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Publication Date

2014-02-01

DOI

10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.07.009

Peer reviewed



ELSEVIER

www.elsevier.com/locate/worlddev

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.07.009>

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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Key words — downward accountability, NGOs, transnational social movements, legitimacy, Mexico

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

* The author thanks the Zapatistas, the activists she interviewed, and the many others who facilitated her research. She also appreciates the advice and comments of Tim Bartley, Laura Enriquez, Peter Evans, Neil Fligstein, Raka Ray, Jen Schradie, Aaron Shaw, Sandra Smith, and Millie Thayer. This project received support from the Jacob K. Javits Fellowship, the National Science Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the University of California-Berkeley, and Amherst College. All translations from Spanish are the author's. She can be reached at abigailandrews@berkeley.edu. Final revision accepted: July 23, 2013.

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

affects their values, inhibiting their capacity to promote social change or even pursue their own missions (e.g., Bebbington, 2005; Hearn, 2007; Kapoor, 2005). Donors' demands also constrain NGOs on a practical level, professionalizing NGOs by demanding bureaucratic organization, deliverables, and short-term outcomes (Alvarez, 1999; Bartley, 2007; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Roelofs, 2007). Others show that the more flexible or varied an NGO's donors, the more capacity it has to report to beneficiaries (Ebrahim, 2003; Hudock, 1999; Kilby, 2006). On the flip side, some have hinted that upward and downward accountability are most likely to clash when donors demand systematic monitoring and reports (Fowler, 1998; Moore & Stewart, 1998).

Furthermore, scholars contend, NGOs are driven not only by their role as agents of donors but also by a sense of accountability *inward*, to their own values (Kilby, 2011; Lissner, 1977). For instance, Lissner (1977) argues that NGOs act out of principles of political altruism that influence their treatment of constituencies, irrespective of their positions of power. Others contend that values represent the driving force behind NGOs (Edwards & Sen, 2000; Gerard, 1983). As evidence, in a comparative study of Indian NGOs, Kilby (2011) notes that as many of half of NGOs rejected funding arrangements that contradicted their values.

Nevertheless, NGOs may *also* use economic resources to impose their values on beneficiaries (intentionally or not). While NGOs may presume that recipients share their goals, this assumption of isomorphism can be wrong. Scholars call this the "moral hazard" of NGO work, noting that NGOs may not be providing goods or services that beneficiaries really want (Ahmed & Potter, 2006; Easterly, 2006; Joshi & Moore, 2000). NGOs also pursue these goals in a context of unequal resources. Ebrahim (2003) explains, "Like relations between NGOs and funders, those between NGOs and clients tend to be asymmetric as a result of resource allocations" (203). Kilby (2011) adds, "Because of NGOs' greater endowments in resources both physical and by virtue of their status, and their relative skill in negotiation, NGOs could exert power in these relationships [with beneficiaries]." Several studies note that NGOs' values and ideas—often grounded in Western understandings of the meaning of social justice—may eclipse local knowledge (Fernando, 2003; Subramaniam, 2007). Like larger donors, NGOs' preferences may also lead beneficiary communities to alter their agendas (Bob, 2002; Kapoor, 2005). For example, studies show that in the case of the Civil Rights Movement, outside support channeled black constituencies toward more moderate goals (Haines, 1984; Jenkins & Eckert, 1986; McAdam, 1982). Beneficiaries, therefore, rarely question NGOs, so it remains unclear to what extent NGOs will uphold their ideologies of participation, or under which conditions.

Some progress has been made in this arena by research examining the conditions under which NGOs adopt formal mechanisms of participation. Kilby (2011) argues that NGOs that value participation or solidarity are likely to put in place deeper and more formal mechanisms for soliciting their constituencies' input. Still, accountability mechanisms *per se* are not necessarily effective, especially when they remain at the discretion of the NGOs. Also, if valuing participation is so important, we must consider how such a value develops over time, and how it fares when it clashes with other, conflicting NGO values.

This paper builds on existing research by drawing theories of NGOs' upward and inward accountability into dialog with organizational theory, which emphasizes social fields and legitimacy (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). As scholars in these areas have shown, organizations' relationships to their peers and

constituents shape their values, goals, and strategies (Bartley, 2007; Ray, 1998). To understand NGOs' practices of upward and downward accountability, therefore, we must look at their relations of legitimacy within a field (Bourdieu, 1991; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). That is, we must consider *horizontal* accountability. A few scholars have developed this line of reasoning, in looking at how NGO networks develop codes of behavior, making those involved more accountable to the codes (Bartley, 2007; Ebrahim, 2003; Lloyd, 2005). I extend this work by looking at how horizontal relationships among NGOs may also produce greater accountability to beneficiaries. I also take inspiration from field theory's interest in *change*, noting that any given organization's values are fluid and that horizontal pressure can dynamically reshape their practices.

Finally, whereas economically-focused versions of resource dependence theory assume that donors' influence is decisive, Ebrahim (2003) shows that this influence is always negotiated, and scholars like Ganz (2000) and Alvarez (2009) note that constituencies also wield non-economic resources that may help them to offset economic resources. For instance, clients can exercise power when donors need fieldwork done (Ebrahim, 2003) or need information (Thayer, 2010). In the case of NGOs, Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan (2012) and Gilham and Edwards (2011) point out, legitimacy is particularly important, since, unlike corporations, they do not measure their success by economic means. Brown (2008) adds that demonstrating accountability can reinforce an organization's reputation and thus play an instrumental role in its ability to mobilize resources.

Yet, further study is needed to understand how and among whom legitimacy works in NGO fields—as well as how other forms of influence may counterbalance donors' financial leverage. In a review article on service NGOs, Watkins *et al.* (2012) highlight a series of unanswered questions: "In whose eyes do NGOs seek legitimation? What are the reference groups of the diverse occupants of the NGO organizational field? ... Do NGOs become isomorphic with their own donors, or with other organizations they regard as their peers? Which organizations ... are considered of higher status and worthy of imitation, and in which respects?" (306). In examining the relationships between downward accountability, other forms of accountability (upward, inward, and horizontal), and legitimacy—as well as the ways these accountabilities intersect with power—this paper digs into such questions.

