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Downward Accountability in Unequal Alliances: Explaining NGO Responses to Zapatista Demands

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Summary. — This paper examines the conditions that foster downward accountability among nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). To do so, I compare how NGOs responded in an unusual case where, from 1999–2003, the Zapatista Movement demanded more say over projects. I compare 77 NGOs, some that dropped out and others that accommodated the movement's demands. I argue that funders' reporting requirements inhibited NGOs from being responsive to beneficiaries. However, living alongside the movement pushed inner-circle NGOs to practice downward accountability to sustain their legitimacy. In turn, horizontal pressure among NGOs influenced organizations further afield, especially those that identified closely with the movement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 1997, US activists Pilar Martinez¹ and Jennifer Smith founded a project to empower indigenous women in the Zapatista Movement² in Chiapas, Mexico. Less than three years later, their beneficiaries called for greater control. Though the Zapatistas relied on nongovernmental organization (NGO) funds, the movement criticized NGOs for imposing outside agendas. They also demanded more oversight over NGO contributions, altered programs to fit their priorities and organizational forms, and rejected support from those who would not conform. To continue working with the Zapatistas, service-providing NGOs had to give the movement a more decisive say in project planning and management. For instance, the Zapatistas insisted that Jennifer and Pilar hand over their bank accounts and shift their focus from women's empowerment to economic development, which was a higher priority for the movement. These demands provoked a brief shutdown and extended struggle for the NGO. Jennifer recalled "It sometimes felt kind of crappy in terms of how this impacted you personally or your project . . . Politically, I really agreed with them, and at the same time it sometimes would come to as a negative—kind of a clash." This paper considers why, in the face of such pressure from below, some NGOs persisted, while other gave up and withdrew.

Development scholars often focus on whether NGOs fulfill their promise to empower marginalized communities, and they widely agree that "downward accountability"—where beneficiaries have say over NGO practices and the latter must justify their actions—is morally and practically desirable (Day & Klein, 1987; Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Kilby, 2011). Nevertheless, given the power relationships that permeate aid funding streams, many dismiss this possibility as "effectively irrelevant" (Najam, 1996). NGOs must navigate relationships with multiple stakeholders, including donors, beneficiaries, staff, and allies. First, NGOs are often accountable *upward*, to donors who hold economic sway over their actions. Second, NGOs are accountable *inward*, and their primary allegiance may be to their own values (Lissner, 1977). While NGOs may not comply completely with a given party, economic resources help reinforce these patterns. A few scholars have proposed that particular NGO values like an ideology of "participation"

may temper this pattern (Kilby, 2006, 2011; Joshi & Moore, 2000). Others note that grassroots beneficiaries wield non-economic resources, like information, that may give them some leverage (Ebrahim, 2003). Nevertheless, because recipients depend on NGO support, they rarely call their benefactors to account. Thus, the factors that promote downward accountability remain unclear.

This paper seeks to better identify conditions that encourage downward accountability among NGOs. To do so, I examine how 77 resource-providing NGOs reacted when the Zapatistas forced them to weigh downward accountability against their funders' demands (upward accountability) and their other values (inward accountability). Unlike most beneficiaries, the Zapatistas actively expressed priorities that conflicted with NGOs' existing accountabilities, which helps show how the NGOs weighed competing allegiances and how they were influenced by the material and symbolic resources involved in their relations with stakeholders. Based on in-depth interviews with 40 NGO leaders and secondary information on 37 other organizations, I consider why some NGOs accommodated the Zapatistas' requests, while others refused to forsake their own priorities or grants. The comparison helps illuminate the relationships between upward, inward, and downward accountability, and the power dynamics that enforce these relationships. By distinguishing different kinds of NGOs and elaborating on their intermediary role, the paper also bridges often-divided literatures on social movements and development aid.

I argue that downward accountability was more likely when it was not blocked by upward accountability and when it was integrated with inward accountability, that is, NGOs held it as

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a value. I show how this value gained prominence through (1) NGOs' need for legitimacy with beneficiaries, and (2) the pressures of horizontal accountability with similarly placed NGOs. This argument proceeds as follows: First, I note that upward accountability, when it entailed reporting, precluded responsiveness downward. While accountability to beneficiaries and funders are not necessarily mutually exclusive, reporting requirements made it almost impossible for NGOs to be responsive to the movement. To adapt to Zapatista demands, NGOs had to find what scholars call "flexible funding" (Kilby, 2011)—that is, income from sources such as dues, product sales, speaking programs, or grants with subjective or abstract requirements. Such funding sources were necessary for downward accountability, but they were not sufficient.

Second, I contend that NGOs that accommodated the Zapatistas' demands also had to value downward accountability itself. In other words, responsiveness to the movement had to be *part of* NGOs' accountability "inward." However, in contrast to the relatively rigid conditions of upward accountability, NGOs' values—and therefore the constraints of inward accountability—were fluid. As NGOs began to prioritize downward accountability, some even found ways to avoid the constraints of upward accountability, by creating or seeking more flexible forms of funding.³ To understand why NGOs like Jennifer and Pilar's swallowed the negative feelings of a "clash" and sought more flexible funding while others did not, it is important to examine the process by which they came to value downward accountability above other priorities.

