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ABSTRACT

This article proposes to examine how human rights organizations from Latin America, working on the national level, are addressing the demand for accountability. The field research was conducted through interviews with five human rights organizations from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Peru. The academic research on the accountability of civil society organizations has been concentrated on the normative grounds of the need for more accountability, while very few studies analyze the matter from the perspective of the actual actors involved. In this article, based on this diagnosis, the author works with a specific group of national human rights organizations, with a view to analyzing what five organizations have done on the subject. The result of the research demonstrates that, unlike what is claimed in the literature, human rights organizations from Latin America are sufficiently concerned about the topic that they have adopted a complex idea of their accountability to civil society. Moreover, these organizations have developed incipient and innovative practices in this field, paying special attention to the particular type of work they do. The article concludes by asserting that further theoretical debate is needed on the question of the legitimacy of these organizations, in light of the fact that they have, indeed, adopted practices of representation.

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ARTICLE

EXPERIMENTATION AND INNOVATION IN THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS IN LATIN AMERICA

Juana Kweitel

This article¹ aims to examine how human rights organizations from Latin America working on the national level are addressing the demand for accountability. This aim is a response to the call made by Gurza Lavalle and Castello, who highlight “the usefulness of documenting the different answerability models of civil organizations and of examining them in search of any internal control and sanction mechanisms that encourage them” (GURZA LAVALLE; CASTELLO, 2008, p. 71).

The discussion on the accountability of non-governmental organizations is part of the broader debate on the accountability of institutions in general. In the field of political science, the idea of accountability was revived in Latin America following the work of Guillermo O’Donnell – an author who addressed the topic in several articles, inserting into the regional debate the old idea of checks and balances of American constitutionalism (O’DONNELL, 1998; 2002).²

The concept of accountability is a complex one and different authors have given it distinct meanings. Andreas Schedler attempted to recreate the concept based on its use by different actors. As such, he claims:

[...] the notion of political accountability carries two basic connotations: answerability, the obligation of public officials to inform about and to explain what they are doing; and enforcement, the capacity of accounting agencies to impose sanctions on power holders who have violated their public duties.

(SCHEDLER, 1999, p. 14).

Alnoor Ebrahim (2010) also emphasizes that most discussions on the concept pose three central questions: **accountability to whom, accountability for what and accountability how.**

Notes to this text start on page 321.

It is important to mention that, for many authors, the concept of accountability has been stretched so much that it now lacks precision. As Newell and Bellour claim, “accountability has become a malleable and often nebulous concept, with connotations that change with the context and agenda” (NEWELL; BELLOUR, 2002, p. 2). It is what Ebrahim and Weisband call the “accountability panacea” (EBRAHIM; WEISBAND, 2007).

As we shall see in this article, the academic research on the accountability of civil society organizations has been concentrated on the normative grounds of the need for more accountability, while very few studies analyze the matter from the perspective of the actual actors involved. Moreover, the literature does not differentiate much between the various types of organizations (for example, between national and international organizations and between organizations that provide services and organizations that engage in advocacy).

As a result of this diagnosis, this article focuses on a specific group of organizations: **national human rights organizations**.³ The research concentrated on the vision of accountability by five national human rights organizations. In this vein, it sought to tackle some of the dominant ideas in the literature on the topic based on the perception and the practices of the organizations themselves.

The field research was conducted through interviews with five human rights organizations from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Peru.⁴ These organizations engage primarily in advocacy activities for a wide range of beneficiaries.

It is important to point out that many of the national human rights organizations work in opposition to the State; some of them were founded during periods of authoritarian rule, which is reflected in their resistance to disclose certain information that, in their view, could be used unfavorably or detrimentally against the victims. This article demonstrates, however, that this resistance is gradually being overcome.