3. THE CASE OF NGOS SUPPORTING THE ZAPATISTAS

The Zapatistas provide an ideal pivot for building theory, because their unusual demands of donors illuminate empirical conditions under which NGOs may accommodate greater community say in the management and implementation of projects (Barmeyer, 2009). The Zapatistas were able to make such demands thanks to their strong organization, rural, geographically-concentrated base, and visibility in 1990s radical circles, resources that were particularly strong compared to other NGOs. Nevertheless, the Zapatistas depended on NGO funds, particularly since they rejected government support.⁷ Because this paper focuses on NGOs, I deal little with divisions within the Zapatista Movement or community-level variations. Rather, for analytical clarity, I treat their call for downward accountability as an "impetus," then I examine the reactions it sparked among NGOs. While the Zapatistas were hardly a unified actor, the

demand for downward accountability arose concurrently across their communities.⁸

The process by which the Zapatistas pushed NGOs to change their practices occurred as follows. Shortly after the Zapatista rebellion in 1994, the movement was “swarmed” with NGOs, most of whom controlled the content, timing, resource distribution, and form of implementation of the services they provided. For instance, NGOs tended to direct their contributions to the most accessible and well-known Zapatista villages, leaving others with little support. The Zapatistas became increasingly frustrated with what their leader Subcomandante Marcos (2003) called “[NGOs] deciding what the communities need, and, without even consulting them, imposing not just particular projects but also the times and means of their implementation.”

In response, starting around 1999, Zapatista communities and leaders called for more say in their NGO partnerships.⁹ While many beneficiaries of NGO programs avoid causing tension for fear of losing financial support, the Zapatistas were willing to forsake some funding sources, because they considered political autonomy to be a core value. Therefore, they insisted that donors (1) seek formal permission to conduct solidarity projects, (2) allow the movement to allocate donations among its 38 base communities at its own fit and distribute 10% of all donations among the movement as a whole, and (3) give the movement control over bank accounts and financial records. To manage the movement’s internal administration and relationships to outsiders, the Zapatistas set up “good government councils” (*juntas de buen gobierno*), which formally opened in 2003.

For NGOs, these changes created a “values clash,” forcing those supporting the movement to weigh tradeoffs around (1) funding, (2) priority work areas, and (3) approach. In this case, I look specifically at NGOs that provided services, material resources, or funds directly to the movement. Such relationships dramatize how NGOs—most of which claim to value participation—weigh this against other priorities.¹⁰ These NGOs had to decide if accommodating Zapatista oversight of projects was worth forsaking grant money, letting go of priority work areas like gender, or giving up some level of efficiency or reach. While NGOs’ interests often align with those of beneficiaries, such clashes—when beneficiaries call them to account—make it possible to “test” their downward accountability.

The NGOs under study share certain features of all service NGOs, in that they provide economically valuable support to a community of which they are not beneficiaries. Compared to most NGOs involved in international development, those associated with the Zapatista Movement are generally smaller, more politically radical, less formal, and perhaps more driven by an ideal of solidarity. Nevertheless, they provide a starting point for considering possibilities elsewhere. Indeed, these struggles over power and values echo in many cases, historical and contemporary. We might think, for instance, of the US Civil Rights Movement, the African National Congress of the 1970s and 80s, the Eritrean Peoples’ Liberation Front of the 1980s, Keren on the Thai-Burma Border, Focus on the Global South in Thailand, as well as beneficiaries’ struggles for NGO accountability from India to Brazil (Reitan, 2007; Thayer, 2010; Wood, 2004). Within the global Zapatista network, I focus on service NGOs based in the United States and Mexico. Rather than randomly sampling NGOs, looking

at a concentrated subset helps illustrate the relationships among organizations.

4. METHODS

My analysis considers the actions of 77 of the most well known US- and Mexico-based Zapatista solidarity NGOs. I sampled these organizations by contacting all NGOs listed in prior studies that had been working with the Zapatistas during 1999–2002 (Leyva Solano, 1999; Olesen, 2005; Stephen, 2002). To understand relationships across NGO networks, I also recruited additional organizations that collaborated with those above, using snowball sampling. The final subset of NGOs was selected to illustrate the array of responses to the Zapatistas’ demands and includes 26 organizations that adopted downward accountability, 36 that dropped out when the Zapatistas set new restrictions, and an additional 15 groups that emerged after 2002, inspired by the new norms of Southern leadership. Of the 36 that dropped out, 24 ceased collaborating with the Zapatistas altogether, while 12 re-formed into new, more downwardly accountable organizations.

I conducted in-depth interviews with leaders of 40 of these NGOs, visited 20 of them in person, and gathered secondary information on the other 37, primarily through news reports, organizational materials, and word of mouth. During interviews, I asked NGO leaders about the histories of their organizations’ relationships with the Zapatistas, how their practices had changed, and the reasons for those decisions. I also asked about the organizations’ relationships with fellow NGOs and other players in the arena. I examined NGOs’ program content, their sources of funding, how they started supporting the Zapatistas, how they stopped supporting them (if applicable), and how they changed their practices (if applicable). I coded these responses by NGO size, proximity to the movement, longevity of the relationship, and funding sources and constraints. To code for size, I drew from classifications in prior studies, and for proximity to the movement, I coded NGOs as “inner circle” if they lived in Zapatista communities and “secondary” if they lived elsewhere and visited the base communities periodically (see NGO tables in the appendix).

While I collected interviewee accounts in the mid 2000s, and they dated back to the mid 1990s, I implemented several “checks” on the data. First, it is unlikely that NGO leaders would forget key moments of change in their policies. Second, most participants were forthcoming about what they could or could not remember. Third, if the data are biased, it is likely that leaders would portray themselves as downwardly accountable from the beginning, thus understating the shifts described. Fourth, I was able to use changes in practices as an indicator of the shifting priority levels of different values. Finally, I confirmed respondents’ accounts by triangulating among NGOs, as well as between sources: interviews, participant observation, and NGO records and documents. During 2005–2008, I visited 20 of the NGOs, participated in several months of NGO meetings, delegations to Chiapas, and Zapatista “*encuentros*” or festivals, during which I watched various organizations interact with each other and the Zapatistas, as well as gossip about past affairs. I also examined organizations’ propaganda and the Zapatistas’ public communiqués. Together, observations, written accounts, and in-depth interviews with NGO leaders illuminated the process by which organizations negotiated with the movement, interacted with

each other, and engaged the norm of downward accountability.

5. FINDINGS

(a) *How reporting requirements pit upward accountability against downward*

While some NGOs may be able to navigate multiple accountabilities, in this study, donors' demands for specific schedules, reporting, or program content were incompatible with the practical terms set by the Zapatistas. Before the shift, many of the NGOs that worked with the Zapatistas were funded by program-related grants from foundations like Ford, Goldman, MacArthur, and Hewlett (see Tables 1–4 in the Appendix). Of the 36 cases I examine that dropped out, 24 abandoned the Zapatistas altogether. All of these faced reporting requirements to such foundations or government grants. In contrast, the 26 organizations that adapted to downward accountability—as well as the 12 that re-formed with less constraining funding structures—all avoided donors' terms. Instead, they were funded by product sales (27% of respondent NGOs), programs such as speaking tours and study abroad (20%), members' contributions (46%), and grants that had abstract (and therefore non-measurable) goals such as human rights, or were, in one supporter's words, "authentic progressive funding sources, with no strings attached (26%)"¹¹ (Internal communication, "Support Chiapas," 2002). Some sought out these alternate sources intentionally, to avoid foundation funding.