In the second part of the paper, I show that two mechanisms drove NGOs supporting the Zapatistas to prioritize downward ability: (1) the need for legitimacy with the beneficiaries themselves, and (2) the pressure of *horizontal* accountability to fellow NGOs. These mechanisms took effect differently depending on NGOs' proximity to the Zapatistas. An inner core of NGOs, who interacted directly with the movement, saw firsthand that practical efficacy and the legitimacy of their service missions depended on beneficiary input. Then, these NGOs reinforced their status by pressuring more peripheral NGOs to prioritize downward accountability as well. Peripheral NGOs were most responsive to such pressure when they needed downward accountability for legitimacy; that is, the Zapatistas were the reason for their founding and/or their only constituency. In sum, horizontal pressure among NGOs may help elevate downward accountability as an internal value, increasing its likelihood among organizations able to avoid funder constraints.

2. THEORIZING ACCOUNTABILITY AND POWER IN NGO-BENEFICIARY RELATIONS

This paper builds on an emerging literature that examines how NGOs may be held more accountable to their beneficiaries. The term NGO (non-governmental organization) can include any organization that is neither government nor profit-making, though it generally refers to groups rooted in the "developed world" and concerned with development, relief, or advocacy in the "developing world" (Lister, 2003). While there has been extensive work to typologize NGOs, I focus on those that provide services or welfare support.⁴ The fact that these NGOs contribute material resources highlights the tensions between funding streams and the desire to serve the disadvantaged.

Studies of such NGOs have often been divorced from a second set of research on transnational social movements (Evans,

2008; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Tarrow, 2005). The latter, concerned with the transformative potential of alliances between disenfranchised groups across borders, have tended to minimize power dynamics among them, assuming that members of such movements share values. In this paper, by examining the range of solidarity NGOs who operate between large donors and grassroots movements, I help break down the distance between these two sets of research.⁵ NGOs act as intermediaries among internal and external stakeholders, and they play a dual role as principals and agents (Ebrahim, 2003; Meyer & Scott, 1992). In many cases, donors and beneficiaries have complementary interests, or NGOs are able to negotiate strategies that take multiple allies into account (Brown, 2008). I am concerned with the moments when these interests conflict, bringing underlying power relations—and the prospects for downward accountability—to light.

I define accountability, following Day and Klein (1987), as the measure of who can call whom to account and who owes a duty of explanation and rectification. That is, in Edwards and Hulme's (1996) words, "the means by which individuals and organizations report to a recognized authority (or authorities) and are held responsible for their actions." Edwards and Hulme argue that *downward* accountability represents the extent to which NGOs answer to the priorities and organizational practices of their beneficiaries. Kilby (2006) adds that "empowerment" is linked to downward accountability and may even represent the moment when beneficiaries take power over NGO work.⁶

Most scholars agree that NGOs have a moral obligation to serve grantees' aspirations and that they gain practical benefits from doing so (Kilby, 2006; Mawdsley, Townsend, & Porter, 2005). In the 1990s, as NGOs proliferated globally, some constituencies accused them of serving their own interests (*e.g.*, Bello, 2002). Giles Mohan (2002), for instance, criticized, "The rural poor are only brought in as members of fictionalized 'communities' and are in practice denied any real voice" (148). In the 2000s, such critiques sparked a backlash and a "crisis of legitimacy" among NGOs (Lister, 2003; Sogge, 1996), provoking demands for stronger mechanisms to ensure that NGOs were in fact serving the poor. Thus, NGO legitimacy became premised, at least in part, on the strength of their accountability to constituents, and organizations in the sector increasingly came to see empowerment and participation as values in themselves (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Kuhl, 2009).

To understand how NGOs navigate different commitments, scholars look at how accountability is tied to power. Most characterize NGO power dynamics using resource dependence theory, put forth by Emerson (1962), McCarthy and Zald (1977), and Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), which suggests that to the extent one group or organization depends on another for resources, the latter controls the agenda. Therefore, when stakeholders make competing demands, NGOs are likely to favor those who have the power to implement rewards and punishments (Brown, 2008). While such resources may vary in character—from money, to access to information and legitimacy—existing research suggests that those who contribute economically typically have the greatest leverage and therefore the capacity to ensure accountability (Najam, 1996). As a result, scholars often write off downward accountability as "effectively irrelevant," condemning participation as a "sham ritual" (Najam, 1996) or a "new tyranny" (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mansuri & Rao, 2004; Mosse & Lewis, 2005).

First, they argue, NGOs' economic dependence produces *upward* accountability, influencing their ideologies and constraining their practices, including their treatment of beneficiaries. Several studies show that NGOs' dependence on donors

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