

Symmetrical Communication in Development:
A Critical Review of its Effect on
Downward Accountability of NGOs.

Malte Arnold

Abstract

This thesis is located at the intersection of two concepts: accountability in and communication for development. Two review chapters provide an overview of their general reception in the development discourse, relevant definitions and the significance both concepts have gained for the work of development NGOs. Within each concept the thesis focuses on a particular aspect: downward accountability and symmetrical communication. A chapter on the methodology used follows and subsequently, as the key research question, the thesis examines the effect symmetrical communication can have on downward accountability of NGOs in development. Three case studies exemplify the practical implementation and pursuit of symmetrical communication mechanisms and illuminate the differences that exist across diverse settings. After analyzing and contrasting the empirical cases this thesis suggests that the *timing* and the *degree of integration* of symmetrical communication into the overall projects are useful categories to evaluate the impact of symmetrical communication on NGO downward accountability. Furthermore, the thesis acknowledges operational limitations regarding the universal applicability of symmetrical communication. Moreover, it also includes fundamental criticism that questions the underlying participatory development paradigm. Nevertheless, the thesis' findings do indicate a significant potential for symmetrical communication as a pathway to strengthen downward accountability of development NGOs.

Key words: accountability, downward accountability, communication for development, symmetrical communication, development NGOs

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1 Introduction

Accountability has become a key objective in the field of development. Since the start of the new millennium, a fast growing number of development actors has recognized the importance of accountability (Newell & Bellour 2002; Zadek 2003). Some scholars already demanded that accountability should play a pivotal role within development NGOs during the 1990s and argued that “accountability is not an ‘optional extra’ for NGOs: it is central to their continued existence as independent organizations with a mission to pursue” (Edwards & Hulme 1995: 244). In recent years this demand has gained major importance as the concept of accountability has become part of the mainstream development discourse and made it onto the agenda of many development actors (Grant & Keohane 2005; Newell & Bellour 2002; Armstrong et al. 2011; Zadek 2003). Accountability has become “central to the mechanism through which the aid relationship is regulated” (Cronin & O’Regan 2002: viii).

Initially, accountability was predominantly linked to state governments and related government organizations (Scott 2002; Newell & Bellour 2002), but academic scholars as well as development practitioners have increasingly applied the concept to the context of development NGOs (Newell & Bellour 2002; Jordan 2005; Jordan & van Tuijl 2006; Lee 2004; Jacobs & Wilford 2007; Jacobs & Wilford 2010). Alongside its popular reception nowadays (World Bank 2008; Newell & Bellour 2002, Lee 2004), an ongoing debate on what accountability exactly constitutes has produced numerous definitions and interpretations of the concept. Together with the different understandings of accountability, a broad repertoire of mechanisms has emerged with the common aim to promote accountability. These mechanisms include formal top-down processes, often in form of elections, bottom-up strategies such as more direct forms of civic participation and a variety of participatory approaches, often coupled with new communication strategies (Newell & Bellour 2002). Furthermore, there is no general consensus of what the best mechanisms to promote accountability are and how to translate them from theoretical concepts into workable policies benefitting organizations and their stakeholders: “Appropriated by a myriad of international donor and academic discourses, accountability has become a malleable and often nebulous concept, with connotations that change with context and agenda” (Newell & Bellour 2002: 2).

In this thesis I focus on one particular conceptualization within the discourse on accountability that examines the direction in which accountability functions: The distinction is made

between *upward accountability* and *downward accountability* based on the power relation between actors. In the case of most development NGOs upward accountability relates to donors and governments that command the resources while downward accountability is directed towards the people who NGOs seeks to help – their beneficiaries. The latter aspect of downward accountability is at the core of this research, as it highlights the link between NGOs and their beneficiaries and is likely to play an important role in achieving sustainable and participatory development (cf. Gaventa & McGee 2013; Cornwall & Gaventa 2001).

The numerous communication strategies that are often used to promote good governance and accountability, tie into the second key concept of this thesis: communication for development (Haider et al. 2011; Inagaki 2007; The Communication Initiative et al. 2007; Wilson et al. 2007; Dagrón 2009). In 2006 the World Bank launched the Communication for Governance and Accountability Program that exemplifies the growing interest in the connection between communication and the promotion of accountability (World Bank 2008). The significance of communication for development grows with the emergence of new and innovative communication technologies. Many see the affordances of information and communication technologies such as the rapid exchange of information and numerous new media formats as tools to empower the beneficiaries of development projects: “Open, participatory information and communication processes (...) contribute substantially to better, more transparent and accountable governance, to the creation of a vibrant and dynamic civil society, and to rapid and more equitable economic growth” (Wilson et al. 2007: 25).

New methods that fall under the umbrella term of communication for development are characterized by the common goal to increase stakeholders’ influence on decision-making processes (Haider et al. 2011; UNICEF 2005; Wilson et al. 2007; The Communication Initiative et al. 2007; Singh 2008).

In this thesis I will focus upon one specific form of communication for development: *symmetrical communication* that originates in the area of public relations and was first conceptualized by James Grunig and Todd Hunt in 1984. Symmetrical communication proponents emphasize the importance of an ongoing dialogue between an organization and its stakeholders and argue that organizational strategies are most successful if based on a consensus between them (Grunig & Hunt 1984).

1.1 Research question and goals

Despite the widely recognized link between accountability and communication for development, there has been limited systematic investigation of the role that symmetrical communication can play for NGOs in their pursuit of accountability, particularly downward accountability. The goal of this thesis is to contribute to closing this research gap and to shed some light on the effect symmetrical communication may have on downward accountability, with a special focus on NGOs operating in the field of development. Hence, my research question is: *What effect can symmetrical communication have on the downward accountability of development NGOs?*

In this context another relevant topic for investigation would be the effect that symmetrical communication using new forms of social media could have on downward accountability. However, this topic lies outside the boundary of my thesis, but has been discussed elsewhere (cf. for example Haider et al. 2011; Walton 2010; SIDA 2009).

1.2 Thesis structure

In Chapter Two I start with a review of how accountability has been discussed within the development discourse and then proceed to show the significance accountability has gained for development NGOs. Subsequently, I give an overview of relevant definitions of accountability and introduce the distinction between upward and downward accountability. In Chapter Three I place the concept of communication for development into a historical context, show the significance it has gained for development NGOs and present important definitions. Additionally, I narrow down the broad concept of communication for development to the specific aspect of symmetrical communication. Chapter Four describes the methodology that I use to find answers to my research question. It starts out by outlining this thesis' research design, then explains the data collection strategy and the analysis that follows and finally highlights two main limitations of the data. Chapter Five contains the empirical basis of this thesis: I present three case studies that exemplify different approaches to symmetrical communication in development. The cases offer insights into the effect that different implementations of symmetrical communication can have on NGO downward accountability. Chapter Six analyses and discusses the cases. After a comparison I will engage with them on a more abstract level; elaborating key factors for a successful

implementation. I conclude the discussion by pointing out operational limitations as well as fundamental criticism targeting the underlying participatory development paradigm. Ultimately, I provide a critical assessment of the scope of my findings. Chapter Seven summarizes the results and identifies follow-up questions that emerged during my investigation.