On a practical level, formal upward accounting such as reports made it difficult for NGOs to change their programs. The case of Justice International, a California-based NGO that supported women's projects and withdrew, illustrates the irreconcilability of the Zapatistas' and donors' terms. According to its program director, Julie Steinberg, Justice International valued downward accountability. Steinberg described, "What our values are all about is challenging and questioning the power dynamic and trying to create a different model for international solidarity." Nevertheless, Steinberg explained that when the Zapatistas began interrupting her program work, re-routing funds and altering program content, "Because of the change in the way the [Zapatista] communities worked, we stopped funding" (Interview, Berkeley, CA, 2008).

At first, because she valued downward accountability, Steinberg tried to gloss over such interruptions in her reports to foundations—that is, to mediate the conflicting allegiances to donors and beneficiaries.¹² Ultimately, however, she found it impossible to reconcile the two. She went on: "Because of the demands of funders here [in the US], we're under this pressure. We're—unlike solidarity groups, we're not as openly radical. We're not volunteer run. We have a funding base that we have to answer to, and most of our grants funding comes from foundations, mostly private foundations that are getting more and more demanding in their specific requests for reporting. They want photos; they want testimonies; they want charts and graphs. They want results. Now, for example, we need photos. That, obviously, was not going to work in this case . . . That's a lot to explain to somebody, to try and get them to understand why we're treating this organization completely differently than we would treat any other organization."

For Justice International, it became unmanageable to accommodate both.

Likewise, in the example of the US-based NGO HELP-NOW, donors' desire to focus programs within a single village clashed with the Zapatistas' mandate to redistribute NGO re-

sources among its 37-village base. From 1998 until 2001, the NGO had provided a women's literacy program in one community. Angela Peterson, its representative in Chiapas, remembered:

They were changing their way of looking at things, and they said, 'We can't have one community getting so much help, so we're not having this program any more. We'll only accept a program that will include women from all the communities.' Therefore, it would have to be in Oventik [a central community], and women would come there. It would be a very different sort of thing. But the people who were giving the funding didn't change it, so Oventik basically rejected the program (Interview, San Francisco, CA, 2008).

In this case, funder terms regarding the organization of the project—presumably set in the interest of efficiency—precluded downward accountability. To stay, NGOs had to find funding sources that would accommodate the Zapatistas' forms of organizing programs and their at-times erratic behavior.

A few NGOs were able to avoid rigid reporting stipulations by framing their goals to foundations subjectively, such as in terms of human rights. For instance, Melissa Torres, the coordinator of an NGO called *Acompañar*, explained that her organization was able to maintain consistent levels of foundation support *and* keep a good relationship with the Zapatistas by presenting itself to foundations as a neutral human rights observer (Interview, Chiapas, 2008). Others had to seek out funding that came with "no strings attached"—as scarce as grants of this character may have been. Many others escaped upward accountability by avoiding institutional funding altogether. For instance, they sold Zapatista-made products like coffee, artisanship, or videos; hosted speaking programs; held fundraisers; or solicited member contributions.

While several NGO supporters had flexible funding structures prior to the Zapatistas' pushback, others actively changed their funding models in order to accommodate greater accountability to the movement. For example, in its early years, DESMI,¹³ a well-known economic support NGO, relied heavily on donor agencies such as Catholic Relief Services. Yet, in light of the new mandate to let beneficiaries define the projects, they shifted to funders such as Oxfam-UK, which were more willing to fund the NGO in general, instead of specific programs. Later, Oxfam also started to demand attention to specific issues, particularly gender and the environment. While the Zapatistas did not address these areas in the manner the donor specified, DESMI maintained flexibility by "translating" between the two. A former field officer explained:

They [community groups] are engaged in some gender work; however, they don't express it that way. They don't use the term, the theoretical concept '[gender] equity,' but it is present in their projects. Not in all projects, but in the majority of them. Therefore, we decided that we would integrate it into our work as well, not as something all that explicit, but more as something that was implicit in the projects. Increasingly, funding agencies also demanded that we address these themes (as quoted in Benessaieh, 2004).

By making their gender work explicit with funders but implicit with communities, DESMI mediated these competing priorities.

Other NGOs avoided donors' terms by abandoning institutional funding altogether. For example, Mexico Solidarity Network¹⁴ (MSN) initially relied on foundation grants; however, in order to be more accountable to the Zapatistas' priorities, MSN forsook this funding and found new ways to raise money by running a study abroad program, along with selling Zapatista handicrafts, running delegations (visits to the movement), and conducting speaking tours. In MSN's words, charging enrollment fees for the study abroad program

“allowed us to break the often precarious and overbearing links to foundations, which in turn allowed us to more clearly define our organizing principles [AKA downward accountability]” (Mexico Solidarity Network, 2011). Like NGOs Kilby (2011) examines in India, organizations like MSN were willing to seek flexible funding out of loyalty to their values. Still, this process took creativity and effort. If most NGOs around the Zapatistas valued beneficiary participation, why were some organizations willing to prioritize it above institutional funding, while others were not? And, what drove NGOs to shift from upward accountability to downward? Though flexible funding was necessary, it was not sufficient for downward accountability.

(b) *Downward accountability as a dynamic value*

Flexible funding secured, NGOs also had to be convinced to change their practices, which was a difficult process even when they valued downward accountability. Many interviewees recalled having to move out of communities where they had built interpersonal ties, relinquish roles they were invested in, or change the content of their programs. For instance, Teresa Morales, who ran an educator-training project, said that handing over control of the curriculum to the Zapatistas “was pretty hard in terms of letting go of a project you had already worked on for five years—almost a sort of mourning” (Phone Interview, 2008). Others described the Zapatistas’ alterations to their programs as “a shock,” or felt they were “saying goodbye to everything” (Interview, “Zapatista Solidarity Project” Coordinator, Chiapas, 2008). What made NGOs tolerate these changes?

As research about NGO values would predict, respondents attributed their acceptance to their ideologies of participation. For example, Jennifer Smith, quoted in the introduction, reflected:

I really, really politically supported the whole process. Some of the ways that it impacted us felt negative, but I felt like it was fine, because we were there being almost like guinea pigs of this change and putting this into practice. I feel like the people who were really supportive of the process were the people who were also tolerant of what sometimes felt kind of crappy.

Organizations like Jennifer’s were willing to tolerate shifts that felt bad to them personally, because the Zapatistas’ growing autonomy affirmed their values.