This article is structured into three main sections. The first section, below, makes an overall analysis of the subject of the accountability of civil society organizations, including the particularities of the organizations that engage in advocacy and work with a broad public. The second section is restricted to the field of research, with a view to describing the factors that specifically define human rights organizations, the practices adopted by these organizations and their visions of accountability. The article finally reflects on the conclusions of this study, pointing out that human rights organizations from Latin America have adopted some innovative accountability practices.

1 Accountability of civil society organizations

This section describes the growing debate over accountability in the literature on civil society organizations and examines two issues: the difficulty of evaluating advocacy activities and the challenges of working with a broad public. In the next section, based on research with national human rights organizations from Latin America, this literature will be evaluated in light of the practices already existing in these organizations.

1.1 “The mantra of greater NGO accountability”⁵

The discussion on accountability has grown exponentially in the academic literature on social organizations and also in the mainstream media. A number of theoretical articles on the topic have started by citing a piece in the magazine *The Economist* from September 2000 that succinctly summarizes the discussion. The British publication stated that, “They may claim to be acting in the interests of the people – but then so do the objects of their criticism, governments and the despised international institutions. In the West, governments and their agencies are, in the end, accountable to voters. **Who holds the activists accountable?** (ANGRY..., 2000).⁶

Using other words, the International Council on Human Rights Policy (ICHRP) claims in the first version of its report on accountability: “[some] people feel that NGOs are out of control, have acquired an ability to influence public opinion and the public agenda but have no corresponding **duty to take responsibility for the effects of their advocacy or the conduct of policy**” (INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY, 2003, p. 3).⁷

These questions ultimately pose a threat to the legitimacy of a type of organization that, unlike representative governments, are not subject to periodic elections by popular vote. The criticisms are leveled against organizations that do not generally represent either the interests of a specific group (like peasant organizations, for example) or the interests of their members (like unions).

Dagnino clearly articulates these criticisms:

[...] the political autonomization of NGOs creates a peculiar situation in which these organizations are responsible to the international agencies that finance them and to the State, which contracts them as service providers, but not to civil society, whose representatives they claim to be, nor to the social sectors whose interests they bear, nor to any other organ of a truly public character. For as well-intentioned as they might be, their activities express, fundamentally, the desires of their directors.

(DAGNINO, 2004, p. 101).

According to Jordan and Van Tuijl, criticisms like these have started to gain visibility since 2001, after the time, at the end of the 20th century, when NGOs used to be viewed – somewhat naively – as “inherently good”, as agents of development and as indispensable for democratization (JORDAN; VAN TUIJL, 2006, p. 3). Institutions such as the World Bank, during the 1990s, played a key role in the expansion of the work of civil society organizations. Against the backdrop of the end of the Cold War, many donors considered NGOs to be more reliable recipients of financial support than governments. Accordingly, as their role expanded, the criticisms over their legitimacy also grew.

These criticisms were leveled in particular at the actions of a particular kind of organization, one that worked primarily on a transnational level for development. They were organizations whose head offices are located in countries in the North (where they raise funds) but that develop their work in the South (in programs that support development) or for the South (through international advocacy actions).

One of the main reasons for demanding more accountability from civil society organizations stems from the fact that many of them use precisely this “lack of accountability” as a weapon to criticize States. The challenge for the organizations, says Edwards, is to demonstrate that they themselves can apply the same principles of accountability that they demand of others (EDWARDS, 2000).⁸

Many authors claim that civil society organizations do not discuss this subject in any depth. Jordan and Van Tujil claim that “a discourse on accountability has been lacking among NGOs, perhaps out of a defensive reflex towards immediate political threats and addressing immediate needs, but also because seriously engaging accountability is expensive for almost any type of organization” (JORDAN; VAN TUJIL, 2006, p. 5). The specialized literature also asserts that, of all civil society organizations, it is the human rights organizations that are most behind the curve in this area (INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY, 2009, p. 24).