2 Accountability in the development discourse

At the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 Kofi Annan (2000: 13) told the assembled world leaders; “better governance means greater participation, coupled with accountability”. This statement put the concept of accountability on the map and acknowledged its importance for successful and sustainable development on a global scale. Moreover, Annan did not direct these words primarily at the governments of developing countries, as it had commonly been the case before, but instead addressed the entire UN, donor countries, and the myriad of inter- national development organizations, including NGOs. This is the result of an ongoing shift towards a participatory development paradigm: policies of most aid agencies and development organizations have increasingly started to adopt participatory approaches since Annan’s speech (Cooke & Kothari 2001; Hickey & Mohan 2004; Zadek 2003).

Development organizations seek new ways to become less ‘closed systems’ and better include beneficiaries into the design of project strategies. They have demonstrated the will to enhance their transparency and thus become more accountable to the people they set out to support. Cronin and O’Regan (2002: viii) describe this ideological re-orientation as the “new language of aid and development” that “implies shifts in control and the distribution of power.”

2.1 Significance for development NGOs

Annan had good reason to shift the spotlight also towards NGOs. In the past NGOs could rely on their popular image as ‘magic bullets’ for development that harbor nothing but good intentions and are committed to altruistic objectives (Newell & Bellour 2002; Kovach et al.

2003; Zadek 2003; Leen 2006). Meanwhile, NGOs have constantly gained more influence: The Economist (1999) described the Earth Summit in 1992 as the breakthrough of NGOs as a major power in the development landscape and stated that the conglomerate of NGOs already delivered more development aid than the entire UN system. The resulting re-negotiation of power-relations between state, private sector and development NGOs actors granted the latter a significant voice and power in decision-making processes regarding development policies and state legislation (Lee 2004: 4; Kovach et al. 2003; Cooley & Ron 2002). In addition to their key function in the channeling of aid, some NGOs have assumed advocacy roles in development questions and are frequently consulted by decision-makers worldwide (Newell & Bellour 2002; Leen 2003). The increasing influence of NGOs has raised the question if this is part of a positive trend towards a more desirable dispersion of power and greater beneficiary inclusion or if it rather represents “a dangerous shift of power to unelected and unaccountable special interest-groups” (The Economist 1999). As a response, voices for greater NGO accountability grew louder (Lee 2004: 4; Newell & Bellour 2002; Zadek 2003; Leen 2003) and made it a “hotly disputed topic” (Lee 2004: 3). In a new and increasingly complex “set of obligations and responsibilities between different actors in the field of development” (Newell & Bellour 2002: 4), the external pressure on NGOs grew to attend to their accountability gap. The NGO-community rapidly realized its shortcomings and in many cases displayed discernable motivation to tackle the lack of accountability (Ebrahim 2003a; Ebrahim 2003b; Lee 2004) and recognized the necessity of a “greater culture of learning” (Leen 2006: 4) to maintain their high levels of public trust.

Hostile political environments of development projects are an additional reason behind NGOs’ accountability efforts. Through a well visible emphasis on accountability, NGOs can possibly attenuate authoritarian governments’ efforts to chip away their political and civil rights and instead secure sufficient room to operate in (Obrecht 2012; Leen 2006).

Despite the general recognition and support for the concept of accountability, critical voices exist as well: Critics of the participatory development paradigm claim that it is merely a mechanism that shrouds underlying power interests and benefits others than the intended beneficiaries. Such criticism highlights that the assessment of accountability is part of a “political process driven by broader economic and political agendas” (Newell & Bellour 2002: 3).

2.2 Definitions and conceptualizations

The growing popularity of accountability has produced a multitude of definitions and conceptualizations of accountability (Ebrahim 2003a; Newell & Bellour 2002; Ackerman 2004; Edwards & Hulme 1995; Najam 1996; Ebrahim & Weisband 2007). Narrow definitions of accountability tend to refer only to the way financial resources are spent ('financial accountability') whereas broad definitions include the way that stakeholders participate in decision-making ('social accountability') (GIZ 2011).

For example, Lee (2004: 3) defines accountability broadly as "the obligation to report on one's activities to a set of legitimate authorities". The Transparency and Accountability Initiative (2014) presents a more detailed definition of accountability as: "an institutionalized (...) relationship between different actors. One set of people / organizations are held to account [...] and another set do the holding". Both definitions contain the two core features of accountability; one party reports and the other holds to account. In a World Bank related document, Arnold and Garcia (2011: 1-2) include another dimension and present a participatory-driven definition that highlights the importance to strengthen individuals' capacity to take matters into their own hands: "Accountability is about strengthening non-state institutions such as civil society. Accountability can also be about processes such as citizen engagement in policy making and service delivery". Cosgrave (2007: 9) argues along the same lines, detailing the prerequisites for accountability: "First, the group must have accurate information about the policies and actions of the organization and their impact. This demands transparency from organizations. Second, they must have a mechanism through which they cannot only raise their concerns but can also have their questions answered and influence present and future policies and actions." Cosgrave's conceptualization shows the importance of beneficiaries' access to information and channels to make their voices heard.

Another dimension of accountability is the aspect of power that Newell and Bellour (2002: 1) focus on: The very function of accountability is to "ensure that those that wield power on behalf of others are answerable for their conduct" and, accordingly, to examine the practice of accountability is "de facto an enquiry into how to control the exercise of power". They draw attention to the fact that those who demand accountability need to have a certain amount of power in the first instance.

For the purpose of this thesis, I adopt the definitions of Arnold and Garcia (2011) and Cosgrave (2007). Their emphasis on organizational transparency and dialogue between organization and beneficiaries stresses the significance of participation for accountability. Further-

more, I follow Newell and Bellour's (2002) perspective on accountability through the lens of power relations. In the context of development NGOs these power relations can be visualized as a vertical line, with NGOs located somewhere in the middle, between state government and large donor organizations at the top and less powerful beneficiaries at the bottom. This visualization allows a distinction between two directions of accountability: *downward and upward accountability*.

2.2.1 Downward accountability

Downward accountability is associated with relationships that face down the power hierarchy. The degree of downward accountability is "the extent to which an NGO is accountable to those lower in the aid chain, generally to organizations which receive funds or to intended beneficiaries" (Jacobs & Wilford 2007: 7). This includes the degree of transparency, responsiveness and inclusiveness towards less powerful beneficiaries, regarding the NGOs' decision-making and design of agenda (BOND 2006; Kovach et al. 2003).

Downward accountability is deeply rooted in the participatory development paradigm. The key objectives of downward accountability are "to release power to those further down the aid chain" (Jacobs & Wilford 2007: 7) and achieve a fairer power-balance between NGOs and beneficiaries. Ideally, beneficiaries even take the lead and initiate development projects while NGOs aim to support this process by providing the necessary resources and organizational guidance. Genuine downward accountability produces local ownership that is considered to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of development projects (Kovach et al. 2003; Ellerman 2001; Kaplan 2000; Chamber 1997). Beneficiaries gain access to decision-making processes and the feeling that their opinions are genuinely taken into account. This rebuilds trust in political processes, generates public support for NGO work and can prevent the misuse of power in development projects (Kovach et al. 2003). These characteristics can be summarized as the "core dimensions" of downward accountability: transparency, participation, evaluation and complaint and response mechanisms (Blagescu et al. 2005: 11).

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (2010) has been established by a number of humanitarian and development organizations with the objective of promoting a universal accountability standard for development projects. For downward accountability in particular, it suggests four areas of implementation: (1) the public provision of information, (2) the inclusion of beneficiaries into decision-making progresses, (3) the establishment of complaint mechanisms and (4) the overall attitude and behavior of staff. Again, this focus on the beneficiary point of view reflects the participatory development paradigm in which downward ac-

countability is located in: Instead of pre-determined objectives, the aim is to provide development cooperation based on beneficiaries' priorities and perceptions to "re-balance the power differential between donor, NGO and beneficiary" (Jacobs & Wilford 2007: 13).

