Enhancing the role of accountability in promoting the rights of beneficiaries of development NGOs

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Abstract

This paper identifies and assesses the extent to which downward accountability mechanisms in non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs) have had the potential in practice to contribute to the effectiveness of rights-based approaches to development. Prior research has recognised the potentially beneficial impact of downward accountability on rights-based approaches to development. However, there has been little academic study of the outcomes of attempts by development aid funders to encourage NGDOs to develop and implement downward accountability mechanisms as part of rights-based approaches. The paper draws on evidence gathered from a detailed documentary analysis and a series of in-depth interviews undertaken with senior individuals working in the Irish NGDO sector. The analysis indicates a substantial degree of resistance among Irish donor NGDOs in practice to the substantive implementation of key downward accountability mechanisms, particularly NGDO-local beneficiary partnerships. The accountability-in-practice revealed shows that problems with implementation have arisen due to: an apparent lack of Irish NGDO attention to oversight of downward accountability within locally-based partner NGDOs; a reluctance to transfer influence to locally-based partner NGDOs by allowing them some influence on Irish NGDO governance and strategy; the perceived control of locally-based partner NGDOs by local elites who are often distant from, and unrepresentative of, local communities; and a perception that locally-based partner NGDOs do not require downward accountability. Drawing on these findings, the paper makes a number of public policy recommendations aimed at helping transform the largely rhetorical NGDO commitment to downward accountability into practices that can contribute substantively to the realisation of the key elements of the rights-based approach to development.

Keywords: accountability; downward accountability; non-governmental organisations (NGO); development aid; rights-based approach to development
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1. Introduction

Many governments and citizens of developed nations are committed to spending large and increasing amounts on development aid to less developed nations, with a key aim of lifting as many people as possible in these countries out of extreme poverty¹. Much of this multi-billion dollar aid is channelled through the medium of non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs).

Given the sizeable funds provided to NGDOs, increasing attention has been paid to ensuring that NGDOs are accountable for how they raise and spend this money. Academic and practitioner interest in NGDO accountability has tended to focus on mechanisms for formal reporting by NGDOs upwards to donors. However, there is growing recognition that these formal upward accountability mechanisms do not necessarily lead to, and sometimes hinder, the most effective deployment of aid funding in terms of raising as many people as possible out of poverty. Proponents of this view argue that the effectiveness of aid delivery (for every $, € or £ of aid) can be enhanced when NGDOs engage in accountability dialogues with their beneficiaries so they can better identify, and assess how responsive they are to, the core needs of these beneficiaries (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Edwards and Fowler, 2002; Ebrahim, 2003a, 2003b, 2005; Kilby, 2006).

This form of accountability, interacting and mutually learning with beneficiaries, is often referred to as downward accountability. It is an integral part of the Rights-Based Approach to development – an approach increasingly being promoted by both NGDOs and some governments as a way to enhance the effectiveness of aid funding in terms of raising as many people as possible out of poverty.

¹ For example, in 2005 the European Union (EU) set a target for Official Development Assistance (ODA) by governments to rise to 0.56% of overall EU Gross National Income (GNI) by 2010 and then to 0.70% by 2015 (in line with EU commitments to the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals). In 2008 OECD member governments and multilateral agencies spent US$134.8 billion on ODA, including over US$70 billion from EU countries (OECD, 2009).
delivery (Nyamu-Musembi and Cornwall, 2004; Nelson and Dorsey, 2003; Filmer-Wilson, 2005; Jordan and Van Tuijl, 2006). The rights-based approach focuses explicitly on defining people’s rights as laid down in international conventions and then empowering them to claim these rights. NGDO downward accountability to beneficiaries within the rights-based approach firstly involves NGDOs recognising beneficiaries’ rights within NGDO-beneficiary relationships. Secondly, it entails NGDOs designing accountability mechanisms emphasising participatory, partnership approaches to development aimed at enabling beneficiaries to have a meaningful role in NGDO development projects that affect them.

Through analysing the experiences of a sample of Irish NGDO-sector officials in implementing a government initiative to foster greater NGDO downward accountability, the aim of this paper is to identify and assess the extent to which downward accountability mechanisms have the potential in practice to contribute to the effectiveness of rights-based approaches to development. In addressing this aim, the paper makes a novel contribution to the accounting and accountability academic literature which has not previously explored this particular issue. It offers potentially important insights in the development of public policy related to fostering more effective deployment of aid through the rights-based approach to development. More specifically this paper aims to build on the insights provided by O’Dwyer and Unerman (2007), who examined the impact of accountability initiatives between the Irish government funding body and Irish NGDOs, by now investigating experiences of Irish NGDOs in attempts at fostering greater downward accountability both between the Irish NGDOs and their local partner NGDOs in developing countries, and between these local partner NGDOs and their beneficiaries.

