

GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN INTERNATIONAL NGOs

Introduction

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Who controls the international NGOs? Critics of international humanitarian and human rights organizations often refer to these non-profit non-government organizations (NGOs) as “self-appointed”—as if other organizations, such as international businesses and religious networks, were, by contrast, properly authorized and accountable to a democratic process. Still, the critics have their point. After all, international NGOs operate outside most governmental structures, and although they may be incorporated within the regulations of a particular country they operate around the world pretty much as they see fit. This organizational independence raises issues regarding their legitimacy and their constituencies of accountability; the way that they may be seen as competing with national governmental organizations; and the role they play among other international and transnational institutions.

The essays in this special issue speak to each of these issues, and are all related to the theme of governance and accountability in international NGOs. They were first presented at an international conference on this topic hosted by the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, on November 11-12, 2006. The stimulus

for the topic was an idea originated by the Global History Initiative led by Bruce Mazlish of MIT and Akira Iriye of Harvard, both of whom participated in the conference. Several other participants, including Helmut Anheier and Marlies Glasius, were associated with the Center for Global Governance at the London School of Economics, which took a keen interest in the topic. Following the conference the papers were revised and honed in response to the discussion at Santa Barbara. The essays selected for this issue look at the issue of governance and accountability from several perspectives.

Richard Falk's essay deals with one of the broadest issues in the relationship of international NGOs to national authorities—the role of international NGOs in justifying humanitarian intervention across national boundaries. This is a topic explored in a different way in the essay by Krishan Kumar, which examines the context of these organizations within an emerging global civil society that provides both legitimization and a network of support for international NGOs.

Another important perspective on the role of international NGOs is the relationship—in some cases a rivalry—between agencies of national governments and transnational humanitarian organizations operating within national locales. The essay in this issue by George Thomas, Nalini Chhetri and Khaleel Hussaini raises the issue of the legitimacy of international NGO operations within the context of South Asia.

Yet another perspective is the role that international NGOs play within the global political and organizational arena. The essay by Marlies Glasius focuses on the International Criminal Court, and raises the question of whether NGO involvement makes international decision-making more democratic. Walden Bello's commentary deals specifically with the role of international NGOs in the World Social Forum and the Globalist Project. A common theme

running through all of the papers is the idea that, although the role of international NGOs are diverse and rapidly changing, they have become a significant and increasingly influential force on the global political scene.

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