Accountability in Public Policy Partnerships

Julia Steets

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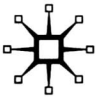

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Also by Julia Steets

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Preface

This book is about public policy partnerships and their accountability and its theme derives from my work for the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi). At the institute, we have been following, analysing and debating the rise of public policy partnerships and their implications for global governance over many years. Time and again, we returned to questions of accountability. What effects do partnerships have on existing accountability relationships? How can partnerships themselves be held accountable? Answering these questions seemed central to any debate relating to partnerships, yet difficult since the necessary concepts were not sufficiently developed. Within the context of my doctoral dissertation, submitted to the University of Erfurt in late 2007 under the title 'Defining Accountability Standards for Public Policy Partnerships', I therefore set out to develop a concept and model of accountability that would help us understand, assess and guide the development of partnerships. Since partnerships include public, business and civil society actors and are active in very different areas, I quickly found myself building a generally applicable accountability model. I hope that the thoughts developed in this book will be helpful for those working with partnerships and of interest for those thinking about accountability.

Naming all individuals who supported me during the research and writing phases or provided critical inputs would be impossible. My special thanks go first and foremost to Prof. Dr. Dietmar Herz, my supervisor, as well as Prof. Dr. Frank Ettrich, who acted as secondary supervisor. I would also like to thank Martin Sprott, Bernd Siebenhüner, Angelika Steets, Andreas Blätte, Thorsten Benner, Jan Martin Witte and Jenny Scharrer for their critical and supportive feedback and Kristina Thomsen for her support in revising and adapting the manuscript.

Julia Steets
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List of Acronyms

4C	Common Code for the Coffee Community
AICPA	American Institute of Certified Public Accountants
BGB	Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch
BPD	Business Partners for Development, now also known as Building Partnerships for Development
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
CSD	Commission on Sustainable Development
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DALYs	Disability-Adjusted Life Years
DESA	United Nations Division for Sustainable Development
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
DKV	Deutscher Kaffeeverband/German Coffee Association
DOTS	Directly Observed Therapy, Short-Course (a treatment strategy for TB)
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
EITI	Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
ESCB	European System of Central Banks
ESMAP	Energy Sector Management Assistance Program (World Bank)
EU	European Union
FAO	United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization
FASB	Financial Accounting Standards Board (US)
FDA	Food and Drug Administration (US)
FOCJ	Functional, Overlapping, Competing Jurisdictions
FRSs	Financial Reporting Standards
FRSSE	Financial Reporting Standard for Smaller Entities
GAAP	Generally Accepted Accounted Practices
GAIN	Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition
GAO	Government Accountability Office, formerly: General Accounting Office (US)
GAVI	Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation
GRI	Global Reporting Initiative
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (Germany)
GVEP	Global Village Energy Partnership
GWP	Global Water Partnership
IAASB	International Auditing and Assurance Standards Board
IASB	International Accounting Standards Board

ICANN	Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers
IFAC	International Federation of Accountants
IFRS	International Financial Reporting Standard
IGO	Intergovernmental Organisation
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
INTOSAI	International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions
IP	Internet Protocol
IPSASB	International Public Sector Accounting Standards Board
IRS	Internal Revenue Service (US)
ISA	International Standard on Auditing
ISEAL	International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
IUCN	The World Conservation Union
MAD	Multiple Accountabilities Disorder
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MSC	Marine Stewardship Council
NAO	National Audit Office (UK)
NCVO	National Council for Voluntary Organisations (UK)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPO	Non-Profit Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
OMB	Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget (US)
PCFV	Partnership for Clean Fuels and Vehicles
PM	Performance Measurement
PMs	Performance Measures
PPP	Public Private Partnership
RBM	Roll Back Malaria
REEEP	Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership
SSAPs	Statements of Standard Accounting Practice
SIDA	Styrelsen för Internationellt Utvecklingssamarbete/Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
SORP	Statement of Recommended Practice
TB	Tuberculosis
TNC	Transnational Corporation
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

VENRO	Verband Entwicklungspolitik deutscher Nichtregierungs-organisationen
WCD	World Commission on Dams
WHO	World Health Organization
WSSD	World Summit on Sustainable Development
WTO	World Trade Organization
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

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1
Introduction

1.1 Accountability – a fuzzy concept and its importance for partnerships

> Accountability. Oh no, I don't know that I can. [...] I guess some of us, when we think of that [...] word we understand the importance of checks and balances. We understand that there are some things that – where accountability is near instantaneous, and that there are other things where there are grey areas and it's much less difficult. But what it means, very simply, is to – to me, anyway – is that people understandably look to individuals, who have responsibilities, to be accountable for the conduct of those responsibilities. [...] you need to put in place a series of things that hold people reasonably accountable for their actions, and people, I think, expect that.
>
> *US Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld when asked about how he would define accountability (Council on Foreign Relations, 2004)*

'Accountability' has become a prominent political catchword. The term serves as a rallying cry for civil society organisations aiming to control the actions of governments, international organisations and corporations,[1] and is used by those who want to create a positive image for their organisation[2] as well as those attacking their opponents for irresponsible behaviour.

