

[Erik Nielsen](#)

## Erik Nielsen February 15th Reaction Paper

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11.363: Civil Society and Environment  
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#### Defending Accountability in NGOs

In this essay, Wapner argues that NGOs are in fact subjected to wide variety of accountability designs, including scrutiny by individual NGO members, donors, boards of directors, fellow NGOs, as well as through the 'publics' own sense of a NGOs legitimacy. He argues that when considering questions of accountability, many critics often compare NGOs to states and demand similar forms of accountability, however, Wapner asserts that many states (even within the 60% that are deemed democratic) are themselves not fully accountable to their respective 'publics'. Although his arguments were clear, I was not completely convinced – for example, many NGOs do not have members; donors are usually 'external' and are not necessarily representative of local and/or national constituents; and boards of directors are frequently appointment by the NGOs themselves. Furthermore, although I agree that states are not as accountable as they may purport, I did not find the comparison of state to NGO reasonable.

#### Restructuring World Politics

Sikkink argues that non-governmental actors are "key instigators and promoters of new norms" in the international arena through the use of soft power. The global order of nations or 'international society' is bound by a common set of rules and norms and non-state actors can help initiate a 'norm shift'. Through the concerted engagement of non-state actors, particularly transnational advocacy groups and networks, a 'restructuring of world politics' can be achieved by "altering the norm structure of global governance." Sikkink argues that by exercising 'soft' power, the utilization of moral authority and information flow, transnational networks can, in fact, yield tremendous influence over traditional decision-making spheres such as the sovereign nation-state. The chapter continues by reviewing key issues related to asymmetries of power, internal divisions, and the issue of representation and accountability within transnational networks. She argues that NGOs and networks must simultaneously address their own weaknesses before they can help to democratize and 'shift' the current world order.

#### NGO Performance and Accountability

Edwards and Hulme assert that an explosion of NGOs has occurred in the recent past, the funds they command have soared, and the access these organizations have to decision-makers, both in the North and South, has never been greater – essentially they declare a 'revolution' of sorts is unfolding at the global level. The authors argue that although (many) governments and donors alike have become enamored by the opportunities NGOs present, whether as potential vehicles for democratization, service delivery or simply counter-weights to state power, serious concerns exist regarding NGO performance and accountability. Edwards and Hulme state that little evidence exists that NGOs and GROs are actually accountable; however, they qualify this statement by making it clear that the concept of 'accountability' is extremely complex; given the 'messy' issues NGOs work with, the 'standards' by which to measure 'output' are not exact, therefore evaluation must become an act of interpretation. Moreover, they assert that accountability itself cannot be demanded, but must be "negotiated among stakeholders", something that donors traditionally are unable to accept given their internal guidelines and procedures. This too is part and parcel of the accountability deficit – the question of exactly who is accountable to whom? None-the-less, the authors caution that although accountability is a complex and, at times, rather nebulous arena, it can be very thin ice for some NGOs, particularly given "NGO claims to legitimacy are premised at least in part on the

strength of their accountability”.