

Conference «Non-State Actors as Standard Setters: The Erosion of the Public-Private Divide» | February 8-9 2007 | Hotel Hilton Basel, Switzerland

Accountability of transnational actors: is there scope for cross sector principles?

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Decision making at levels above that of the nation state is an unavoidable reality. A web of connections binds us globally through trade, finance and communications. Problems such as global warming and spread of disease are global in nature, and require global solutions. The growth in the number and scope of intergovernmental organisations reflects the need for coordinated state action. Yet there is also a growing recognition that states alone cannot respond to such multiple and diverse issues. As a result non-state actors such as corporations and civil society groups have gained an increasingly important role in global governance, contributing their capabilities and providing greater flexibility in addressing issues of human security and global concern.

The complexity and density of the relationships between actors across national, regional and global levels have led to the emergence of a multitude of accountability gaps¹ – fissures between those that govern and those that are governed that prevent the latter from having a say in, and influence over, decisions that significantly impact upon their lives. The future legitimacy and effectiveness of transnational governance rests on our ability to address these gaps and to tackle the challenge of meaningful inclusion of stakeholders in the multilateral arena. Mechanisms need to exist for transnational actors to become more accountable, and new understandings of what accountability means in practice need to be developed.

The paper will draw on the ongoing work of the Global Accountability Project² which engages with a network of intergovernmental, corporate and civil society representatives in both developing and developed countries. It will focus on accountability mechanisms across three different sets of actors, from transnational civil society organizations to multinational corporations to intergovernmental organizations and discuss the role of these mechanisms as agents for increasing both legitimacy and organizational effectiveness. The paper will highlight some of the learning from developing cross-sector accountability principles and will focus on cross-sector findings from the 2006 Global Accountability Index, which assesses and compares the accountability of 30 transnational actors according to four key dimensions – transparency, participation, evaluation, and complaint and response mechanisms.

¹ Newell, P. and S. Bellour (2002). Mapping accountability: origins, contexts and implications for development. Institute of Development Studies. Working Paper 168.

² Blagescu, M., de Las Casas, L. and R. LLoys (2005). Pathways to Accountability: The GAP Framework. London: One World Trust.