The sample of NGDO-sector officials interviewed for this study comprises senior individuals working in the Irish NGDO sector. The Irish NGDO context is a significant one in which to investigate aspects of NGDO accountability and the rights-based approach. Irish humanitarian aid delivery is highly rated internationally (Altinger et al., 2007: 27). Ireland ranked 6th in the recent worldwide index of humanitarian donors as a percentage of GNP, well ahead of countries like the UK (9th) and the US (16th) (Altinger et al., 2007). Government funding levels have also risen rapidly in the past
decade from €157 million in 1997 to €871 million (0.5% of GNP) in 2007 (Irish Aid, 2007a). This funding was forecast to rise to €1.5 billion per annum by 2012 (Irish Aid, 2007b), equivalent to 0.7% of forecasted GNP.\(^2\) About 20 per cent of this funding is channelled through Irish NGDOs (White Paper on Irish Aid, 2005), the focus of this study. These NGDOs also receive a significant amount of donations (approximately 70 per cent of total operating income) from the public. In recent years, the Irish Government, through a funding scheme entitled MAPS (the Multi-Annual Programme Scheme), have sought to make continued medium-term funding of NGDOs partly conditional upon these NGDOs developing downward accountability mechanisms that have the potential to contribute to the effectiveness of rights-based approaches to development.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: Drawing on the academic literature related to NGO accountability, Section 2 explains the concepts of upward and downward accountability and their potential role in fostering effective rights-based approaches to development. To provide a necessary contextual understanding of the setting within which the empirical NGDO accountability issues addressed in this paper have taken place, Section 3 explains key aspects of the Irish NGDO and development aid sector. Prior to the presentation, interpretation and analysis of the empirical data, Section 4 briefly explains the main research methods used to collect and analyse the data in this paper. The findings are then presented in Section 5 in the form of a case narrative tracing key aspects of the evolution of NGDO downward accountability, partly in the context of the Irish government MAPS initiative to encourage greater downward accountability as part of an effort to promote effective rights-based approaches to development. Section 6 draws together the key insights from the interpretive empirical analysis, suggests some public policy implications, and indicates directions for future research arising from this study.

\(^2\) The 2009 Irish government budget issued in October 2008 cut funding for overseas development aid given that government finances had suffered a severe downturn. However, the NGDO representative body, Dóchas, responded positively to the cuts as the extent of the cuts was not seen as overly severe given the financial constraints the government faced. For example, Dóchas pointed out that Ireland was still likely to spend 0.56 per cent of national income on overseas aid in 2009.
2. The role of NGDO accountability mechanisms in fostering the rights-based approach to development

Most organisations have to deal with conflicting demands from different sets of stakeholders. NDGOs, however, tend to experience these demands more acutely and regularly than private sector organisations (Ebrahim, 2003a, 2005; Dixon et al., 2006). NDGOs are upwardly accountable to constituencies such as donors, foundations, governments and other partner NGOs - collectively known as patrons (Fowler, 1996; Najam, 1996). They are also downwardly accountable to clients/beneficiaries – groups to whom NGDOs provide services and/or advocate on behalf of, including communities indirectly impacted by NGDO activities (Ebrahim 2003a; O’Dwyer and Unerman, 2007). As NGDOs have become established organisations in development policy and practice worldwide, more questions have been asked about their accountability.

A key focus of increased accountability demands in practice has been on upward accountability to patrons, in particular to donors such as governments and foundations. This has placed a primary focus on accountability for resources, resource use and immediate impacts, measuring the efficient as opposed to the effective use of funds. However in recent years the academic literature on NGDO accountability (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Edwards and Fowler, 2002; Ebrahim, 2003b, 2005; Kilby, 2006), in keeping with many individual NGDOs and some donors, has argued that focusing on ensuring accountability for the effectiveness of aid delivery should take priority. A key part of this focus should, it is often argued, require NGDOs to engage in downward accountability processes with their beneficiaries so that they can become aware of, and assess how responsive they are to, the core needs of these beneficiaries.