Yet, if we consider values to be fluid, rather than static, we must look not only at *which* NGOs adapted (*i.e.*, those with one set of values *versus* another) but also at how downward accountability gained importance for NGOs vis-à-vis other priorities. I argue that downward accountability gained salience when it was fundamental to NGOs’ legitimacy with beneficiaries and peers. These needs for legitimacy affected different NGOs differently, based on their proximity to and identification with the Zapatista Movement. In the following section I trace the process through which downward accountability spread among NGOs supporting the Zapatistas, using key examples to illustrate variations.

(c) *Inner circle NGOs and legitimacy with constituents*

NGOs whose staff lived in Zapatista communities—which I call “inner circle” NGOs—were the first to adapt downward accountability, because interacting directly with the Zapatistas led them to question the legitimacy of top-down programs. Indeed, all 15 of the NGOs I studied in this position accommodated the movement—12 altering their practices and three others disbanding, but the staff re-forming into new, more

accountable organizations. Inner circle NGOs witnessed the same failures of NGO aid that had led the Zapatistas to demand control over programs. Many also experienced hurdles in their own programs when they lacked beneficiary input. Furthermore, the Zapatistas used direct discussions and actions to call attention to the inconsistency between these NGOs’ professions of solidarity and their top-down practices, questioning the NGOs’ commitment to shared norms of grassroots autonomy.

Inner circle respondents personally witnessed the practical shortcomings of NGO programs that lacked Zapatista input. For instance, Teresa Morales, who ran a program to train teachers, explained, “It was really difficult for an external project to function if it wasn’t something chosen and organized by the community. That was also one of the things that convinced me that yes, the government or whatever organization can invest a ton of resources, and it still won’t work. Because that’s not what the people need or they don’t feel they need it.” Other respondents watched fellow NGOs introduce programs that were culturally inappropriate, relied on resources that were not available locally, or required labor for which constituents did not have skills or time. For example, Stephen Cohen, a volunteer in one Zapatista community, cited the example of Peace International, an organization that attempted—and failed—to get Zapatista villagers to breed rabbits for food; the beneficiaries became fond of the rabbits and did not want to kill them (Interview, Berkeley, CA, 2008). Similarly, Ramor Ryan (2002), who lived as a peace observer and built water systems in a Zapatista community called Diez de Abril, remembered:

As international volunteers in Chiapas we witnessed an array of embarrassing and poorly conceived national and international involvement in the Zapatista zones . . . The rebel communities are haunted by the ghosts of failed NGO projects and the paradox of good intentions. In Diez, people remember the failed rabbit rearing NGO project of ‘96, the failed candle making NGO project of ‘97, the delivery of 50 gas stoves which were thrown out a month later when the gas ran out—who could afford to buy bottled gas?—and of course the stalled potable water project of ‘97.¹⁵

Such experiences made NGO leaders on the ground realize that they needed Zapatista input to avoid distributing resources unevenly across communities, causing divisions among constituents, or focusing on inessential needs. While running effective development programs is challenging—even for the Zapatistas themselves¹⁶—those who interacted directly with the Zapatistas saw that refusing to let the movement manage projects set additional hurdles to NGOs’ efforts.

In conjunction, the Zapatistas questioned the legitimacy of “inner circle” NGOs in conversations and dramatic public actions. In 1996 and 1997, the Zapatista leadership criticized and “threw out” a few large NGOs in its inner circle, particularly one called AYUDA. The movement attacked those organizations for attempting to speak on its behalf, attracting foundation grants that they used for their own pet projects, and refusing to listen to the Zapatista leadership. The critique left the remaining NGOs chagrined about their role as outsiders and motivated them to differentiate themselves from the violators. Jennifer Smith, for instance, remembered that when AYUDA was kicked out, “All of sudden I was like, ‘What the hell am I doing here? Who do I think I am, what do I have to offer? What role is it appropriate for me to play here?’” Her partner Pilar added that in the context of this public shaming, the legitimacy of the remaining NGOs required conforming to the movement’s wishes. She recounted:

In 1997 they had thrown out a lot of people from AYUDA, because they didn’t respect the rules [about consulting the Zapatistas on pro-

jects]. We arrived to work just as the communities were starting that discussion. A lot of organizations hadn't taken into account the direct needs of the communities in their projects . . . and we wouldn't have been able to work if it weren't respecting those dialogues and discussions.

The Zapatistas' demands symbolically tied NGOs' legitimacy to accountable behavior.

These experiences compelled inner circle NGOs to accommodate Zapatistas demands, regardless of their size. Some accepted changes in the content or structure of their programs. Others, such as AYUDA, disbanded, because the Zapatistas had prohibited them from continuing to operate in base communities under their original structures and names. Nevertheless, respondents who had been staff members of the expelled organizations remained invested. Taking the expulsion as a lesson, several formed themselves into new NGOs that made downward accountability a central goal. For example, once AYUDA disbanded, many of its former staff members formed a new organization called Participar. Dedicated to "accompanying" the Zapatistas, Participar refused to accept foundation grants that would impede its capacity for solidarity. In turn, Participar became a core player in the reconfigured field of Zapatista-NGO relations.

(d) *Peer pressure and the production of horizontal accountability*

The value of downward accountability extended to more peripheral NGOs—which interacted with the movement on a less frequent or intimate basis—primarily through pressure from those in the inner circle. Having faced threats to their legitimacy and been shamed for serving as brokers to foundations, core NGOs re-affirmed their standing by actively advocating downward accountability and pushing peripheral NGOs to sign on. As Lloyd (2005) has shown, codes of conduct among NGOs can influence their behavior, making them more accountable to each other. This study reveals that such horizontal accountability, even when informal, can help foster accountability toward beneficiaries as well.

The core organizations became what Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) would call "norm entrepreneurs," who took responsibility for re-framing the role of outside organizations in relation to Zapatista leadership and promoting the importance of downward accountability. For example, Teresa Morales, mentioned above, ran an inner-circle education program that initially floundered due to a lack of Zapatista input. Yet, once she had reformed her own program Teresa positioned herself as a mediator between the Zapatistas and another NGO called Apoyo, which drew in supporters from other countries and operated out of the nearby city of San Cristobal. Through this position, Teresa relayed to foreign supporters the importance of honoring the Zapatistas' priorities. She described her new role as "a relationship of support and of being a messenger."

Other inner circle NGOs directly encouraged peripheral peers to change their practices. For instance, Jennifer and Pilar maintained a close relationship with Friends of the Zapatistas, a California solidarity group that held fundraisers, sent occasional visitors to Chiapas, and relied on Jennifer and Pilar for updates about events on the ground. As Jennifer and Pilar's organization altered its program, it encouraged Friends of the Zapatistas to do the same.