2.2.2 Upward accountability

Upward accountability is associated with relationships that face up the power hierarchy. For development NGOs, upward accountability means to inform their respective donors how funds are being used and to document that this happens in an effective and appropriate manner (Jacobs & Wilford 2007). In most cases donors control the allocation of funds and thus are able to exert power over recipient NGOs. Accordingly, in contrast to downward accountability, "robust reporting mechanisms" (Kovach et al. 2003: 1) are usually already in place for upward accountability. NGOs are required to specify and plan projects and outcomes with the donors in advance and are later held accountable for the results.

The two directions of accountability are potentially counter-productive to each other. Upward accountability may disadvantage downward accountability and constitute a barrier to objectives such as participation, empowerment and local ownership of projects (Wallace 2006). Furthermore, upward accountability of NGOs can have a "substantial impact on the priorities and practices of [NGO] staff" (Jacobs & Wilford 2007: 6) and divert NGOs' attention from the beneficiaries' situations towards the accomplishment of a predetermined 'tick list'. Often, staff members embrace the view that development can be fully planned in the long run and, accordingly, decrease their responsiveness to local needs (Ebrahim 2003a). Therefore mechanisms that promote a balance between the two forms of accountability are needed (Kovach et al. 2003) as a high degree of downward accountability is essential to successful development projects.

3 Communication for development

During its initial stages in the second half of the 20th century, communication for development was characterized by the dominant modernization paradigm: ‘Traditional’ societies had to be transformed into ‘modern’ societies through the implementation of Western attitudes, technologies and practices. ‘Diffusion theory’ was the driver behind communication for development; and accordingly, communication was limited to a “one-way transmission of information from sender to receiver” (Haider et al. 2011: 7).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s criticism towards the modernization paradigm grew, including the dissemination of information that hitherto constituted communication for development. Proponents of diffusion theory started to recognize the limitations of the approach, especially in “promoting sustained behavioural change” (Haider et al. 2011: 7). There were first steps to incorporate more elements of interpersonal communication and better response mechanisms to beneficiaries’ concerns. Development practitioners increasingly realized that “while mass media allows for the learning of ideas, interpersonal networks encourage the shift from knowledge to continued practice” (ibid.) that is essential for effective development projects. Demands for a ‘participatory’ approach to development intensified and eventually the same changes in overarching development ideology that also shifted accountability further into the spotlight, led to the concept of ‘participatory development communication’ (Cronin & O’Regan 2002). The empowerment of local communities, collective decision-making and transparency became the key objectives of communication for development (The Communication Initiative et al. 2007; Haider et al. 2011; Wilson et. al. 2007).

Even though the importance of communication for development to achieve these goals is widely recognized, in practice it remains relatively “under-prioritized” (Haider et al. 2011: 9) and weakly implemented (Pettit et al. 2009; Dagron 2009). One explanation for the discrepancy between rhetorical support and practical implementation is a lack of robust empirical evidence that supports theoretical claims and convinces development organizations as well as donor agencies to tackle the issue (Inagaki 2007). Coffey International (2007: 10) supports this explanation: “There is a limited pool of empirical evidence that illustrates the impact and significance of communication in good governance”. Also, most literature is “subsumed within conventional analysis on governance”, instead of focusing on communication for development and more specifically development NGOs. This situation is gradually changing, howev-

er, through the emergence of qualitative and quantitative research that identifies a positive effect of communication for development (Coffey International 2007; The Communication Initiative et al. 2007)

3.1 Significance for development NGOs

The current discourse on communication for development is of particular interest for development NGOs, for the same reason that makes them strive for more accountability: The steep increase in numbers of NGOs and their grown power and influence have put them into the spotlight. Governments, donor communities and the general public in donor- and development countries are carefully observing what actions NGO take and which financial and personal resources they allocate to what purpose. Moreover, many NGOs have embraced the participatory development paradigm and thus accepted the importance of appropriate communication for the quality of their work. Subsequently, numerous NGOs have taken the initiative to explore communication mechanisms that best support their objectives of facilitating local development efforts and encouraging beneficiaries to become part of the projects. For these aims, new communication approaches can be of great help: The establishment of beneficiary dialogues and consultation can promote “spaces in which [beneficiaries] can define development and give meaning to and claim their citizenship” (Haider et al. 2011: 26). Ideally, beneficiaries can become active partners for development NGOs, instead of remaining dependent recipients of aid. Such ‘beneficiary ownership’ can give development projects and the involved NGOs the legitimacy they need to achieve sustainable social change (Haselock 2010.). While conventional communication, based on diffusion theory, is useful to disseminate information to the masses and pursue predetermined reforms, empirical evidence suggests that participatory communication is more likely to bring locally owned initiatives into existence and promote sustainable social change (Haider et al. 2011: 26).

3.2 Definitions and conceptualizations

Previous forms of communication for development mainly engaged in the dissemination of information. Key concerns were how to reach the largest possible number of recipients, achieve a strong impression and influence beneficiaries' behavior in order to meet project goals. Very limited interest was paid to beneficiary consultation and feedback, because the common perception was that the beneficiaries 'were the ones that had to be developed'. Such communication contributed to a one-directional, 'asymmetrical' flow of information and thus further cemented the power hierarchy between development organizations and beneficiaries.

More recent communication approaches have embraced the emerging participatory development paradigm and have attached great importance to dialogical approaches such as public hearings, beneficiary consultation and inclusion (Haider et al. 2011). In 1997, the United Nation's General Assembly formulated an official definition of communication for development that exemplified the beginning of this new participatory focus: communication for development "stresses the need to support two-way communication systems that enable dialogue and that allow communities to speak out, express their aspirations and concerns and participate in the decisions that relate to their development" (United Nations 1997: 2).

As proof for the growing interest in the concept, a decade later the first World Congress on Communication for Development was established. It defined communication for development as "a social process based on dialogue using a broad range of tools and methods. It is also about seeking change at different levels, including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change" (The Communication Initiative et al. 2007: xxxiii). Since then many United Nations organizations adopted similar understandings of communication for development. The FAO (2014), for instance, follows the above definition and also emphasizes the significance of thoroughly understanding the local contexts of development projects. The new understanding of communication for development goes "beyond information dissemination to facilitate active participation and stakeholder dialogue" and recognizes "the importance of raising awareness, the cultural dimensions of development, local knowledge, experiential learning, information sharing and the active participation of rural people and other stakeholders in decision making".

While there is a variety of answers to the question what exactly constitutes communication for development, there is common consensus on what is clearly excluded from it. Com-

munication for development does not include any forms of corporate communication or conventional media liaisons, through press releases and advertisement (The Communication Initiative et al. 2007).

Since the shift towards the participatory development paradigm communication for development is also linked to social change: communication for development has come to be seen as a way to “facilitate meaningful participation, and foster social change” (Haider et al. 2011: 7). Other scholars connected the concept of communication for development to the discourse on governance: “Communication connects citizens, civil society, the media system, and government, forming a framework for national dialogue through which informed public opinion is shaped” (Arnold and Garcia 2011: 7). The link to governance and thus accountability is also reflected by the Communication for Governance and Accountability program that the World Bank launched in 2006. Research within this program highlights the potential of innovative communication approaches to amplify citizen voice, promote a free and independent media landscape and generally support the communication between organizations and citizens (World Bank 2008).