Recent trends in the nature of development work reinforce a need to shift towards greater use of downward accountability practices. While the development efforts of many NGDOs based in developed nations, who raise and channel aid funding to NGDOs based in developing nations, have traditionally focused on development as a need and development work as a gift, recent changes in development frameworks identify development more commonly as a right with “the goal of
development assistance involving an obligation to assist in [the] fulfilment of individual entitlements” (Nelson and Dorsey, 2003: 2104). This rights-based approach to development represents a broad conceptual framework for the process of human development, focusing explicitly on defining people’s rights (as laid down in international conventions) and empowering them to claim those rights. While there is no single rights-based approach to development and some authors have complained about its theoretical and practical ambiguity (Nyamu-Musembi and Cornwall, 2004; Filmer-Wilson, 2005), the United Nations claims that most rights-based frameworks embrace the following key elements: an express linkage to rights; a focus on accountability by identifying claim-holders (and their entitlements) and corresponding duty-holders (and their obligations); empowerment where beneficiaries become the directors of development; participation which is active, free and meaningful – in which so-called ‘ceremonial’ contacts with beneficiaries are deemed insufficient; and non-discrimination and attention to vulnerable groups.³

From an accountability perspective, an effective rights-based approach to development aims to empower beneficiaries to assert their rights in relation to various state and non-state actors (often termed duty bearers) including the NGDOs who assist them to assert these rights. The rights-based approach emphasises the accountability of all actors whose actions impact on the development process. From this perspective, bilateral and multilateral donors, NGOs and private contractors are seen as having a duty to ensure that they respect and protect human rights in their work. They are also required to ensure that their programmes are locally accountable – in other words downwardly accountable.

Accountability is therefore seen as central to improved effectiveness and transparency of action; facilitating monitoring of programmes and inducing duty-bearers such as NGDOs to act. As such, accountability is viewed as offering the potential ‘added value’ of applying rights-based approaches to development practices (Filmer-Wilson, 2005). The complementary concepts of accountability, empowerment and participation central to rights-based approaches to development are all key features of downward accountability thereby placing it at

the core of the rights-based framework (Fowler, 2002a; Hilhorst, 2002; Nelson and Dorsey, 2003; Kenny, 2004).  

By committing to rights-based approaches to development, NGDOs accept a two-fold responsibility. The first is to help beneficiaries pursue their rights as claim-holders in relation to non-NGDO constituencies (or duty bearers). The second involves NGDOs recognising beneficiary rights to hold NGDOs accountable for the nature of their activities and NGDOs’ acceptance of their duty-bearer role in relation to beneficiaries. For example, Offenheiser and Holcombe (2003) suggest that the need for genuine partnership relationships between donor NGDOs and locally based NGDOs, that are central to the rights-based approach, necessitates donor NGDOs re-thinking their accountability processes – particularly the power relationships and structures of inequity that may be created by virtue of their relationship with local NGDOs and their beneficiaries.

Embracing downward accountability mechanisms focused on minimising, as far as possible, power differentials and establishing participatory partnership arrangements with local NGDOs and their beneficiaries is central to the fulfilment of this duty. Ideally, this should enable beneficiaries to design, develop and implement programmes and projects in conjunction with NGDOs whereby they are heavily involved in identifying their own development objectives. A key example of an international NGDO embracing downward accountability as a means to enhance the effectiveness of the rights-based approach is Action-Aid International (Scott-Villiers, 2002; Action-Aid International, 2004). Their approach to development recognises their role as a power-holder in relation to their beneficiaries and acknowledges the need for Action-Aid to be held accountable by their beneficiaries for protecting and promoting beneficiaries’ rights within this relationship.

While downward accountability is central to the success of the rights-based approach to development, Kilby (2006) argues that its effectiveness is not always

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4 Since the 1990s, the rights-based approach has been adopted or espoused by The World Bank and The United Nations, bilateral agencies such as the Swedish International Development Cooperation agency (SIDA) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Numerous development NGDOs such as Oxfam and Action Aid International have also adopted the approach (Bradley, 2007).
evident. Hence, he suggests that the emerging NGDO focus on downward accountability within the rights-based approach should be evaluated carefully. He argues that the efficacy of accountability mechanisms should be assessed based on their depth of accountability and level of formality. Depth of accountability refers to the nature and extent of feedback arrangements from an NGDO to its beneficiaries. Depth increases with the frequency and the range of topics addressed as well as the extent to which topics are determined by beneficiaries. The level of formality refers to the formal rights of access and potential for rectification accorded to beneficiaries. Kilby (2006) argues that the presence of formal processes establishes a right for beneficiaries and is thus empowering, leaving the possibility that beneficiaries can impose some form of cost on an NGDO.