However, there have been some recent examples of self-regulation, one of which is the adoption of the Accountability Charter, in June 2006, by 11 international organizations.⁹ The Charter represents an innovative effort to establish common rules. It deals with issues such as transparency, clarity of governance rules and combating corruption. It also includes the requirement for member organizations to submit an annual report to the Charter Secretariat and, since 2010, these reports have also been reviewed by an Independent Panel.¹⁰

As the literature on accountability grows, some authors have started to draw attention to the need to inquire **whether more accountability is always best**. Ebrahim raises the question of “whether there is a danger of too much accountability” (EBRAHIM, 2003b). This danger is associated both with the possibility of donors abusing their powers to manipulate the organizations, and with the risk that excessive control could limit their creativity, diversity and experimentation.

In recent years, the literature has focused on practical solutions to promote greater control of organizations by their beneficiaries.¹¹ This literature is partly based on concepts developed in the private sector for the management of companies. Accordingly, the idea of the stakeholder approach, which gives visibility to various different groups and individuals that may be affected by the actions of a company, has been gradually incorporated into the debate on non-profit organizations.¹²

Therefore, according to this stakeholder approach, and within the discussion on non-governmental organizations, the following concepts have been created that are now part of the debate on accountability and that are necessary to further the discussion proposed here:

- **Internal accountability:** refers to the accountability of the organization to its mission and its staff;
- **External accountability,**¹³ which can be divided into:
- **Upward accountability:** generally refers to the relationship with donors,

foundations and governments. It aims to demonstrate that money is used for the purposes for which it was donated;

- **Downward accountability:** refers to the relationship with customers and with the groups for which the organization provides services (beneficiaries);
- **Horizontal accountability:** refers to the relationship with other organizations in the same field.

Several voices have drawn attention to the excessive amount of proposed tools that prioritize short-term aspects instead of paying attention to long-term variations related to complex issues of social and political change (EBRAHIM, 2003a). They emphasize that what is lacking is a systemic vision in which it is possible to see, within a given thematic niche, the part played by each organization in jointly effecting the desired social change (EBRAHIM, 2014).

1.2 Accountability and the problem of assessing advocacy activities

Many proposals guided by the stakeholder approach recommend participatory processes in which the organizations at least explain their ideas and strategies to the beneficiary groups (BENDELL, 2006, p. 23).

However, accountability, when interpreted in this way, is particularly problematic in the case of organizations that engage in advocacy. There are at least four factors for this: 1) the success of an advocacy action depends on cooperation (and not on the individual action of one organization); 2) the impact of this action is not linear (there is no clear causality between result and advocacy); 3) since advocacy is eminently conflictual, it is unlikely that the results will be attributed to the work of one organization; and 4) the timeframes for assessing the impact need to be considerable.

In other words, first, the “performance assessment” is particularly complex in the case of advocacy organizations, since it is questionable to attribute specific results directly to the individual action of certain organizations. An effective advocacy action requires cooperation between several organizations, which is why, generally, the impact cannot be attributed only to the action of one actor.¹⁴

Second, political and institutional changes occur non-linearly, in response to multiple factors and, often, unexpectedly.¹⁵ An organization that is effective in its advocacy, for example, will know how to take advantage of political opportunities even when this means straying from its original plans (which makes it difficult to assess the performance comparing planning versus results).

Additionally, in third place, advocacy often involves influencing a decision-making process that is hostile to external interventions. In these cases, generally, the public official who was targeted by the advocacy action will not acknowledge that the change resulted from the organization’s work.¹⁶

Finally, the time frames for assessing the results of the advocacy action need to be long, which makes it difficult to maintain a permanent information channel with the potential beneficiaries. For example, there may be long periods in which no result is obtained despite the ongoing action of the organization.

1.3 Accountability and the problem of organizations that work with a broad public

Human rights organizations generally operate for the “public interest” (JAICHAND, 2004).¹⁷ As such, they try to change public policies using a range of strategies that includes litigation, lobbying, public opinion campaigns and the creation of alliances.¹⁸ In these cases, which form most of the actions of these organizations, there is no beneficiary public that can easily be consulted to apply the stakeholder approach model.