Reviewing the literature in search for definitions and empirical evidence of the effects of communication for development it becomes apparent that most literature on the topic can be found in ‘grey’ publications. Minor and self-publications by program-planning organizations, and other venues outside the conventional academic channels produce a “wealth of informative (often first hand) experiences and analyses underscoring positive impacts of communication” (Inagaki 2007: 3). Furthermore, there are professional conferences and meetings that compile new findings and experiences in their proceeding, such as the UN Communication for Development Roundtable.

And yet, it is the literature that is published in academic journals that is the “authoritative voice in the field” and has the greatest influence on development policies. The situation is aggravated by a lack of journals specialized in the field, partly due to the highly interdisciplinary nature of the field, so that most articles are published in the contexts of a variety of related disciplines. For decision makers and researchers alike this situation is “not ideal for the purpose of systematically accumulating evidence” (Inagaki 2007: 3) and evaluating the impact of communication for development.

Possibly, this situation stems from the limited attention that communication for development has received in the past, while it was influenced by the conventional diffusion theory of communication. With the recent shift to more participatory communication this situation is likely to change. Currently, two-way flows of information between organizations and benefi-

ciaries come into focus. Two-way flows of information can allow both sides to contribute to the discussion, become active in decision-making progresses and create a more even relation between development actors and beneficiaries (Haider et al. 2011). In contrast to previous ‘asymmetrical communication’, these inclusive approaches can be referred to as *symmetrical communication*.

3.3 Symmetrical communication

This communication approach is in alignment with the growing emphasis on participatory forms of development. Numerous scholars consider mechanisms such as stakeholder consultation and dialogue, effective response mechanisms by organizations and facilitating the access to information conducive to an environment in which stakeholders can fully execute their citizenship. Symmetrical communication is thus considered key for sustainable and successful development (Haider et al. 2011; Dagrón 2009).

Symmetrical communication has its roots in the field of public relations. In 1984, James Grunig and Todd Hunt determined four communication approaches for organizations to interact with the public: The first two approaches ‘press agency’ and ‘public information’ broadcast information from an organization to a target audience and widely ignore feedback from or dialogue with the audience. The third approach, ‘two-way asymmetrical’ communication, includes the aspect of identifying the public’s opinion only to adjust the organizational strategy and effectively control and manipulate the public’s behavior (Cutlip 2013). In the context of development NGOs’ adapting the participatory development paradigm, it is Grunig and Hunt’s fourth model that is of particular interest: ‘two-way symmetrical communication’.

The central theme of this communication approach is an assessment of a public’s needs, combined with a continuous dialogue to build a close rapport between organization and the public (Cutlip 2013). Symmetrical communication fosters mutual understanding between organizations and the public that ideally leads to a harmonious adjustment and provides the platform for successful further cooperation (Grunig & Hunt 1984). It promotes the continuous exchange of information between the two parties and especially in a development context can help to enhance beneficiary ownership of projects and outcomes (Haider et al. 2011). Practitioners of this model become “mediators between organizations and their publics” (Grunig & Hunt 1984: 22). They bridge the steep power divides between development actors and en-

courage organizations to re-evaluate their agendas according to beneficiaries' needs and opinions.

Accountability as the objective and symmetrical communication as the method originate in the participatory development paradigm. They both aim to reduce power imbalances of development projects and instead strengthen beneficiaries' capacities to cooperate with NGOs on more equal terms.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research design

The objective of this thesis is to investigate the effect that symmetrical communication methods can have on the downward accountability of development NGOs. Individually, these aspects have been investigated previously and there is substantive literature on both of them. However, very limited research has been done on a possible connection between the two. And virtually no research exists if such a potential connection is put into the specific context of development NGOs. Hence, my aim with this thesis is not to test already existing hypotheses or gain a more detailed knowledge about a specific research issue. Instead, the objective is to search for new patterns and ideas that can consequently form the basis for further research. This exploratory nature of the research suggests the use of qualitative research methods (Bryman 2012; Denzin & Lincoln 2005). Within the wide range of available qualitative research methods, I chose to work with case studies, more specifically a *comparative case study* approach. Case study methods are widely considered valuable when the research objective is to gain a holistic understanding of the situation and connections in contexts such as organizational and managerial processes (Yin 2014; Mills 2008).

Within the field of case studies the question arises, whether to do a single case study or a multiple case study approach or to combine a case study approach with a comparative approach. I opted for a multiple case comparative approach because it seemed the best fit for my ambition to explore possible connections between two aspects and to develop categories that provide a better understanding of such connections, given the situation that these connections are quite new territory up to know. Furthermore, this approach supports my desk study that draws exclusively on secondary data. An alternative method would have been a single case study analysis that attempts to draw conclusions from an in-depth study of one

specific case (Bryman 2012). However, such a research method would have required at least some primary data to gain reliable results from a detailed study of an individual case (Corti 2008). And since such a data collection was outside my possibilities for this thesis, I concluded that a comparative case study analysis that uses multiple cases suits my thesis' purposes the best.

4.2 Data collection strategy

Sampling

As is common for qualitative research I did not use any statistical sampling but instead a theoretical sampling approach (Bryman 2012; van den Hoonaard 2008). Three cases of NGOs constitute the empirical material of this thesis' comparative case study analysis. I have chosen these three cases in a three-step-selection process on the basis of specific criteria: In a first selection step, I conducted a free internet search for literature on development NGOs' projects that incorporate any forms of communication for development into their work – key words were: *development NGOs, communication for development, case study, dialogue*. In a second step, I chose those NGO cases from the primary search results that showed discernable forms of symmetrical communication. And lastly, I selected three NGO cases from these secondary selection results that varied as much as possible from one another - besides their commonality of incorporating symmetrical communication into their projects, using the theoretical sampling strategy of maximum variation (Morgan 2008; Palys 2008).

Maximum variation sampling

As a result the three case studies that I eventually selected differ in at least three important aspects: geographical situation, development aim and the time frame they are operating in. All three case studies depict NGOs that are located in different world regions: Sudan and Kenya in Africa and Indonesia in South-East Asia. Furthermore, the NGOs engage with a wide range of topics within the overarching objective of providing development support: combating the consequences of water scarcity, seeking to improve sanitation standards and providing immediate aid relief in form of rebuilding infrastructure and shelter. And lastly, the NGOs operate in very different overall frame conditions, especially regarding the projects' time frame: One NGO works in the rural areas that constitute the origin of beneficiaries and engages in a long-term commitment. The second NGO seeks to improve the living conditions in refugee

camps with a more rotating population that at least in theory is intended to only be temporary. And the third case depicts NGOs' efforts to provide immediate catastrophe relief with a strong focus on the most immediate problems to save lives and much less of a long-term vision.

Case	Geographic location	Work focus	Time frame
Tearfund	(Northern) Kenya	Water scarcity and agricultural support	Long-term and without a set deadline
Medair	West Dafur (Sudan)	Hygienic and medical support in refugee camps	Medium-term and depending on duration of the refugee camps
Tsunami Recovery Projects	Mainly Indonesia and other surrounding areas that were affected.	Reconstruction after Tsunami destruction and immediate aid relief	Short-term and as an initial response to combat the worse consequences

Table 1: Maximum variation of selected case studies

The guiding motivation for the selection of the following three cases for my research can be summarized as seeking to achieve the maximal diversity of material relevant to my research question, within my possibilities regarding time, text length and scholarly expertise (Palys 2008).