There is a small but developing literature in the social accounting and accountability field empirically examining the above trends in NGDO accountability. This literature has critically examined the emergence and impact of accountability mechanisms in various individual NGDO settings (Dixon et al., 2006; Goddard and Assad, 2006; O’Dwyer and Unerman, 2008) and the nature of the accountability relationships between funders and NGDOs (Dixon et al., 2006; O’Dwyer and Unerman, 2007). Further work has theorised the extent to which NGDOs should be held accountable for their actions (Unerman and O’Dwyer, 2006). Much of this work highlights a focus in NGDO accountability discourse, practice and research on narrow, financially oriented accountability to donors which, it is argued, often comes at the expense of the potential to learn through downward accountability to beneficiaries. There is, however, an absence of research seeking to trace and evaluate the impact in practice of attempts to foster greater NGDO use of downward accountability mechanisms as a contribution towards the effectiveness of rights-based approaches to development. In addressing this gap in the literature, this paper explores how the NGDO community in Ireland have responded to increased Irish Governmental and other demands for broader forms of accountability to foster a rights-based approach to development, with a particular focus on the extent to which NGDOs have embraced downward accountability.
3. The Irish NGDO context

Irish Aid is the Government of Ireland’s programme of assistance to developing countries. The programme’s main objective is the “reduction of poverty, inequality and exclusion in developing countries” (Irish Aid, 2007b). With a budget in 2007 of €871m (Irish Aid, 2007a), the programme is a central plank in the foreign policy of the Government of Ireland. Irish Aid works in cooperation with governments in other countries, other donors, NGDOs and international organisations as part of the global effort to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.5

The Irish NGDO sector itself is dominated by three large NGDOs who broadly concentrate on improving the plight of the poor in so-called developing nations. They comprise Concern Worldwide with total income of €116m in 2007 (Concern, 2008), Trócaire, which is the overseas development agency of the Catholic Church, with total income of €60m in 2007/08 (Trócaire, 2008a), and GOAL with total income of €59m in 2006 (GOAL, 2007). Both Trócaire and Concern have traditionally been less focused on emergency relief than GOAL. The next level of medium sized NGDOs operate on annual incomes of around €5m to €17m. These include Oxfam Ireland (total 2007/08 income €17m (Oxfam Ireland, 2008)), World Vision Ireland (total 2006/07 income €8.2m (World Vision, 2008)) and Christian Aid Ireland; while a large cluster of smaller NGDOs operate on annual incomes of €0.5m to €2m.

[Insert table 1 about here]

The Irish NGDO sector is represented by an umbrella body called Dóchas. Dóchas provides a forum for consultation and co-operation between its NGDO members (see Table 1). It is not a funding agency and does not partake in overseas projects. Nine NGDOs make up Dóchas’ board including representatives from two of the

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5 The Millennium Development Goals targets, agreed by the UN at a series of international summit meetings, identify some of the main causes of extreme poverty in today’s world and underpin the poverty reduction policies and activities of Irish Aid. The Millennium Development Goals require the international community to: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development.
three large NGDOs (Trócaire and Concern). Dóchas’ key aim is to develop strategic alliances in order to combat poverty and global injustice. A strategic relationship with Irish Aid is central to this objective. This relationship is governed by the terms of a three-year Memorandum of Understanding (covering 2006 to 2009) which seeks to “develop and mould a genuine partnership relationship, which facilitates a frank, appropriately balanced and mutually respectful relationship between Dóchas and Irish Aid”. (Dóchas, 2007a: 5). As part of the three-year partnership agreement, Irish Aid provides Dóchas with financial support (amounting to 55% of Dóchas’ income in 2006 (Dóchas, 2007b)) and works with Dóchas to shape the mechanisms for policy dialogue between Irish Aid and the NGDO community. One of the key areas in this dialogue has been the nature of accountability relationships between NGDOs, Irish Aid (as a funder of the NGDOs), and the beneficiaries of NGDO services – with an aim of fostering, and realising the benefits of, greater downward accountability. Among the envisaged benefits is the potential for more effective realisation of rights-based approaches to development.

