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Downward accountability for a natural disaster recovery effort: Evidence and issues from Australia's Black Saturday

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ABSTRACT

This study provides evidence on the nature and extent of downward accountability rendered by key government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to victims during the extended period of recovery from Australia's 2009 'Black Saturday' bushfires disaster. It also provides a critical assessment of the interplay between downward, upward (or hierarchical) and internal (or identity) accountability. It questions whether the concept of 'downward accountability' loses meaning when applied to the published special-purpose disaster recovery reports of the organizations leading the recovery effort. Document analysis is undertaken on the traits of downward accountability displayed in the text and images published in the disaster recovery reports of the controlling government authority, a government/NGO partnership coordinating the appeals fund and three separate participating Christian-denominated NGOs. These report traits include readability by, closeness to and empowerment of beneficiaries. Subsequent interviews with senior financial and communications executives of these organizations shed light on the motivation for the preparation of the recovery reports. The findings have implications concerning the problematization of downward accountability. The appearance of downward accountability traits in these reports appears to be an artifact of the motivation for upward and internal accountability. Moreover, downward accountability through the mode of charitable deeds-based recovery actions seems to be devoid of principal-agent expectations. For these reasons, in the context of a natural disaster, downward accountability does not sit well, conceptually, in a stakeholder-oriented accountability typology framework.

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1. Introduction

In a natural disaster recovery effort, accountability to multiple stakeholders can create uncertainty and controversy for participating government agencies and non-government organizations (NGOs). Najam (1996) identifies the funders of an NGO, namely, donors, foundations, grantors and patrons as one class of stakeholder or principal. This group has been viewed as entitled to upward accountability from management (Edwards and Hulme, 1996). Another class of stakeholder or principal is the recipients of services and funds from NGOs, namely, beneficiaries and community users of services (Ebrahim, 2003). They have been viewed as entitled to downward accountability from management (Kilby, 2006). A third category of accountability articulated by Najam (1996) arises internally to the NGOs themselves. This internal accountability involves an

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NGO's "responsibility to its mission and staff, which includes decision-makers as well as field-level implementers" (Ebrahim, 2003).

Intuitively, the notion of downward accountability, from organizations participating in the recovery effort to victims or beneficiaries, would expect to hold heightened salience. It is a time when the plight of survivors in the disaster affected areas is in the public psychic. But whether the nature of, and mechanisms for, downward accountability become more prevalent in the perceptions and actions of the management of participating government agencies and NGOs in a natural disaster, is an empirical question.

This empirical question will need to consider whether there are more complex issues associated with treating downward accountability to victims/beneficiaries as a discrete phenomenon, and whether it changes as a concept when an organization seeks to render it through different modes. Using document analysis and interviews, this study provides evidence on the nature and extent of downward accountability rendered during the period of recovery from Australia's 'Black Saturday' bushfire disaster. It also provides a critical assessment of the interplay between downward, upward (or hierarchical) and internal (or identity) accountability, and questions whether the concept of 'downward accountability' loses meaning when applied to the published reports of the organizations engaged in the recovery of disaster-affected communities.

A series of bushfires swept across the Australian state of Victoria on Saturday 7th February 2009 during extreme weather conditions, resulting in Australia's highest ever loss of life and property from bushfire. 173 people were killed, 2133 houses were destroyed, and the cost of the disaster has been estimated to exceed AUD4 billion (Holmes, 2010). The date has since been referred to as 'Black Saturday' and the subsequent recovery and reconstruction effort, funded from community appeals and government grants, extended over almost three years until late 2011. This recovery effort was led by a specially formed government authority as the controlling body charged with overseeing the recovery effort, a government-NGO partnership as the appeals funds managing body, and some independent Christian-denominated NGOs as voluntary field participants. These government and NGO organizations had the common purpose of bringing about the recovery of the many hundreds of individuals, families and businesses across the many regional communities affected by 'Black Saturday'. Subsequently a Royal Commission was established by the Victorian State Government to investigate the early warning systems, disaster action plans and chains of command surrounding the Black Saturday event. However, the Royal Commission did not investigate the appeals and recovery processes that came after the event, and therefore does not have any direct relevance to this study. Nonetheless, the plight of the survivors in the affected areas remained in the public psychic through media coverage of this Royal Commission investigation, as well as television documentaries and published books produced over the two years post-Black Saturday. In addition approximately 85% of appeals funds had been expended during this two-year period. Hence, initially a relatively straightforward objective was conceived for this study. It was to identify the nature and extent of downward accountability to the victims (as beneficiaries of funds and services) conveyed in the special-purpose 'bushfire recovery' reports published two years into the recovery period by each of the main participating government and NGO organizations. It was initially surmised that downward accountability to victims would have reached its height of community interest at this point of the recovery effort, and would be manifest in these voluntarily published special-purpose reports.

To pursue this initial objective of identifying the nature and extent of downward accountability rendered through published reports, the researchers chose to content-analyze the text and images in these reports. The concept of rendering downward accountability can be evidenced in these formal special-purpose reports, it is contended, by the following features:

- the accessibility by affected communities, families and individuals (i.e., beneficiaries) to performance-related content in these reports relevant to their decision-making interests, as indicated by the readability of this information;
- the use of personalized language or writing style in reports for conveying 'closeness' of the participating organization to beneficiaries;
- information in reports that can empower beneficiaries; and
- the selection of photographs and images in reports that are attuned to conveying 'closeness' of the participating organization to beneficiaries.

In pursuing this initial objective of measuring and comparing the nature and extent of downward accountability for natural disaster recovery efforts rendered through formal publicly available reports by a government authority, a government-NGO partnership and individual NGOs, it became evident from the content analysis results, coupled with a series of interviews with executives of these organizations, that there were more complex problematization issues associated with the concept and mode of downward accountability. First, downward accountability by NGOs is perceived in a framework of three "distinct categories of accountability", according to Najam (1996, p. 341), namely, upward accountability to patrons, downward accountability to clients and internal accountability to themselves. But others view these categories as not 'distinct'. For example, Dixon et al. (2006) consider NGOs as engaging in a process of continuous balancing of their accountability to multiple stakeholder groups, whether donors, beneficiaries or trustees. Second, accountability can be directly rendered to stakeholders (especially beneficiaries) by having them experience grass-roots action-based deeds, rather than formal reporting (Kilby, 2004). Hence, management in certain NGOs may deem it sufficient to render accountability to natural disaster victims through their on-the-ground actions, and keep formal reports on

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