4.3 Data analysis

For the comparative case analysis I first scrutinized each case for the details of how symmetrical communication methods were employed and where connections to downward accountability became apparent. In the second round of the analysis I compared the particularities of the cases, with the intention to generate categories that could explain differences in the effect that symmetrical communication had on the NGOs' downward accountability. The results of my analysis are visualizations of the way in which symmetrical communication methods were incorporated in each of the three cases that help to get a quick overview of the case particularities and furthermore a set of categories as an answer to the initial research question.

4.4 Limitations of the data used

There are two main limitations to the empirical material that are important to keep in mind throughout the case descriptions and the analyses that follow: All empirical material in this thesis qualifies as secondary data (Bryman 2012; McGinn 2008). It was outside the scope of this thesis to collect case data myself, with my research question in mind. I had to draw on other researchers' primary data that has therefore been 'filtered' and interpreted by other researchers before me (and also collected for somewhat differing purposes). Accordingly, it is vital to consider the agendas that the sources I draw upon pursue themselves and be aware of how this may have affected the material.

The second limitation ties into precisely this point: The empirical material concerning communication and the forms of cooperation between the development NGOs and their beneficiaries is either produced by the NGOs themselves or other forms of Western development organization. It does not, however, feature first-hand accounts by the beneficiaries that of course would have been included if I could have collected the data myself specifically for this research, as would have been the best fit for my research question, given more time and resources.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, given the exploratory nature of this thesis, the empirical data that I finally draw on seems reasonably sufficient to reach reliable answers to my research question. Limitations regarding the range of my conclusions and the possibilities of generalization are discussed in Chapter 6.4 *Critical reflection on methodology*.

5 Case studies: Symmetrical communication in practice

5.1 Case study 1: Tearfund

Context

The NGO Tearfund established an emergency relief program in the pastoral areas of Northern Kenya, where the impact of a prolonged drought throughout the past decade has been particularly severe. As a consequence, water tables decreased dramatically and essential boreholes

ran dangerously low. This led to high levels of malnutrition, livestock losses up to 70% and mass migrations. Tearfund's goal was to provide practical support to the most vulnerable in the region and to cooperate with local partners to minimize drought-induced suffering and Damage (HAP 2007a).

Symmetrical communication

Tearfund has incorporated a set of three symmetrical communication mechanisms into its program: *notice boards*, *suggestion boxes* and *beneficiary reference groups* (HAP 2007a-c).

The *notice boards* serve as platforms to disseminate general information, such as Tearfund's mission statement and overall agenda. In addition, notice boards display current updates, including the results of recent surveys and other current projects. And importantly, the boards contain governance information, such as member names of water and livestock committees and member lists of the beneficiary reference groups. The boards also include an explanation of selection processes and how individuals can challenge selection results. As a first step, Tearfund held meetings with beneficiary representatives from ten communities to determine the best locations for notice boards. They took into account a number of factors, such as the security and accessibility of locations, and decided to choose water points, churches and other central points of public life of the communities (HAP 2007a).

To complement the notice boards, Tearfund established two other channels that provide beneficiaries with the opportunity to convey feedback and criticism to the NGO.

Suggestion boxes function as channels for beneficiaries to reach Tearfund anonymously. They were designed especially for feedback of a more sensitive nature, such as allegations of corruption and misbehavior, potentially even involving NGO staff. Such feedback can be deposited in one of the locked suggestion boxes and is weekly collected by NGO staff. Similar to the preparation process for the notice boards, beneficiary representatives were part of the decision-making process regarding the location of the suggestion boxes and were involved in explaining their purpose (HAP 2007b).

Finally, Tearfund established *beneficiary reference groups* as more informal channels taking into account the highly oral nature of the regional culture. The group members represent a cross-section of the beneficiaries and work as intermediaries between the NGO and the wider population. They do not control any of the NGO resources, but stand in direct contact with the NGO staff, so they can gather questions, feedback and criticism and communicate them directly to Tearfund. As well-rooted members of their communities, members of beneficiary reference groups are able to engage with more vulnerable beneficiaries that might lack the capacity to publically voice criticism or make use of the suggestion boxes (HAP 2007c).

Results and lessons learned

The written and public display of information on the notice boards effectively promoted transparency and constituted one component of successful symmetrical communication. Beneficiaries particularly appreciated the lists of aid recipients and committee members, which provided a source of verification of circulating rumors. Despite low literacy rates, the region's oral nature ensured that most people had access to notice boards' information. In addition, the public display of nominees for certain positions functioned as a check of their legitimacy: One person was disqualified for a committee position after it became apparent that he had faked papers in the past. The incident of a broken notice board in one community confirmed the appreciation that boards received: Community members contributed small amounts of money to replace the glass screen to ensure its functionality in the future (HAP 2007a).

Most complaints that were filed via the suggestion boxes were anonymous and mainly concerned the recruitment processes for committee members and the selection of aid recipients. Albeit the total number of complaints was rather low, Tearfund staff was convinced that suggestion boxes were essential to receive feedback from marginalized community members as well. Tearfund was able to address a number of these complaints before they led to any major dissatisfaction.

Tearfund concluded that for a complaint system to be effective the 'pattern of information' has to be designed in a way that ensures the sender's confidentiality and at the same time the transparency of documentation (HAP 2007b).

The beneficiary reference groups were soon given names in local languages often connected to 'truth' and 'justice'; presumably, a sign of their legitimacy and respect among the beneficiaries. They managed to reach more vulnerable community members and better include them into decision-making processes. Importantly, these groups also promoted female involvement and encouraged women to make important contributions to the dialogue between NGO and beneficiaries. In fact, the groups were able to solve various controversial issues before they escalated. Tearfund valued the key role of beneficiary reference groups in communication and at the same time highlighted the importance of adequate preparation and training of the members throughout the process. Moreover, the composition of the groups influences their work. Female representation and the inclusion of less powerful individuals are essential to reach every community member. Either way it is important to note that the increased cooperation with beneficiary reference groups cannot replace communal meetings between Tearfund and its wider group of beneficiaries (HAP 2007c).

Altogether, the combination of different mechanisms of symmetrical communication

yielded very positive results according to both Tearfund and beneficiary representatives. High levels of satisfaction even triggered some communities to demand similar mechanisms from other development actors in the region (HAP 2007a).

5.2 Case study 2: Medair

Context

The NGO Medair launched small-scale health projects in West Darfur (Sudan) in 2001. Since then these interventions have developed into a multi-million dollar relief program for over 230.000 internally displaced people due to the ongoing conflicts in Sudan (HAP 2007d).

Symmetrical communication

In 2005, Medair conducted a pilot study to examine what the main problem areas in the refugee camps were and how beneficiaries perceived previous NGO projects. Despite difficult operational circumstances, the NGO employed two mechanisms of symmetrical communication to collect beneficiary feedback and better understand their needs and priorities: *household surveys* and *on-site surveys*.

The household surveys in 104 homes in 14 different locations consisted of eleven basic questions regarding the accessibility of water, hygiene facilities and medical institutions and the overall perception of Medair and its services. Some questions were of a more factual nature, such as the nearest source for water, but most focused on beneficiaries' opinions on less tangible aspects of the projects. For example, recipients were asked whether or not they felt treated respectfully, if the correct use of drugs was explained sufficiently, and whether adequate post-rape treatments were offered.

Additionally, Medair conducted on-site surveys at the clinics they provided in the camp. After each visit, patients were asked to rate their satisfaction level in three areas; staff conduct, drug explanation and waiting time. Participants judged each area by placing a counter into boxes with a happy, neutral or unhappy face. This way, Medair was able to gather feedback from 768 beneficiaries spread over ten clinics (HAP 2007d).