In 2003 Irish Aid launched a major initiative (denoted MAPS – the Multi-Annual Programme Scheme), linking large-scale, medium-term NGDO funding from the Irish Government to the adoption of forms of downward accountability focused on assessing the extent to which NGDOs deliver benefits to their ultimate beneficiaries. This initiative promoted a partnership approach to the delivery of overseas development aid at two distinct levels. At one level it promoted a partnership relationship to aid delivery between Irish Aid and funded NGDOs which focused on mutual learning and dialogue. This formed the key focus of recent academic work by O’Dwyer and Unerman (2007) whose findings suggested that this initiative, albeit in its early stages, had largely failed to establish this hoped-for partnership relationship. At the other level, the initiative promoted the development of ‘local’ partnership relationships between funded NGDOs and locally-based NGDOs and beneficiaries in developing nations. This part of the initiative emphasised the development of strong downward accountability relationships as an element of its rights-based focus on “strengthening the capacity of people in the developing world to pursue their human, economic and social rights” (Irish Aid, 2008). This study places its analytical emphasis on this aspect of ‘local’ partnership relationships

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6 The third large NGDO, GOAL, is not a member of Dóchas.
promoted within MAPS, focusing on how the nature and extent of its adoption has facilitated downward accountability as part of the rights-based approach. In doing so, it takes the analysis and insights provided by O’Dwyer and Uneman (2007) to a different level by focusing on the impact that MAPS had in practice on the establishment of local partnerships as a central part of the development of greater downward accountability within NGDOs and the appreciation by these NGDOs of the importance of downward accountability for the realisation of more effective aid delivery through the rights-based approach to development.

4. Research methods

The main source of evidence in this paper derives from twelve in-depth semi-structured interviews held over a six-month period with key senior individuals working within the Irish NGDO sector (see Table 2) and an extensive analysis of documentary sources.7 The documents analysed included individual NGDO and Dóchas annual reports from 2004 to 2008, NGDO, Irish Aid and Dóchas strategy and policy documents, Irish government publications on development aid, print media coverage and press releases of Irish Aid, Dóchas and the NGDOs interviewed from January 2004 to August 2008, and external consultant evaluations of MAPS.

[Insert table 2 about here]

Eight of the twelve interviews were held with senior “executives” in NGDOs. The interviewees included individuals from all three of the largest NGDOs, three from the medium-sized NGDOs, and two from smaller NGDOs. Seven of the eight NGDOs represented by interviewees were on the board of Dóchas (on which nine NGDOs sit in total). The remaining interviews were conducted with: senior members of Irish Aid and Dóchas, a thought leader in Irish development education, and a senior official in the main Irish support organisation for development aid workers.

7 The interviewees were guaranteed, as far as possible, anonymity in the writing up process. Hence, separate interviewees are denoted by the letters A to L throughout the narrative in the next section, rather than being identified by name or organisation.
In advance of their interview, all interviewees were sent an outline of issues surrounding NGDO accountability which were to be discussed. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one and a half hours, was tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews aimed to initiate a discussion about how interviewees perceived the evolution of accountability in the Irish NGDO sector, and why they felt it was developing in the manner they perceived (King, 1999; Lilis, 1999; Patton, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003).

Post-interview analysis focused on organising the interview evidence into an initial thick description of the findings. The initial themes were then grouped under a number of overarching themes (sometimes called ‘axial’ codes (Parker and Roffey, 1997: 228)) depicting relationships among the initial themes (‘open’ codes) identified in the thick description.

Links and inconsistencies between these overarching themes were then identified to flesh out a broad ‘story’. This ‘story’ traces the practical development of greater downward accountability within NGDOs as part of a commitment to implementing a rights-based approach to development. It also highlights the appreciation by these NGDOs of the importance of greater downward accountability for the realisation of more effective aid delivery through rights-based approaches to development. This forms the key focus of the narrative presented in the next section.

5. Case analysis

This section presents, interprets and analyses the empirical interview and documentary data. The analysis initially reveals how attention to the effectiveness of aid delivery has emerged from several sources – including the Irish government, the print media and the aforementioned MAPS guidelines. It proceeds to examine how widespread NGDO commitments to the rights-based approach to development, in response to this concern for effectiveness, have been coupled with commitments to adopt downward accountability mechanisms – a central feature of MAPS. The downward accountability promise promoted within the rights-based approach, particularly the enactment of ‘local’ partnerships between Irish donor NGDOs and local NGDOs, is then further scrutinised and shown to be struggling to embrace the depth of accountability and the level of formality that Kilby (2006) deems essential.
for effective downward accountability mechanisms. The reasons for this apparent limited enactment of downward accountability are subsequently explored.

