

Reaching toward outward accountability of environmental non-governmental organizations

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Summary

Environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) are key players in biodiversity conservation. From local to global scales, ENGOS have been charged with assuming responsibility for project outcomes and encouraged to share project findings with financial donors, policy-makers and the public. Although many have responded to increasing calls for accountability toward financial donors, we contend that ‘outward’ accountability – defined as the process of being called to account for one’s actions, responding to external scrutiny, and assuming public responsibility (Mulgan, 2000) – can be further improved. Specifically, we call for greater accountability downward to stakeholders, horizontally to peers and the broader conservation community and upward to bureaucratic superiors, boards and donors (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999; Naidoo, 2004; Salafsky et al., 2000). Willingness to involve a range of stakeholders in decision-making and efforts to explicitly communicate policy outcomes will lead to higher levels of transparency, institutional learning, and trust among those most impacted by conservation practices.

In this essay, we highlight three ways in which outward accountability can be further supported by ENGOS and other related resource management agencies. Specifically, we believe the mechanisms of dialogue, data sharing and volunteer accreditation can maintain and promote further development of accountable practices among ENGOS. First, open dialogue

between public and private sectors is an essential ingredient of accountability and provides a foundation for making equitable and efficient management decisions (Ban et al., 2013). In this sense, outward accountability can be a discursive activity that supports knowledge production and exchange, while providing opportunities for questions, comments and critique among stakeholders (Mulgan, 2000; Roberts, 2002). Efforts to increase dialogue will not only ensure opportunities to explain and justify partnerships with funding entities and other interest groups that shape conservation priorities, but also allow for collaborative problem solving with local communities. Forums for discussion during regularly held public meetings and through the Internet (where possible) will establish platforms for increasing outward accountability while improving legitimacy, creating understanding through a shared language and increasing the likelihood that stakeholders will accept conservation initiatives (Burnitt & Welch, 1997).

A second mechanism for promoting outward accountability is data sharing, which is the general practice of making project objectives, methods and data readily available to all individuals interested in conservation outcomes. Many organizations are actively involved in data sharing and have adopted mandatory, standardized protocols for disseminating project information. The National Science Foundation, for example, has policies for data sharing, in that grantees are required to make data and any other relevant materials gathered over the course of their work publically available (NSF, 2011). Other examples of required data sharing include top tier journals (e.g., Nature, Ecology, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences) and foundations such as the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation that support access to and/or publication of data as a supplement to project reports. These organizations have adopted accountable practices and we encourage others to follow suit when possible because

conservation needs to be confronted from local and global scales. With greater access to 'big data' (i.e., large volumes of project information), ENGOs will be better equipped to combat environmental change across spatial scales. That is, conservation issues are global problems that require large scale solutions based on standardized methods, data repositories, collaboration among organizations, and data sharing (Fraser et al. 2013).

Although there are widespread benefits to data sharing, the second mechanism we've highlighted in this essay is a double edge sword. Showing unsuccessful project results may risk the loss of support for conservation research and management. For example, Jepson (2005) reports that for ENGOs, "a major barrier to greater accountability was that admitting to weaknesses, particularly in project delivery, could jeopardize donor funding in a highly fickle and competitive market" (pp. 517). Sharing data may also debase public support for conservation by revealing uncertainty in the scientific process or showing that reported results are inaccurate and/or do not match declared conservation initiatives (Lapham & Livermore, 2003; Halpern et al., 2006). Despite these challenges, however, data sharing will ultimately improve scientific outcomes through (a) access to funded projects proposals, (b) disclosure of results and tradeoffs involved in conservation initiatives, and (c) independent auditing that supports adaptive institutional learning (Salafsky et al., 2000).

A third mechanism for increasing outward accountability is voluntary accreditation, whereby ENGOs and related organizations choose to meet standards of quality based on conservation outcomes and stakeholder engagement. Certifying conservation practices often involves multiple steps that facilitate public recognition of organizations meeting review standards and thus carries potential to maintain and increase accountability. The process

varies, though in general, organizations completing accreditation applications undergo self-assessments and agree to site visits from a third-party accreditation representative. The internal and external reflections that stem from certification reviews create opportunities to identify areas of improvement, garner recognition for performing best practices and help alleviate public uncertainty about the effectiveness of conservation efforts (Ferraro & Pattanayak, 2006). We argue that these practices should be pursued by conservation organizations.

In conclusion, there are multiple avenues for increasing outward accountability among ENGOs, three of which we have shared in this essay. To effectively and equitably combat conservation challenges across local and global scales, we believe that open dialogue, data sharing and voluntary accreditation programs are particularly hopeful mechanisms that support outward accountability. These three strategies have been adopted by many organizations and we hope will be further considered by ENGOs that influence global conservation policies and serve as role models for smaller local organizations. Although outward accountability requires strong commitment and political will, we hope that the potential solutions reviewed in this essay will spark dialogue within the conservation community.

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