Results and lessons learned

The surveys enabled Medair to determine which issues mattered most to beneficiaries, such as

long waiting time to use hand pumps, skepticism towards medical and psychological post-rape care, and significant discrepancies of hygiene conditions between locations. Subsequently, Medair conducted follow-up surveys to narrow down particularly affected areas and to take appropriate actions. The clinic surveys showed that people were generally satisfied with the service. Staff conduct received the best rating, followed by drug explanation and waiting time on the last place.

According to Medair, their symmetrical communication mechanisms yielded good results. The surveys provided valuable insights on their programs' effects from the point of view of beneficiaries, with only little additional work for the NGO staff. An important additional aspect was that beneficiaries perceived the symmetrical communication efforts as a sign of Medair's respect and genuine interest to include them into the development process. The household visits enhance a personal connection between NGO and beneficiaries and the on-site surveys gave beneficiaries tangible proof that their opinions were valued (HAP 2007d).

5.3 Case study 3: Tsunami recovery projects

Context

In 2004 a tsunami hit numerous South East Asian countries with devastating effects for large groups of the population. The aftermath of this catastrophe was extensively covered by international media and thus received a high degree of public attention. The international response was backed by large amounts of donations in addition to government funding and a myriad of development actors set out to provide aid relief and to engage in long-term reconstruction. For the purpose of this thesis, these combined efforts of international development agencies, small- and large scale NGOs and also actors from the private sector, are referred to as the *tsunami recovery projects*. After the first round of these projects, a coalition of 40 aid agencies founded the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition with the aim to systematically appraise the effectiveness and shortcomings of catastrophe relief efforts and to generally improve the quality of future humanitarian interventions. Based on the data from 43 different tsunami-related studies and over 27.000 tsunami-related documents, the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition published a report that evaluates five thematic areas of the tsunami recovery projects: (1) the coordination of the initial international response to the catastrophe, (2) the needs assessment of the effected populations, (3) the impact on local capacities, (4) links between relief, rehabilitation and further development aid and (5) the funding response to the tsunami (Cosgrave 2007: 1). The second and third areas provide the most valuable insights into the usage of symmetrical communication mechanisms during the recovery projects.

Symmetrical communication

According to the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition's report, a lack of symmetrical communication characterized the recovery projects. Most development actors entered the stage with pre-determined set agendas and objectives in mind, which limited their willingness to incorporate local capacities and beneficiaries' priorities into projects. Among these shortcomings, the report positively highlights one mechanism that came into play after most projects were conducted: *satisfaction surveys of beneficiaries*.

These surveys can be considered a first step towards symmetrical communication as they start an exchange of information and dialogue between development organizations and beneficiaries (Cosgrave 2007). Such mechanisms can provide an effective approach to assess development actors' behavior from a beneficiary perspective and to encourage development organizations to take beneficiaries' opinions and criticism more serious in the future.

Results and lessons learned

The surveys shed light on an aspect that has received little attention so far: The attitude with which development actors conduct development projects greatly influences beneficiaries' satisfaction and the overall likelihood of success (Cosgrave 2007). Throughout the tsunami recovery projects, beneficiaries felt "over-assessed but not consulted" (de Ville Goyet & Morinière 2006: 11) and hardly had the possibility to hold organizations accountable for their actions. Beneficiaries were scarcely informed about organizations' agendas and could seldom take part in decision-making processes. This strongly undermined local ownership and the effectiveness of aid initiatives (Cosgrave 2007).

In addition, the Tsunami Coalition's report found that the enormous amount of resources that were mobilized in the aftermath of the catastrophe led to a "virtual obsession" (Cosgrave 2007: 11) among development actors to advertise their alleged successes to Western donors and media. A serious 'mismatch' between project objectives and the actual needs and realities of beneficiaries was the consequence. NGO-constructed houses that turned out uninhabitable for beneficiaries due to cultural reasons, exemplify the implications of a highly competitive environment between development actors that hinders cooperation and instead causes duplications and waste (Jacobs & Wilford 2007).

Summarizing these shortcomings the report calls for a fundamental change towards meaningful symmetrical communication. There is a "profound need to put people's principles at the heart of any future disaster response" (Cosgrave 2007: 11) and cooperate with already existing local structures. Transparency and the easy access to information are paramount to

achieve this, but more is needed: The affected people must also have the “capacity to analyse the information and a mechanism both to ask questions and to influence and control policies and actions” (Cosgrave 2007: 23). Only then the beneficiaries themselves can be in charge of setting the priorities of recovery programs and gain genuine ownership.

6 Analysis and assessment

In this chapter, I will analyze and discuss the case studies and connect them to the broader concepts of accountability in and communication for development.

Graphics will visualize the implementation of symmetrical communication in each of the three cases and help to highlight significant differences. Thereafter, I suggest possible categorizations to better understand the effect of symmetrical communication on NGO downward accountability in real-life settings. Critically assessing this effect, I will also reflect upon operational limitations and point out fundamental critique that calls the underlying participatory development paradigm into question.

6.1 Comparative analysis of the case studies

The significant lack of symmetrical communication during the tsunami recovery projects is likely to have contributed to the low levels of NGO downward accountability (Cosgrave 2007). The divergence of predetermined project objectives and beneficiary priorities can be directly linked to the concepts of upward and downward accountability: The tsunami recovery projects displayed great efforts to demonstrate upward accountability to Western donor agencies, donor countries and the corresponding media (*ibid.*). More often than not, donor expectation and the satisfaction of the donor community lay at the hearts of projects goals and strategies, instead of beneficiary interests. This unreflective pursuit of upward accountability in an overly competitive environment with poor cooperation between development organizations contributed to the widespread disregard of beneficiaries’ true needs and their cultures (Cosgrave 2007). In contrast, downward accountability received very little attention. The voices of beneficiaries neither played a role during the process of defining project goals and nor during the subsequent implementation. Local capacities were excluded from decision-making pro-

cesses, which instead were driven by a bureaucratic process to fulfill the requirements for greater upward accountability. The surveys made apparent that beneficiaries experienced close to no project ownership and a strong divide between ‘developers’ and ‘those to be developed’ remained – two factors that clearly indicate low levels of NGO downward NGO accountability. Figure 1 visualizes the use of symmetrical communication during the tsunami recovery projects:

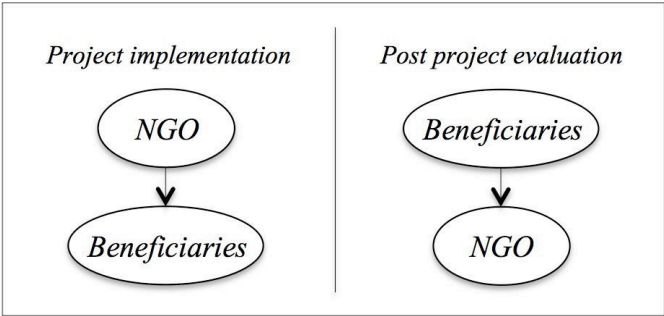


Figure 1: Symmetrical Communication in the tsunami recovery projects

The cases of Medair and Tearfund exemplify a more successful incorporation of symmetrical communication into their projects. Both NGOs display genuine interest in symmetrical communication and the eventual objective of downward accountability. They recognized the intrinsic value of both concepts without major external pressure and nowadays even perceive them as possibilities to improve the quality of their development assistance (Jabry 2008).