When looking from the perspective of the alleged beneficiaries, there are three types of roles played by human rights organizations – each raising a number of challenges when it comes to questioning their accountability:

- **Express mandate – Control through an ability to “opt out”:**¹⁹ in the case of organizations that engage in litigation (for which there is an express mandate of representation), the “customers” can choose to withdraw the case from the organizations. They can, therefore, exercise some control given their ability to “opt out”. In this case, since there is an express mandate, the problem of implicitly assuming representation (often called assumed or virtual representation) – which is the principal challenge when acting on behalf of a broad public – does not arise;
- **Legal mandate:** in other cases, the legitimacy (or representation) is based on the law (for example, in some types of consumer organizations). The question of accountability in these cases is also more specific and less problematic than when acting on behalf of a broad public (without authorization);
- **No express mandate:** it is this third type of role, involving cases in which there is no express authorization or consent, that is of interest to this article. It consists of cases of collective litigation (for example, on behalf of the prison population) or public action in support of a broad-ranging law. Situations such as these, that benefit a broad public or that have no authorization, pose the most interesting challenges to the analysis of the accountability of these organizations.

The next section addresses the relationship that these organizations with no express mandate, considered by the literature as “new actors of representation”, have with the beneficiaries on behalf of whom they speak and exercise this representation (GURZA LAVALLE; CASTELLO, 2008, p. 67), and the ability of the beneficiaries to impose some type of sanction on their “representatives”.

2 Accountability of human rights organizations specifically

2.1 Human rights organizations: values, agenda, governance and resources

The International Council for Human Rights Policy (ICHRP) has made one of the most consistent efforts to define human rights organizations and the values they defend. As such, it highlighted as **core values** of these organizations:

“loyalty to the universality of human rights and commitment to impartiality, independence and true and accurate communication of information” (2003, p. 38). It also stated that these organizations express their commitment to non-violent methods of action.

The organizations, meanwhile, consider that their mission is to “strengthen the democratic system”, “contribute to the democratic transition” or “promote and defend human rights”. They generally claim that they are promoting the implementation of human rights as they are recognized internationally in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Many human rights organizations from Latin America emerged in authoritarian contexts or during the period of transition to democracy. Concerning the activities they engage in, there has been an important shift in recent years that has led to the **expansion of their agendas** (ABREGÚ, 2008, p. 7).

If, during its early years, the human rights movement consisted primarily of organizations of victims and relatives and of organizations of lawyers who supported the demands of these groups, these days it is formed by **professional organizations that rarely identify with a specific cause**. They are not associations that defend the interests of their members, but that instead defend the “public interest” or “human rights” in general.

In many cases, the organizations are **governed by a Board of Trustees**, which chooses an executive director responsible for overseeing the daily activities of the organization, which are developed by a professional, remunerated team (that does not generally participate in the governance of the organization).²⁰

In most countries in our region, national human rights organizations raise **funds** from international foundations or international cooperation institutes. Generally speaking, it is to these actors that the organizations submit their detailed activities reports, often in English.

2.2 The practices and opinions of the organizations on four key topics

This section will present the results of the research conducted with five human rights organizations from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Peru.

2.2.1 Accountability of NGOs in general

There is a consensus among the surveyed NGOs that the concept of accountability applies to civil society organizations, although their vision is somewhat nuanced. Some believe that, while it is recommendable for civil society to incorporate accountability practices, it is not an obligation like it is for the State.