Meanwhile, gossip, email, and newsletters offered a more public means of fostering a shared norm of downward accountability. In these fora, inner-circle activists denounced the actions of imposing NGOs or passed gossip of "bad behavior" along to friends and colleagues further afield. For instance, in 2002 Irish activist Ramor Ryan published a cri-

tique of NGOs called "International Solidarity in the Light of Global Resistance," which circulated among pro-Zapatista organizations. He exhorted:

The mountains of cash donated and raised through international organizations and individuals for the Zapatistas have often been channeled through a network of intermediaries who take their cut, administer the rest, and finally, to add insult to injury, often proceed to speak on behalf of the Zapatistas internationally . . . While some of the blame lies with the Zapatistas for not seizing control of these spaces, the *caxlanes* [outsiders] should prioritize the responsibility of empowering the local *compañeros* [base] to take control. Encouragingly, a couple of Chiapas-based NGO's (one trafficking in water systems, the other in Video training) have begun the careful process of turning over administrative control to the Zapatista municipalities.

Ryan's description praised inner circle NGOs that had adapted, and it hung the legitimacy of other NGOs on following suit. Peripheral NGOs like Friends of the Zapatistas read about and heard word of such critiques through relationship with others on the ground and through a national Zapatista email list by way of which, as one NGO leader put it, organizations were "plugged into everything."

By the time of my fieldwork in Chiapas in January 2004, most NGOs around the Zapatistas touted these norms, addressing newly-arrived outsiders with phrases like, "It's not as easy as you think; there are rules you have to abide by" or "We don't provide information without the permission of the [Zapatista] Good Government Councils" (Fieldnotes, Chiapas, 2007). Like the inner circle, other NGOs began to police the network, using gossip as an enforcement mechanism to sanction organizations that refused to consult the Zapatistas about their programs.

(e) *Zapatista identities, horizontal accountability, and the ambiguous case of women's rights*

The mechanism of horizontal accountability, however, had influence on peripheral NGOs only when they identified closely with the Zapatista Movement. Whereas almost all inner-circle NGOs adapted in some way, in comparison, of the 47 more peripheral organizations examined, 47% (21) left the Zapatistas altogether, 30% (14) stayed on, and 26% (12) disbanded and re-formed into new organizations. Of those who left, 81% lacked flexible funding. But one might argue that they could have sought alternate resources. What defined the 14 peripheral organizations that stayed and the 12 that re-formed—seeking new kinds of funding—was that 88% of them (23) had either been founded around the Zapatistas or served the movement as their only constituency (the remaining three cases were medium sized NGOs which already had flexible funding) (see Tables 1–4 in the Appendix for details).

We might ask whether other factors such as longevity of the relationship or NGO size could also shape an NGO's response to the Zapatistas. Yet, this dataset suggests longevity made little difference. At the time the Zapatistas pushed back against NGOs, the average organization that left had supported the Zapatista Movement for 5.3 years, while the average organization that stayed had been there only negligibly longer: 5.7 years. Size, meanwhile, mattered more in the outer circle. The only large NGOs that adapted were in the inner-circle. On the periphery, those that adapted were all small or medium sized. I would argue, however, that these contrasts reflect the points noted above: NGOs dedicated to a single cause or formed around the Zapatista Movement tend to be smaller than large organizations with international reach, such as Ox-fam, Global Exchange, or Amnesty International—all of

which left the Zapatistas in the context of the shift toward downward accountability.

Perhaps the most salient illustration of the effect of identifying with the Zapatistas lies in the contrasts among a series of women's rights NGOs (though the pattern echoes among NGOs in other areas such as environmental sustainability). The Zapatistas have been famous for incorporating women into politics, and a large number of their early NGO supporters specifically dealt with women's rights. Nevertheless, around the time the movement demanded downward accountability it also decided to reject "women's empowerment" workshops from NGOs. Instead, the Zapatistas said they would prefer to direct NGO funds to economic development. As Chiapas-based activist Blanca Ruiz put it, "The Zapatistas had this response of, 'These are Western feminists that are coming to impose their idea of feminism, and we don't want them in our communities telling us what to do. We have our way of doing things'" (Interview, Chiapas, 2008). Anthropologist Aída Hernández Castillo (2006), working in Zapatista communities, explains that the movement felt that Western feminism introduced bourgeois, individualist ideas that disconnected women from the struggles of the movement as a whole and, in "raising awareness," presumed that indigenous women were trapped in "false consciousness." Faced with this values clash, some NGOs let go of their gender focus. Others, however, let go of the Zapatistas.

Whether the NGOs identified closely with the Zapatistas—indicated by 1) if they were founded around the movement and 2) if they had other constituencies—shaped whether they came down in favor of downward accountability or women's rights. Those that prioritized gender and withdrew had been established independently of the Zapatista Movement, usually with a specific feminist focus. For these organizations, downward accountability threatened to contradict their feminist commitments and delegitimize their broader work. As a result, these NGOs denounced the Zapatistas as sexist and argued that decisions to end women's empowerment programs had been made top-down by Zapatista men. This accusation hinted that despite the Zapatistas' professed interest in participation the movement was bullying the NGOs and refusing to engage in dialogue. These feminist NGOs wrote a public letter denouncing the movement's failure to address women's rights, particularly sexual assault. And, they refused to give up foundation funding (mostly from the Ford Foundation) in order to accommodate the Zapatistas' new goals. As a result, feminist activist Ruiz continued, "We weren't allowed into the communities. Those bridges were really burned."

Large organizations—whose legitimacy was linked to constituencies around the world—had similar reactions. Foundations' and governments' global priorities shifted out of Mexico in 2000 (after the country's "democratization" with the election of President Vicente Fox) and toward the Middle East (in the context of September 11). In addition, several foundations and government entities linked the Zapatistas to terrorism, due to their brief, armed struggle. This change set indirect constraints on some NGOs. As a former WorldProgress staffer explained, "In 2001, the organization's house closed due to a lack of resources. With the election of Vicente Fox, much of the funding for Mexico disappeared" (Interview, Chiapas, 2007). As foundation resources for Mexico diminished, many NGOs that had worked in Chiapas since the mid 1990s faced a crisis, making it even more challenging to construct alternative forms of funding. Therefore, those that did not have direct relationships or identify closely with the Zapatistas had little tolerance for periods when the Zapatistas would treat them

as "cash cows" or refuse to negotiate "mutually accountable" demands. So, they left.

In contrast, the feminist NGOs that prioritized downward accountability over gender tended to be in regular, direct contact with the movement or—for peripheral NGOs—to tie their identities to the Zapatistas. To be downwardly accountable, they had to give up the kind of empowerment workshops that characterized many NGOs' approaches to gender. Pilar, of the small women's organization, recalled:

They [the leaders of one Zapatista community] told us that in fact they'd written these proposals for women, because that was the way to get grants (laughs). Some said that; not all. But, there were arguments where some people thought those funds for women were a pretext so that they could really use the funds to have a warehouse and a store. That was a redefinition we didn't want, and it generated conflicts, but it reflected the interests of that autonomous municipality.