The Medair case entails two mechanisms that qualify to some extent as symmetrical communication: Household and on-site beneficiary surveys promoted a stream of information from beneficiaries back to the NGOs and thus can be seen as mechanisms that made the NGO more accountable to their less powerful beneficiaries. The latter could voice criticism regarding the NGOs behavior and their feedback can influence ongoing and future development projects and implementations strategies. Nonetheless, both of Medair’s symmetrical communication mechanisms have shortcomings: For instance, it is the NGO that decides when the feedback channels are accessible for beneficiary in form of set survey. And it is also the NGO that designates the ‘frame’ for beneficiary feedback and criticism because Medair selects the questions for household surveys and also the areas that can be rated after clinic visits. In comparison to the case of the tsunami recovery projects, the Medair case displays significantly more symmetrical communication that is likely to have had a certain effect on the NGO’s downward accountability. And yet the effect on downward accountability will remain quite limited, since the mechanisms hardly tackle the underlying power imbalance between NGO

and beneficiaries as the power monopoly remains with the NGO. Figure 2 visualizes the use of symmetrical communication in the Medair case:

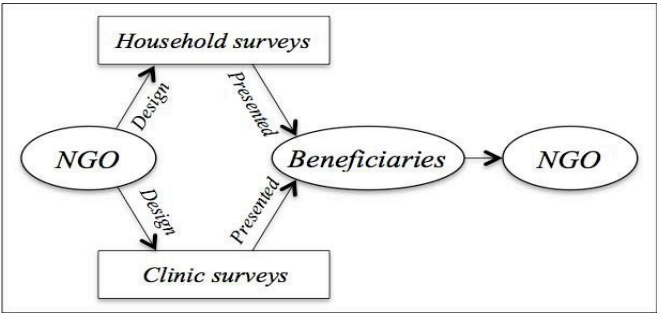


Figure 2: Symmetrical Communication in the Medair Case

The Tearfund case displayed the most far-reaching use of symmetrical communication and achieved the most significant level of downward accountability among the three cases. The mechanism of notice boards promoted a one-way stream of information and enhanced Tearfund’s transparency toward beneficiaries, while the suggestion boxes and beneficiary reference groups channeled beneficiaries’ feedback, suggestions and criticism back to the NGO and thus complimented the symmetrical exchange of information.

Moreover, the Tearfund case shows another important indicator of genuine participation and downward accountability: All three mechanisms encouraged beneficiaries to become active and to some extent self-governed, both before the projects were launched and after: Tearfund incorporated symmetrical communication into the process of designing the mechanisms themselves. Local representatives were part of the decision-making process regarding the locations and announcement of notice boards and suggestion boxes. Accordingly, both mechanisms can be seen as the results of cooperation between beneficiaries and Tearfund, instead of the outcome of an anonymous Western intervention. The same holds true for the third symmetric communication mechanism of beneficiary reference groups. In addition to the fact that all representatives were from the local communities, the committee that elected also consisted of beneficiary representatives and NGO staff. Figure 3 visualizes the use of symmetrical communication in mechanisms in the Tearfund case:

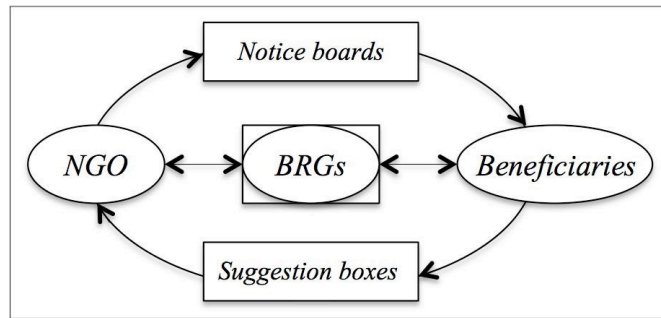


Figure 3: Symmetrical Communication in the Tearfund Case

According to the overall feedback from beneficiary and Tearfund staff, the combination of all three mechanisms successfully strengthened the “four core dimensions” (Blagescu et al. 2005:11) of downward accountability: transparency, participation, evaluation and complaint and response mechanisms.

6.2 Effect on downward accountability: Key factors

Connecting the theoretical concepts and the empirical evidence from the case study analysis, I suggest a distinction between at least two factors that determine the effect of symmetrical communication on downward accountability: (1) the timing of the implementation of symmetrical communication and (2) the degree of integration of symmetrical communication into the project in question.

Timing of implementation

The case studies of Tearfund, Medair and the tsunami relief projects each indicate one of three different stages of development projects during which symmetrical communication can be incorporated: NGOs can incorporate symmetrical communication mechanisms from the *initial stage of a project* and onward. This entails the inclusion of beneficiaries into the preparation processes of defining project objectives and the design of project strategies. This timing offers the valuable possibility that beneficiaries become ‘project partners’ from the very beginning and thus grants projects the chance to start out with significant legitimacy and local ownership.

Next, symmetrical communication mechanisms can be implemented at some stage *during the project*. For instance, they monitor how beneficiaries respond to the project as it progresses and communicate feedback and criticism to the NGO. Coupled with the

appropriate actions as a response to beneficiary input, symmetrical communication mechanisms can lead to stronger beneficiary inclusion and overall downward accountability.

The third case study demonstrates how symmetrical communication can be employed *after already finalized projects* for evaluation purposes that investigate beneficiaries' perspectives and experiences. Logically, if symmetrical communication is implemented after the finalization of the actual projects it has no impact on past projects and only on future projects.

In conclusion, the evidence from the case studies suggests that the earlier symmetrical communication is incorporated into development projects the greater its effect on NGO downward accountability is going to be.

Degree of integration into the project

The second factor that determines the effect of symmetrical communication on NGO downward accountability is the degree of *integration of symmetrical communication mechanisms* into a development project.

The Tearfund case shows a high degree of integration of symmetrical communication into the project: mechanisms, such as notice boards and suggestion boxes, channel information from NGO to beneficiaries and vice versa. Beneficiary reference groups provide a valuable third channel that can pick up on the traditional oral-based communication of a region. The latter allows for more informal communication and takes an intermediary role between NGO and its beneficiaries. In the context of the Tearfund case the three communication channels complimented each other well, are deeply integrated into the project and thus effectively enhance the NGO's downward accountability.

The Medair case displays a lower level of integration of symmetrical communication. Household and on-site surveys certainly allow beneficiaries' opinions and perceptions to reach the NGO. However, the mechanisms are either of a rather sporadic nature (household surveys) or only allow for a general beneficiary feedback, instead of more insightful opinions and criticism (on-site surveys). The attempt to employ symmetrical communication mechanisms is discernable, but its effect on downward accountability is likely to remain limited. The evaluation of the tsunami relief projects demonstrates virtually no penetration of symmetrical communication during the run-time of most relief projects. Beneficiary inclusion was extremely limited and channels through which beneficiaries could make their voices heard hardly existed. It was only after the first round of recovery projects was finalized, that the

intervention was evaluated with partly symmetrical communication mechanisms such as satisfactory surveys that collected reports of beneficiaries' experiences.

6.3 Operational limitations and fundamental criticism

The limitations and questions that remain in regards to the analysis and discussion of the case studies as presented above lie on two different levels: (1) critical arguments that question the universal suitability of symmetrical communication and indicate operational limitations and (2) more fundamental criticism that targets the underlying paradigm of participatory development.