All the interviewees affirmed that the idea of accountability applies to civil society organizations. However, they were less precise when referring to the “accountability of civil society” than when describing the “accountability of the State”. Concerning the State, the interviewees could provide more details on the aspects of accountability, and they included within the concept the

question of transparency, the explicit justification of the reasons for its decisions, the presentation of results, the fulfillment of campaign promises, access to information, accountability between the different branches of government and dialogue with civil society. When it came to civil society organizations, however, even though none of the interviewees limited their view of accountability to the question of transparency or financial accountability, they did not provide more details of the obligations imposed by accountability (nor did they mention the component of answerability/sanction).

During the interviews, it was also mentioned that civil society organizations ought to be accountable to their mission. Although the idea of accountability to the mission is interesting, since it resolves the problem of the difficulty of creating accountability mechanisms in the case of organizations that work with a broad public, it is also problematic, since it does not satisfy one of the central aspects of the idea of accountability: the question, *accountability to whom*. On this point, if there is no “principal” agent, i.e. someone to demand accountability to the mission, then neither can there be sanctions in the event of non-compliance. To claim that an organization should practice “accountability to the mission” without also clearly identifying who is responsible for assessing the accountability is contradictory to the very idea of accountability, for which sanctions for non-compliance are a central element.

The vision of the organizations gathered during the interviews refutes the literature that claims that human rights organizations are unconcerned about the subject of accountability (JORDAN; VAN TUJIL, 2006; ICHRP, 2009). The responses demonstrate that there is a growing interest in the issue. They also reveal that the organizations have a complex grasp of accountability that is not limited to the question of transparency and an acknowledgement that accountability also applies to civil society organizations. As we shall see in the pages ahead, the organizations are also exploring new mechanisms, albeit slowly, to improve their accountability.

2.2.2 Accountability of human rights organizations that engage in advocacy

On the question of whether human rights organizations differ from other civil society organizations, some conflicting arguments appeared in the responses. Some interviewees affirmed that the nature of human rights organizations requires more transparency while others justified less transparency.

The justification for “less transparency” was given mainly by organizations that permanently denounce human rights violations and therefore have a particularly tense relationship with the State, namely in Rio de Janeiro, Mexico and Peru. In these cases, the possibility of putting their staff or the victims at risk was used to justify less transparency, particularly in relation to the information that could be released on the Internet.

The demand for “more transparency” was also associated with various different arguments. The risk of paternalism was mentioned, emphasizing that in

the case of human rights organizations – which do not have an express mandate (to act as representatives) – the demand for accountability is even greater. Similarly, they also mentioned that “the ethical component of working with human rights” requires more accountability.

Analyzing the issue from this angle clearly demonstrates the difficulty of applying generic criteria of accountability without analyzing the specifics. In the case of national human rights organizations, it is essential to analyze the context before formulating generic demands for greater accountability. As already mentioned, it is not possible to apply the same requirements for organizations that work in democratic environments to those that work in authoritarian contexts.

When discussing accountability, the organizations expressed concern over the matter of impact assessment. Several interviewees stressed the difficulty of finding instruments to measure the effectiveness of the work of their organizations. This is one of the aspects in which greater and more in-depth theoretical research would help the organizations.

2.2.3 Practices adopted to improve accountability

As can be seen from the transcripts below,²¹ the research with the interviewed organizations shows that they have either already taken concrete steps or are discussing what steps to take to improve their accountability. Most of them have discussed the need to increase the amount of information available on the Internet. On this point they identified the need to publish financial information as well as additional information, such as priority actions, annual reports and the decisions of their internal decision-making bodies.

Publicity of information – Website

The organization has made an effort to publicize the information on its priorities (which topics), strategies and how the decisions are made. [...] We have also increased our use of press statements and electronic tools, and the website has the institutional history.

Improvement in reporting on activities

We used to have activities reports for each project and each person did what they thought was best, and it was rather informal. We wanted to establish a uniform system, so someone from one area can see what someone else from another area does. It is in the experimental stage. It generates opportunities for collaboration and more uniform reports.