Yet – as is often the case with political buzzwords – Donald Rumsfeld is not the only one who finds it difficult to put his finger on what exactly the term means. As Mark Bovens put it so aptly:

> As a concept, however, 'public accountability' is rather elusive. It is a hurrahword, like 'learning,' 'responsibility,' or 'solidarity' – nobody can be against it. It is one of those evocative political words that can be used to patch up a rambling argument, to evoke an image of trustworthiness, fidelity, and justice, or to keep critics at bay.
>
> (Bovens, 2005, p. 182)[3]

In addition, understandings about accountability vary between the public, private and civil society sectors,[4] adding to the conceptual confusion. Governments and public administrations, the business sector and increasingly also the non-profit sector each have their own distinct accountability traditions.

The discourse and practice of accountability in the public sector, for example, has developed in the context of representative democracy. Democratic governments around the world have espoused the same basic institutional structure, comprising a legislative, an independent judiciary and an executive. Each of these institutions has a range of typical accountability mechanisms. These mechanisms either allow for direct citizen control or work through a system of checks and balances.[5]

Corporate accountability in its classical form has three distinct layers. Firstly, societies use legal and fiscal rules and their enforcement to hold corporations accountable for conforming to social norms and contributing to social goals. Secondly, consumers use market mechanisms to create accountability for product quality and price. Thirdly, owners use a variety of mechanisms treated in the corporate governance literature to induce managers to maximise returns.

Questions of accountability of non-profit organisations have gained prominence concurrent with the recent rise in power of these organisations. But while the debate has intensified, it is far from reaching a consensus. It is not only disputed who NGOs should become more accountable to or for what but also whether more accountability is desirable at all. In addition, the debate has largely remained theoretical and many of the recommendations have not (yet?) been translated into practice. Currently, NGOs are mainly accountable to public authorities, their donors and their members.

Most contributions to the literature on accountability are specific to one of these sectors, even though increasing efforts were made over recent years to apply the concepts and experiences from one sector to another. Reflecting the fact that accountability arrangements are often highly complex, many contributions focus on specific subgroups of agents and individual accountability mechanisms.[6]

In the debate about partnerships, the issue of accountability is particularly salient. Partnerships are cooperative arrangements between international institutions, governments, corporations and civil society organisations to address pressing local and international policy problems.[7] As the ability of traditional nation states to address complex questions has increasingly come under question and as states are transforming, partnerships have emerged in many areas as a promising mechanism for defining and implementing complex and controversial policies. Partnerships now address urgent problems ranging from regulating the technical aspects of the Internet to enhancing the social responsibility of companies and providing remedies to

global health crises. Prominent examples of partnerships at the global level include the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI),[8] a partnership that develops and disseminates standards to guide the sustainability reporting practices of companies and other organisations, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria,[9] a global initiative to raise additional resources for the fight against these diseases.[10]

Since partnerships routinely include actors from the public, corporate and civil society sectors, we cannot simply rely on any one established accountability system. Defining concepts and effective mechanisms of accountability is therefore even more complex for partnerships than for more traditional institutions. This complexity renders partnerships an interesting object of study for analysing different understandings, implications and new developments of accountability. A focus on partnership accountability also has the potential to generate insights for the discourse on the accountability of other institutions.

Moreover, most principled objections against partnerships are based on concerns about accountability. These criticisms imply that by shifting policy decisions to partnerships, governments can circumvent control by their domestic constituencies and international institutions can weaken control by member states.[11]

Corporations for their part are accused of using partnerships to improve their reputation without significantly changing their management and operational practices.[12] Thus they evade public pressure for moving towards more sustainable practices and counteract the drive for binding regulations.[13] At the same time, shareholders may criticise companies for their partnership activities because they are costly and (at least in the short term) inefficient.

NGOs or other civil society organisations, finally, can be seen as risking, being co-opted and losing their critical edge by participating in cross-sectoral partnerships. Moreover, large NGOs that have the capacity to partner with other institutions may be tempted to claim they represent constituencies that do not actually have any influence over the NGO's policies and activities.[14]

These critiques have a common denominator. They fear that partnerships reduce the accountability of the participating organisations without creating alternative accountability mechanisms.[15] If validated, these critiques would seriously undermine the credibility and legitimacy of partnerships as a mechanism to address public policy problems.[16] This has also been recognised by the supporters of partnerships. In unison with many partnership critics, many of them now demand that partnerships should become (more) accountable.[17]

But, for the most part, the demand for accountability has remained general. It is rarely explained why exactly partnerships should be accountable, let alone what this would entail in practice.[18] Acar and Robertson

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