6.3.1 Operational limitations

One major concern is the uncertainty if symmetrical communication mechanisms, such as notice boards, suggestion boxes, beneficiary reference groups, household or clinic surveys, are suitable for all kinds of NGOs, situations and projects. At some point the NGO size, project volume and number of involved beneficiaries are likely to become a problem for symmetrical communication. This thesis' case study with the most advanced symmetrical communication is situated in a rather small-scale setting, including only a limited amount of beneficiaries with quite similar characteristics. While symmetrical communication mechanisms work successfully in such settings, they are likely to pose much greater challenges in projects of greater magnitude. Internationally active NGOs and projects that expand over large geographic areas and encompass thousands of beneficiaries with varying backgrounds and priorities face much higher organizational hurdles than the NGO Tearfund.

Chances are high that from a certain project complexity and NGO size onward, the implementation of genuine symmetrical communication becomes less feasible - and symmetrical communication's positive effect on downward accountability diminishes. A second major aspect that has to be taken into account is that highly unstable environments are prone to affect the likelihood of successful symmetrical communication. Such environments include, among others, so-called failed states characterized by civil unrest or even war in which the framework conditions for sustainable and reliable symmetrical communication are not given. This holds especially true, if the conflict revolves around the distribution of resources and power. In such a context, mechanisms that seek to hand over more power to local beneficiaries are likely to fuel the conflict. Furthermore, symmetrical communication mechanisms seem

less suitable for projects that operate under great time pressure, such as the immediate catastrophe relief after the tsunami in 2004. In these situations NGO projects have to attend to the worse damages in order to save lives, so that during the initial stages of such interventions there is hardly the time, nor the local capacities, to set up well-planned symmetrical communication mechanisms.

In this context, further research is necessary to develop a framework to assess the necessary situational prerequisites and critical success factors. Such a framework could provide guidance to NGOs in their consideration if a particular project environment meets the necessary frame conditions for symmetrical communication.

6.3.2 Fundamental criticism

In addition to ‘situational’ considerations regarding the process and the hurdles of implementation, some scholars voice more fundamental concerns regarding symmetrical communication and question the optimistic assumption of genuine inclusiveness.

Based on Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, Juliet Roper (2005) strongly criticizes the widespread praise that symmetrical communication has received. She argues that symmetrical communication is often only a strategy pursued by dominant actors to establish a ‘flexible hegemony’. They diffuse criticism through minor concessions and instead of promoting open cooperation; they cement and perpetuate existing sets of power relations (Taylor 2001).

On a more fundamental level, a number of critics challenge the participatory development paradigm that constitutes the theoretical base for symmetrical communication and downward accountability (Cooke & Kothari 2001). They question the power structures that shape relations between development organizations and their beneficiaries and especially highlight the risks that group-dynamics bear: These can easily distort decision-making processes and stifle critical voices. In the end they benefit the already powerful and reinforce existing power divides. To prevent this from happening participatory approaches must gain a thorough understanding of local power relations and structures (Cleverly 2001). Otherwise participatory approaches run the risk to encourage subordination, as opposed to genuine inclusion (Cooke & Kothari 2001; Kothari 2001). Further critique warns that participatory approaches can drive out legitimate existing local decision-making processes and it might seem that beneficiaries influence the decision-making when in reality bureaucratic planning and external interests have overridden local capacities (Mosse 2001; Kothari 2001). Especially local knowledge that

challenges the status quo is at risk to be marginalized and outspoken beneficiaries can even lose power (Kothari 2001: 152).

At yet another level of argumentation, postmodern and deconstructive scholars criticize the “singular view” of mainstream literature that presents communication as an “ever-evolving and positive social force” (Duffy 2000: 294). Most research on different communication mechanisms is conducted from a modernist perspective that privileges stability and objectivity. Postmodernists seek to expose the significant power and resource imbalance between organizations and their beneficiaries that the conventional discourse tends to conceal. Postmodern critiques argue that symmetrical communication is commonly advertised to promote “harmony, consensus, and stability” (Duffy 2000: 301), whereas in reality it allows powerful organizations to pursue the opposite motive: the preservation of their current power.

6.4 Critical reflection on methodology

It has to be acknowledged that three short case studies by no means provide sufficient empirical evidence to draw generalizable conclusions with a wide range. Thus the scope of my findings remains limited. Nonetheless the case studies provided valuable insights into the effect that symmetrical communication might have on downward accountability of NGOs. In addition, the categories I proposed after analyzing the cases can help to evaluate the quality of symmetrical communication and can function as guidelines to understand the varying effect symmetrical communication can have on NGO downward accountability. The categories as such should therefore be understood as preliminary research results that provide good points of departure for further and more extensive research. To keep the fundamental criticism regarding the participatory development paradigm in mind should help to prevent overly optimistic and exaggerated expectations when implementing symmetrical communication mechanisms and promote a realistic appraisal of the situation.

7 Conclusions

In this thesis I set out to explore the effect that symmetrical communication can have on downward accountability of NGOs in development. To shed light on the relationship between symmetrical communication and downward accountability, I analyzed three different case studies. The cases displayed quite divergent forms of implementing symmetrical communication into their development projects. Although it remains difficult to quantify downward accountability, the feedback of NGO staff and beneficiaries indicates that differences in the implementation of symmetrical communication mechanisms significantly influence the effect on downward accountability. At this point I proposed two categories that help to evaluate the effect of symmetrical communication on downward accountability on a more abstract level: *the timing of implementation* and *the degree of integration into the project*.

My findings can be summarized as follows: symmetrical communication seems to promote downward accountability in development projects and thus contribute to the projects' effectiveness and sustainability. In small community setups with stable conditions, it is possible for development actors to gain a decent understanding for local customs, power structures and group dynamics. Such a grasp is essential in order to comprehend the decision-making processes in a community, estimate potential risks and the chances that symmetrical communication effectively promotes downward accountability. After all the analysis also shows certain limitations: Symmetrical communication approaches are likely to face major challenges in projects that cover huge areas and large numbers of beneficiaries, as well as in time-critical situations, such as the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. In any setting, it is crucial to recognize beneficiaries as the heterogenic groups of individuals they are and be aware of the fact that power structures, conflicting interests and other group dynamics strongly influence the feasibility of symmetrical communication approaches.

Reflecting critically on my own findings, I could identify two groups of arguments that can be put forward against symmetrical communication: The first disputes the applicability in certain development contexts, while the second consists of more fundamental criticism that questions the underlying paradigm of participatory development.

These findings can serve as the starting point for further and more extensive research regarding conducive and limiting factors for symmetrical communication. One concrete research objective could be a template for NGOs to analyze project environments and assess

whether symmetrical communication mechanisms are likely to enhance downward accountability. Furthermore the timing and the extent of symmetrical communication mechanisms during project implementation are relevant areas of research.

Finally assessing the present situation renders the following picture: Symmetrical communication mechanisms as a strategy toward downward accountability cannot resolve all tensions and conflicts and provide the optimal solution in the blink of an eye. It seems unrealistic to assume that the voices of pastoralists in Northern Kenya will soon be equal to those of powerful Western donor agencies. But to emphasize the importance of symmetrical communication mechanisms to achieve better downward accountability of NGOs is an important step to tackle the steep power divide within many development projects and can contribute to a more participatory decision-making processes.

Although these ideas are challenging to put into practice and might bear risks themselves, they do have great potential: the possibility to bring previously marginalized people to the discussion table and promote development on an eye-level that genuinely centers on the ideas and priorities of beneficiaries.

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