Expansion of the council of partners

The organization has made an effort to expand the council of partners, to count on a broad base of partners, not for the resources, but for the diversity, the partners propose other partners. A broad and pluralistic base of partners serves as a mouthpiece to be

accountable [...]. Among the partners, there are members of other organizations, of parties, of unions. We view the council as a place of accountability and suggestions.

Explanation/Consultation with external actors

Whenever we are going to make a controversial decision, we call on the beneficiaries and other organizations to explain. For example, a mining company asked us to audit a social fund and we decided not to accept. We considered it to be too polemic. When we embark on a controversial topic, we hold meetings to listen.

In the case of a study on social policies, meetings were held with groups of different actors, beneficiaries and academics to discuss the work before it was published.

Opinion poll

To improve its accountability, the organization conducts an opinion poll. [...] The poll is seen as a matter of legitimacy, to create political substance for the NGO. In the past 3 polls (in which only women were interviewed), the approval rating for abortion when the mother's life is at risk and due to rape has risen to 80%. The organization has been working on the topic (in memorandums to Congress, op-eds, etc.). Today, the topic is being debated by presidential candidates. [...] We view the opinion poll as a form of building a "mandate".

The research illustrates that these organizations are concerned about the topic of accountability and that they are developing incipient and innovative practices. The research also demonstrates that there are nuances and that a more in-depth analysis of these practices is necessary in order to understand more clearly the position of human rights organizations in relation to civil society organizations in general on the subject of accountability.

2.2.4 Ways of building legitimacy: discussion on representativeness

The question of the legitimacy and representativeness of the organizations is closely linked to the debate on accountability. Some institutions consider that defending international human rights standards gives legitimacy to human rights organizations. This, however, does not resolve the problem of whom they should be accountable to – as one interviewee affirms:

We represent a perspective, internationally recognized and mandatory standards. The vote is not the only form of legitimacy.

For others, the organizations can assume the representation of unorganized groups that cannot give an express mandate. In these cases, the obligation to be accountable is even greater. This interpretation is similar (but not identical) to the argument of Gurza Lavalle and Isunza (2010), who believe that authorization can come from accountability over time. According to one of the interviewees:

There is no need for an express mandate. The concept of representation can be built; you are within your right to do it, to protect a group or society in general. There are groups that are not organized as actors and cannot give a mandate, but the organization can assume the responsibility and engage based on the interests of this group. If you find yourself in this situation, you need to be concerned about making the information as public as possible. There is an obligation to give publicity so your achievements reach the group for which you are engaging. There should be, as a political and normative strategy, the obligation to make sure the information reaches them. The most marginalized groups in society cannot air their grievances; they are so debilitated that they do not present their demands. These groups are not going to grant you a mandate, since they cannot even defend their own rights on their own. The risk is that a relationship of paternalism is established. I am responsible for avoiding this; when you are the representative agent, there is an immediate obligation to be accountable to this sector. Otherwise, what is it all for?

This response is one of the few that recognizes the existence of representation (called “assumed representation”) and the need for accountability, without resolving, however, the matter of answerability. How could these represented groups control the representative and hold him or her accountable in the event that they are dissatisfied with their representation?

One possible solution, given the lack of an express mandate, is to increase the obligation to be accountable to society in general, regardless of the interest:

If four organizations are not representative, then there has to be some kind of link with the social base. [...] We are well aware that we are not like any ordinary citizen; an ordinary person could not act like we do; we have a lot more power than an ordinary citizen, which is why society has the right to know who is doing this (like the way you ask the State and political parties).

Some of the interviewees call into question the idea that the only way to create representativeness is through the vote. There are, therefore, two arguments that work in different spheres. On the one hand, some organizations use the knowledge argument: something like “I have the legitimacy to act because I know the topic”. In this case, therefore, legitimacy does not stem from proximity or intermediation, but from a technical knowledge of international human rights standards, or what Avritzer calls “affinity” (AVRITZER, 2007). Other organizations appear to be suggesting the possibility of building authorization through accountability over time (GURZA LAVALLE; ISUNZA, 2010). These organizations refer to the obligation to provide information both to the sectors on behalf of which they are acting (in the case of vulnerable groups) and to society in general (in the case of broader agendas).