Ultimately, Pilar's organization accepted the Zapatistas' decisions, because their direct dialogues with the communities revealed that imposing unwanted projects promised practical hurdles, if not public shaming. They also personally observed that even Zapatista women were concerned about economic issues. For instance, another feminist leader who adapted to the calls for downward accountability wrote, "Our militant and grassroots insurgent, indigenous Zapatista sisters will be the ones who decide to move ahead or not with the feminist nature of their organization and their movement . . . Our radical feminist vision can be enriched if we stop to look at the reality of women's existence, the one they live and not only the one they should live, according to our feminist position" (Olivera, 1996). Experience on the ground helped inner circle feminists recognize that the "reality of women's existence" could, indeed, center around economic issues.

Outer-circle NGOs, meanwhile, favored accountability over gender if their identities were tied to the Zapatistas. Friends of the Zapatistas, which had initially supported women's cooperatives, backed away from this program, because, in the words of its main leader, they regretted that "We supported a women's coop that wasn't fully wanted; [the Zapatistas] said, 'our priorities are health, education, and the autonomous councils.'" Because they had been established expressly to support the Zapatistas and the movement was their only beneficiary, groups like the Friends of the Zapatistas fell in line. Their continued existence depended on it.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to gauge how power dynamics within the Zapatista membership affected their de-prioritization of women's rights programs or evaluate whether this decision was "good for" all constituents. The decision may have represented the views of the Zapatista Movement as a whole; or, male leaders, feeling threatened by women's empowerment workshops, may have excluded women's voices. Some observers argue that this was a classic example of the movement's susceptibility to authoritarian decision-making. Others contend that while individual men may have disliked such workshops, the Zapatista leadership actively promoted indigenous women's voices in politics. For example, Jennifer Smith remembered that in her case "higher up leadership told people in [one community], 'You all need to have some more women's organizing, because you are really behind.'" Others suggest that perhaps Zapatista women themselves would reject traditional feminist terms and prefer to prioritize economic issues. Regardless of the internal cause, the example calls attention to the nuanced conditions under which NGOs weigh their accountability to *inward* values (like feminism of a particular orientation) against their desire to respond to beneficiaries' stated goals.

(f) *Complexities of downward accountability*

As the preceding example indicates, downward accountability may not be as straightforward as scholars have presumed. While this paper has focused on differentiating NGOs, we must also take care not to homogenize recipients or essentialize “the local” (Mohan & Stokke, 2000, p. 249). Like any group of beneficiaries, the Zapatista Movement includes various perspectives and internal power dynamics. Relationships between the movement’s militants and base communities are themselves variable and sometimes strained. And, despite democratic rhetoric, decision-making is often dominated by men, community elders, and the military core of the movement (Barmeyer, 2009). Nevertheless, as mentioned in the gender example above, in some cases top-down Zapatista decision making has also worked in favor of the least powerful, marking the complexity of determining who benefits or not.

If accountability entails shifting control to beneficiaries, we must ask to whom the power then goes, especially if it is filtered through bodies like the Zapatista leadership. Within grassroots movements, there are multiple voices and power relations—such as those of gender or class. It is unclear whether the Zapatista Movement, which critics have called authoritarian, was itself *internally* accountable to its own base, particularly to more marginal groups such as women or youth. Scholars and advocates of downward accountability sometimes consider the practice of consulting beneficiaries sufficient, without questioning who gets consulted and why. A cynical view might hold that accountability to one grassroots group—such as the male, Zapatista leadership—simply shifts arrangements from one set of power relations dominated by outside donors to another in which some dominate others from within. Recent studies have suggested that what appears as downward accountability can also tie NGOs to a small constituency of elites (Mohan, 2002; Platteau & Gaspard, 2003). Finally, beneficiaries are not more ethical, *per se*, than NGOs. For example, in this study, the movement’s breach of an agreement in which they were granted funds for gender workshops may itself be considered problematic or even unethical.

Downward accountability is also ambiguously intertwined with the exercise of power. The Zapatistas did not simply ask for downward accountability; they enforced it using their non-economic resources. One might suggest that by demanding that NGOs accede to their standards the Zapatistas inverted existing power relationships, rather than building more egalitarian exchanges. In this paper, I have largely taken the view that real “empowerment” of grassroots movements may include NGOs as its objects. I have implied that NGOs’ willingness to accept such discomforts offers a measure of downward accountability. And, I have noted that even downward accountability is often intertwined - perhaps inextricably - with punishments and rewards. However, the Zapatista Movement’s insistence on compliance with its principles came at the expense of dialogue and participation. One might even suggest that the “inner circle” described in this paper walked the line between accountability to the Zapatista Movement and submission to its power plays. While this change is interesting analytically, *mutual* accountability, in which power is balanced, might ultimately be more desirable. Even if NGOs valued downward accountability some may have found the movement’s stance alienating, because they did not want to be treated as subservient, as if they had nothing to offer but money.

Finally, to the extent downward accountability drives some donors away, it has mixed implications for movements. While the Zapatistas’ demands helped foster downward accountability, they also put the movement in an increasingly precarious

economic and political position. Over time, not only were there fewer NGOs around to support the Zapatistas, but also, the NGOs that had refused constraining funding were able to raise less money. In the context of Mexican economic restructuring and global financial crisis, Zapatista communities struggled to subsist on their own, and migrants increasingly left Chiapas for the United States. Meanwhile, with fewer NGOs present to protect them on the ground, the Zapatistas faced mounting paramilitary and government attacks. Within the movement, internal conflicts persist. Thus, the promise that this particular instance of downward accountability will lead to sustained empowerment—not only with respect to NGOs but vis-à-vis the global, neoliberal economy—remains uncertain. Perhaps the Zapatistas’ greatest success has been symbolic: challenging NGOs’ legitimacy and, despite their dependence on outside resources, pushing NGOs around the world to honor their promise to serve the poor.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper proposed three key conditions that fostered downward accountability among NGOs supporting the Zapatistas: (1) flexible funding, that is, funding sources or grant terms that did not entail particular project areas, forms, or kinds of reporting; (2) on-the-ground interactions with beneficiaries; and (3) horizontal accountability among peer NGOs. First, the more leeway NGOs had in terms of reporting to their own funders—and accounting upward—the more capable they were of responding to beneficiaries’ priorities. While accountability is not necessarily a zero-sum game, it was made to be so in practice when donors and beneficiaries made demands that conflicted on a practical level. As NGOs navigated their multiple allegiances, donors’ economic power often outweighed the influence of staff’s own values or beneficiaries’ interests. Ironically, the very monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that foundations, governments, and others have put in place to *ensure* NGO accountability may in fact hamper their capacity to respond to beneficiaries’ self-defined needs. Those NGOs that avoided reporting requirements had more room to negotiate multiple accountabilities.

Second, NGOs are organizations, and their values—including the prioritization of downward accountability and even the kinds of funders they seek—evolve in relation to beneficiaries and other NGOs in their social movement field. As emerging research has suggested, NGOs are not inherently moderate or bureaucratizing; rather, some value shifting global power relations enough to forsake both funding and their own initial priorities. The relationship between NGOs’ funding structures and their ideologies is complex; while funding is a limiting factor, participatory values may also drive NGOs to creatively find new economic resources. This paper expands existing theories by suggesting that downward accountability—and the search for alternate resources—may be nurtured when NGOs interact regularly and intimately with constituents and when they encourage horizontal accountability among peers. Through these relationships, they are more likely to see practical problems with top-down programs as well as to have their own legitimacy directly questioned when they fail to seek beneficiary input. For more peripheral NGOs, peer pressure can help foster downward accountability, but primarily in cases where the organizations identify closely with the constituents.

Inasmuch as the Zapatistas are a well-known, cohesive social movement and their NGO supporters are politically radical, tight-knit, and attached to the movement, these conditions are unlikely to emerge organically in many other cases. As I

pointed out in the discussion of the Zapatistas, the movement's willingness to defy—and lose—NGO supporters is unusual. The Zapatistas' high level of organization made it possible to state clear objectives, and their prominence gave them leverage to enforce these goals. In contrast, other beneficiaries may lack the leverage of recognition or be too diffuse and fragmented to even articulate shared goals. For instance, examining aid work in Ghana, [Mohan \(2002\)](#) shows that beneficiaries are fractured by fiefdoms and individual officers' efforts at self-promotion. On the NGO side, many NGOs surrounding the Zapatistas were small and committed to shifting power relations in the movement's favor as their primary goal. Their close interrelationships with each other also helped to make horizontal pressure—such as through online communications, gossip, and shaming—highly effective in changing their postures. More mainstream and larger NGOs—whose shared values, political commitments, and social networks may be broader and weaker—might not be as responsive either to pressure from below or from their peers. For instance, [Kilby \(2006\)](#) shows that among women's NGOs in India, larger organizations with more complex sets of accountabilities were less likely to become downwardly accountable. In short, it would be Pollyannaish to predict such spontaneous downward accountability in all but a few other cases.

Nevertheless, community-based, community-driven, and participatory approaches remain priorities for many in the field of international development. Prominent NGOs like ActionAid, Human Rights Watch, and Oxfam International have invested increasing amounts of energy in building accountability across political, economic, and cultural gulfs, earnestly seeking to transform power dynamics and strengthen the capacity of the poor ([ActionAid, 2008](#); [O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010](#)). In recent years, Oxfam, for instance, reexamined its own funding sources, development practices, and business model ([Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003](#)). Meanwhile, resource-dependent groups have continued to challenge Northern donors' terms, as in the cases of the farmers' network Via Campesina ([Reitan, 2007](#)), the Peoples' Global Alliance ([Wood, 2004](#)), and the Rural Women Workers' Movement (MMTR) in Brazil ([Thayer, 2010](#)).

While the empirical circumstances of this paper are unlikely to be replicated organically, my findings point to concrete mechanisms that might help such NGOs and movements build more constructive relationships. First, NGOs could seek and demand flexible funding. To date, donors' primary response to NGOs' "crisis of legitimacy" has been to impose reporting requirements, and funders have been the primary enforcers of these new demands. Yet, ironically, these requirements constrain NGOs and may inhibit them from accountability to the constituencies they intend to serve (see [Brown, 2008](#) for a similar example).

Second, NGOs might increase their contact with beneficiaries. More frequent interactions might help increase downward accountability, by putting NGOs in communication with constituents, making them more open to negotiating different arrangements, and illuminating, firsthand, the contradictory aspects of their aspirations for beneficiary participation. In studies of India, Ghana, and Mexico, [Mawdsley et al. \(2005\)](#) affirm that "being there" matters.

Third, NGOs and oversight groups might implement more mechanisms of accountability to peers, both formal and informal. In this, well-recognized, central, and progressive NGOs like Oxfam might serve as pioneers, helping to define and insist on downward (or mutual) accountability as a shared value and practice. Although many NGOs are less intertwined than those surrounding the Zapatistas, the expansion of information technology in the decade since the events described here might help expand visibility and reach to more peripheral NGOs. Studies such as [Bartley \(2007\)](#) point to the merits of such horizontal standards.

Further research might examine how such practices play out among other types of NGOs and beneficiaries in other conditions—as well as how downward accountability affects NGOs and their constituents over time. As scholars examine these and other NGO practices, they must continue to consider how well-meaning organizations can walk the line between participation in-name-only and subservience to powerful movements. As they do, perhaps they can make good on their promise to overturn existing power structures and foster new forms of mutuality.

NOTES

1. Interviewees and NGOs are identified by pseudonyms, unless otherwise noted.
2. The Zapatistas are a grassroots, rural, indigenous social movement in Southern Mexico that emerged in 1994 to demand autonomy and social rights and became a nucleus of progressive activism worldwide.
3. The relationship between NGOs' ideologies and their funding sources cannot be resolved here; nevertheless, we may draw some theoretical conclusions from the data.
4. An array of studies has sought to classify NGOs, noting ideological and structural differences, such as their programmatic orientation, level of operation, location, and approach. They have also distinguished among welfare or service NGOs—those discussed here—and membership or advocacy NGOs ([Pritchett & Woolcock, 2004](#); [Vakil, 1997](#); [Yaziji & Doh, 2009](#)).
5. As others have shown, a simple distinction between radical and moderate, grassroots and professional, South and North, fails to capture the variety of organizations, particularly in transnational advocacy networks, and the relationships among them ([Bartley, 2007](#); [Davis et al., 2005](#); [Rao, Morrill, & Zald, 2000](#)).
6. Such reversals, I illustrate, can prove very uncomfortable for some NGOs.
7. Since the Zapatistas reject state support and make little income from farming, outside donations provide crucial funds, summing approximately US \$1 million per year (12.5 million pesos), as of 2004.
8. It also represented a shift from more authoritarian command to government by community-level leadership.
9. The reasons the Zapatistas initially took this stand involve complex and often opaque negotiations within their leadership. Because this paper focuses on NGOs' responses, I do not examine these internal shifts. Rather, I take them as a starting point and examine the steps NGOs took subsequent to this decision.
10. I exclude NGOs that disbanded for other reasons, such as internal conflicts.