Both in the literature and in the reality of the organizations, these two arguments on building legitimacy are recent. From a theoretical viewpoint, they represent a necessary deepening of the theory of representation, geared towards observing and analyzing democratic innovations. From a practical viewpoint, they

demonstrate that the organizations are concerned with the question of legitimacy and accountability and that they are developing new arguments similar to those raised in the specialized literature.

3 Conclusion

This article sought to examine how national human rights organizations from Latin America are addressing the demand for greater accountability based on the perspective of the actors themselves.

The result of the research demonstrates that human rights organizations from the region are increasingly concerned about the topic. It also reveals, at least on the conceptual level, that the organizations are currently prioritizing matters of justification (giving reasons for their actions) and monitoring (being transparent and providing information) over matters of stricter control (that include answerability/sanction).

However, it demonstrates that the organizations are adopting new practices that we might call “experimental”, aimed at resolving the question of accountability with special attention to the particular type of work they perform. On this point, they mentioned the following concrete steps: the inclusion of information on the website; an improvement in reporting on activities; the expansion of the council of partners; consultation with external actors; and, also, the taking of opinion polls. These practices, it is worth repeating, demonstrate that there is a concern about the topic, albeit incipient, within these organizations.

The result also demonstrates that, in the vision of the organizations, it is important to be accountable to the beneficiaries – and, on this point, the organizations are in agreement with the literature. At the same time, however, it reveals that, at least in the case of the organizations surveyed in this research, there are no concrete criticisms from the beneficiaries concerning their activities.

Regarding the theoretical debate, further reflection is still necessary. In the case of Gurza Lavalle and Isunza, for example, it is necessary to answer how what they call “accountability over time” – which would be transformed into “authorization for representation” – would work.

This article also illustrates the difficulty that the organizations encounter in their accountability and in evaluating the effectiveness of their advocacy for a broad public. In this regard, it is worth pointing out, as noted by Charnovitz (2006), that this difficulty does not mean that the organizations operate in a context without any forms of control. In the specific case of national human rights organizations, accountability mechanisms exist that are different from those applied by other types of organizations. Therefore, it is important to draw attention to the risk of applying standards that ignore the differences between political contexts to organizations working on the national level, in particular concerning the risks of working with human rights in repressive or highly polarized regimes.

In the case of national organizations, therefore, a growing importance is being attributed to evaluation by peers, or what Stark *et al.* (2006, p. 328) call embeddedness: the creation of forms of collaboration with peer organizations ends

up creating a form of horizontal accountability in a field of action or community of practice. In other words, the organizations need to maintain their good reputation, which implies taking into consideration accountability to their peers (GRANT; KEOHANE, 2006).

However, the difficulty of specifically identifying the broad public or the vulnerable beneficiaries, who do not have the capacity to organize or represent themselves, does not mean that the organizations should not find ways of notifying them clearly about their work. When an organization works for the benefit of a group that has not given it an express mandate, it should be careful to publish the greatest amount of information possible, thereby avoiding the risk of paternalism. As Edwards (2010) recently pointed out:

If the “public interest” is too vague and amorphous a concept to be useful in any operational sense, then at least one can ensure that activities that are claimed to be charitable in nature are openly disclosed and accessible for public questioning. The opportunities to know what an organization does and to ask questions as a result are surely the bedrock of accountability.

On this point, the practices of the organizations are incipient, and it is still not entirely clear how the information should be presented for it to be a real tool of accountability (for example, whether it is necessary to tailor the information for different publics).