11. These do not add to 100%, because each NGO may have multiple sources of funding.
12. Ebrahim (2003) describes a similar set of strategies in the case of NGOs working with BRAC in Bangladesh.
13. Actual name.
14. Actual name.
15. The water project required outside engineering expertise and therefore could not be run by Zapatista peasants.
16. Whether programs are more likely to succeed if run by beneficiaries—especially those run by movement by leaders on the behalf of members—is unclear, but outside the scope of this paper. Given cultural and logistical clashes, we might assume that insiders have some advantages on NGO staff unfamiliar with the Zapatista context or goals.

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APPENDIX A.

Table A1. *Organizations that exited due to donor terms*

Organization	Program	Proximity	Primary Funding Source	Founded around Zapatistas	Zapatistas only beneficiary	Size	Example Funding Organizations
A1*	Delegations	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Large	Kellogg Foundation, Casey Foundation
A2	Delegations	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Large	Arca Foundation
A3*†	Delegations	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Large	Vanguard Foundation
A4	Human Rights	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Large	Goldman Fund, Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation
A5*†	Human Rights	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Large	Ford Foundation, Boehm Foundation, Winston Foundation
A6	Infrastructure	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Large	Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation
A7*	Infrastructure	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Large	USAID, Elsevier Foundation
A8	Political Solidarity	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Large	San Carlos Foundation
A9*	Women's Programs	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Large	Tides Foundation, William & Flora Hewlett Foundation
A10	Human Rights	Secondary	Government Grants	No	No	Large	USAID, National Endowment for Democracy
A11	Economic Development	Secondary	Government Grants	No	No	Large	Mexican Federal Government
A12*	Education	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	Yes	No	Medium	Unknown
A13	Environment	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Medium	Habitat for Humanity, Global Fund for Children
A14*†	Environment	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Medium	Kellogg Foundation, Fund for Global Human Rights
A15*	Women's Programs	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Medium	Inter-American Foundation, Pangea Giving
A16	Women's Programs	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Medium	Oxfam, UNHCR
A17*	Women's Programs	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Medium	San Carlos Foundation
A18	Women's Programs	Secondary	Foundations with Terms	No	No	Medium	Ford Foundation, Semillas
A19*	Women's Programs	Secondary	Government Grants	No	No	Medium	Mexican Federal Government
A20	Economic Development	Secondary	Members	Yes	No	Large	N/A
A21*	Environment	Secondary	Members	No	No	Medium	N/A
A22	Economic Development	Secondary	Members	Yes	No	Small	N/A
A23*	Infrastructure	Secondary	Members	Yes	No	Small	N/A
A24	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A

* Interview.

† Observation.

Table A2. *Organizations that could not adapt to downward accountability, but members re-formed in new organizations*

Organization	Program	Proximity	Primary Funding Source	Founded around Zapatistas	Zapatistas only Group	Size	Example Funding Organizations
B1*	Economic Development	Live-in	Members	Yes	Yes	Large	N/A
B2*	Education	Live-in	Foundations with Terms	Yes	Yes	Large	Fund for Global Human Rights
B3*	Human Rights	Live-in	Foundations with Terms	Yes	Yes	Large	Fund for Global Human Rights
B4	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
B5	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
B6	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
B7	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
B8	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
B9	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
B10	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
B11	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
B12	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A

† Observation.

* Interview.

Table A3. Organizations that accommodated downward accountability

Organization	Program	Proximity	Primary Funding Source	Founded around Zapatistas	Zapatistas only Group	Size	Example Funding Organizations
C1 ^{*,†}	Education	Live-in	Human Rights Grants	Yes	Yes	Large	Global Fund for Children, Larson Legacy
C2	Human Rights	Live-in	Human Rights Grants	No	No	Large	Catholic Relief Services
C3 ^{*,†}	Human Rights	Live-in	Human Rights Grants	Yes	No	Large	Fund for Nonviolence
C4 ^{*,†}	Education	Live-in	Human Rights Grants	Yes	Yes	Medium	Fund for Global Human Rights
C5 ^{*,†}	Human Rights	Live-in	Human Rights Grants	No	No	Medium	Fund for Global Human Rights
C6 [†]	Economic Development	Live-in	Foundations without terms	No	No	Medium	(later abandoned) OXFAM-UK, Ford Foundation, Inter-American Foundation, Novib
C7 [†]	Media	Live-in	Foundations without terms	Yes	No	Medium	(later abandoned)Ford Foundation, Chumbawamba,Glaser Family Foundation,New World Foundation
C8 ^{*,†}	Education	Live-in	Foundations without terms	Yes	Yes	Medium	Small nonprofit & solidarity organizations
C9 ^{*,†}	Media	Live-in	Product Sales	Yes	No	Medium	Fund for Global Human Rights, Cuentos Foundation, Basque Government, Vanguard Foundation, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
C10	Economic Development	Secondary	Human Rights Grants	No	No	Medium	Channel Foundation, Seattle Foundation, American Jewish World Service, Angelica Foundation, Vanguard Foundation, Tides Foundation
C11 [*]	Infrastructure	Secondary	Human Rights Grants	Yes	No	Medium	Unitarian Universalists Fellowship
C12 [†]	Media	Secondary	Human Rights Grants	Yes	No	Medium	Unknown
C13	Health	Secondary	Foundations without terms	No	No	Medium	IDEX
C14 ^{*,†}	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	No	No	Medium	N/A
C15 ^{*,†}	Solidarity	Secondary	Programs	Yes	No	Medium	Arca Foundation, Fund for Global Human Rights
C16	Human Rights	Live-in	Human Rights Grants	Yes	No	Small	Fund for Global Human Rights
C17 [*]	Women's Programs	Live-in	Individual Donors	Yes	Yes	Small	IDEX
C18	Economic Development	Live-in	Product Sales	Yes	No	Small	Fund for Global Human Rights,Rural Advancement Foundation, IDEX
C19	Solidarity	Secondary	Individual Donors	Yes	No	Small	N/A
C20 [†]	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
C21 ^{*,†}	Women's Programs	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
C22 [*]	Economic Development	Secondary	Product Sales	Yes	No	Small	N/A
C23	Economic Development	Secondary	Product Sales	Yes	No	Small	N/A
C24	Economic Development	Secondary	Product Sales	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
C25	Economic Development	Secondary	Product Sales	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
C26 [*]	Solidarity	Secondary	Programs	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A

* Interview.

† Observation.

Table A4. *New organizations that formed to be downwardly accountable*

Organization	Program	Proximity	Primary Funding Source	Founded around Zapatistas	Zapatistas only Group	Size	Example Funding Organizations
D1 ^{*†}	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D2 ^{*†}	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D3 ^{*†}	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D4 ^{*†}	Education	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D5 [*]	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D6 [*]	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D7 [*]	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D8 [*]	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D9 [*]	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D10 [*]	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D11	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D12	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D13	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	No	Large	N/A
D14	Solidarity	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A
D15 [*]	Women's Programs	Secondary	Members	Yes	Yes	Small	N/A

* Interview.

† Observation.

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