Finally, this article shows that the organizations are accountable, in the most demanding sense of the concept (answerability/sanction), only to the State and to their donors (who can withdraw their support as punishment for their dissatisfaction with the results). This fact increases the responsibility of the donors to maintain an ongoing dialogue with the field in which they intervene, to ensure that the activities they fund effectively respond to real needs and contribute to a systemic change.

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NOTES

1. This article is a highly abridged and updated version of the conclusions of the Masters dissertation in Political Science defended by the author at the Faculty of Philosophy, Arts and Human Sciences of the University of São Paulo (FFLCH–USP), Brazil, in September 2010.
2. In the Anglo-Saxon sphere, however, the most recent literature on the topic cites the article by Goetz and Jenkins (2002) as one of the decisive works for putting the topic back on the debate agenda.
3. Between the time the research was conducted and the present day, the categories for classifying organizations have become less clear. These days, it is less common to talk about national/international, human rights/development, litigation/advocacy. The distinction, however, is still relevant here as we shall see over the course of the article, as national organizations usually have mechanisms of accountability to their local peers and quite strong roots in the society where they work primarily.
4. In each of the five organizations, four people were interviewed. The interviews were conducted by telephone, using a semi-structured questionnaire.
5. Expression used by Steven Charnovitz (2006, p. 40).
6. Emphasis added. Also cited by Slim (2002).
7. The ICHRP, a Geneva-based think tank focusing on human rights policy that existed between 1996 and 2012, published in 2003 the report, “Deserving Trust. Issues of Accountability for Human Rights NGOs, Draft for Consultation”. This report broadly discusses the issues of accountability of human rights organizations. The first version was released for consultation in 2003, but due to criticisms and a lack of consensus on the content of the document, the final version was never published. The ICHRP abandoned its plans to publish a study of the topic and created, in February 2010, an online discussion forum. In the quotation, the emphasis is added.
8. Also cited by Schmitz and Bruno (2007).
9. ActionAid International, Amnesty International, CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation, Consumers International, Greenpeace International, Oxfam International, International Save the Children Alliance, Survival International, International Federation Terre des Hommes, Transparency International and World YWCA (at the time of the submission of this article to SUR Journal, the Charter had 17 member organizations).
10. See the Accountability Charter Review Process, available at <http://www.ingoaccountabilitycharter.org/home/review-process/>. Amnesty International and Article 19 are the only two human rights organizations to have signed the Charter.
11. See, for example, Keystone (no date) and Action Aid (2006).
12. Ebrahim (2003a, p. 814) emphasizes “much of the early work in this field is credited to Edward Freeman’s (1984) writing on a ‘stakeholder approach’ to strategic management among private sector firms, in which stakeholders are defined to include not only stockholders but also other individuals and groups who can affect, or are affected by, a particular business”. See also Ebrahim and Weisband (2007).
13. In the literature, approaches that focus on upward accountability are often called “hierarchical accountability” and approaches that prioritize downward and horizontal accountability are called “holistic accountability”. See, for example, O’Dwyer and Unerman (2008).
14. See Coates and David (2002). See, also, Chapman and Wameyo (2001) cited by the ICHRP (2003).
15. On the difficulties of Human Rights Watch to prove the impact of its advocacy work, see Gorvin (2009).
16. Analyzing the issue in the light of the advocacy practiced by the U.S. organization Human Rights Watch, Gorvin comments, with some irony, that: “It is rare indeed that an abusive government will come out and tell us: ‘we saw the error of our ways, thanks to you, and we have changed’” (GORVIN, 2009, p. 480).
17. See Jaichand (2004).
18. See Abregú (2008).
19. See Hirschman (1970).
20. A whole other study would be necessary to analyze the transformation of these and other organizations into their current format (a non-remunerated Board of Trustees, a remunerated staff and volunteers), which appears to be strongly inspired by the practices of organizations in the United States.
21. **Editor’s Note:** The quotations from this point on, unless otherwise specified, refer to the interviews that the author conducted with five human rights organizations as part of her research. See footnote 4 above.