5.1 The emergence of a focus on accountability for effectiveness

A combination of an Irish government White Paper on Irish Aid, Irish Aid’s MAPS process (as explored in O’Dwyer and Unerman, 2007), greater media debate, public uncertainty about the effectiveness of development assistance, and an Irish government Public Accounts Committee Interim Report assessing expenditure on Irish Aid (see: Cullen, 2005; O’Dwyer and Unerman, 2007; Committee of Public Accounts, 2008) have prioritised assessing the effectiveness of aid delivery by Irish-funded NGDOs. This has forced NGDOs to embrace accountability for effectiveness more explicitly, with the Dóchas director, for example, publicly encouraging “greater scrutiny of effectiveness” (Cullen, 2005). Moreover, both he and senior directors in Trócaire have engaged in a highly public and sometimes rancorous debate with the Director of GOAL over the ideal way to deliver aid to ensure what they term “maximum accountability” for its effectiveness is achieved (see, Meehan, 2008; O’Shea, 2008).

These debates also involved the Irish Minister of State for Development Co-operation and Human Rights writing publicly in response to the issues discussed, particularly in defence of Irish Aid’s strategy of channelling aid in co-operation with foreign governments (Lenihan, 2005). Trócaire have also been publicly critical of progress on the Paris Declaration9 principles of ownership and accountability (Trocraíre, 2007) bemoaning, inter alia, the Declaration’s apparent prioritisation of the efficiency of aid delivery over its effectiveness (Trocraíre, 2007: 3). The Trócaire Director also

8 A 2005 survey by Irish Aid found that 20 per cent of Irish people did not know if development assistance was making a difference (White Paper on Irish Aid, 2005).

9 The Paris Declaration is a major international agreement aimed at increasing efforts to harmonise, align and manage aid for more effective results. It established a set of monitorable actions and indicators to which over 100 Ministers, Heads of Agencies and other Senior Officials adhered and committed their countries and organisations to (see High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (2005)). The declaration was endorsed on the 2nd of March 2005 and lays down a roadmap aimed at improving the quality of aid and its impact on development. The 56 partnership commitments are organised around five key principles of: ownership; alignment; harmonization; managing for results; and mutual accountability (see http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,2340,en_2649_3236398_35401554_1_1_1,00.html).
highlighted the need to focus on effectiveness when admitting in a high profile television interview in 2006 that, despite the increasing level of NGDO activity and funding “the continent of Africa had [actually] gone backwards in the past two decades”.

Several of the interviewees in this study argued, in common with much recent research (see, for example: Ebrahim, 2005; O’Dwyer and Unerman, 2007, 2008), that downward accountability needed to be embraced and encouraged by Irish NGDOs if the benefits of rights-based approaches were to be fully realised in terms of improved effectiveness of aid delivery. The case narrative that follows critically analyses how two central complementary features of the Irish NGDO environment, the conceptual commitment to downward accountability within the rights-based approach and the adoption of local partnership models of aid delivery by individual NGOs, both central features within MAPS, have been instrumental in supporting claims of Irish NGDOs to embrace downward accountability as part of the rights-based approach.

The next sub-section examines the way in which apparent allegiances to a rights-based approach to development at a macro level, and to a complementary local partnership approach to aid delivery at a micro level, as promoted within MAPS, have been perceived as requiring a demonstrable commitment to downward accountability. The succeeding sub-section reveals perspectives contesting the extent to which the rhetoric employed in promoting these local partnership and rights-based approaches is translating into actual downward accountability practice.

5.2 Prioritising Downward Accountability within Rights-Based Approaches to Development

As a focus on effectiveness of aid delivery has developed, increased discussions about the importance of downward accountability for a successful rights-based approach have emerged – both within Irish Aid as part of the MAPS funding requirements, and among Irish donor NGDOs themselves. In the early 2000s, in common with international trends (Nelson and Dorsey, 2003), Dóchas commenced
actively promoting a rights-based approach to development among its members, organising a number of seminars and publishing a report mapping members’ engagement with the rights-based approach (Kenny, 2004). It also issued a paper on NGDO accountability (Leen, 2006) highlighting the need to pay greater attention to downward accountability. Furthermore it established a working group to examine experiences of downward accountability elsewhere, to inform the Dóchas membership and Dóchas’ ongoing consultations with Irish Aid.

The emergence of this focus on downward accountability was perceived by several interviewees in this study as necessary if the adoption of the rights-based approach by many Dóchas members in the mid-2000s was to have been as effective as possible. Interviewees from NGDOs of all sizes pointed to adoption of the rights-based approach as a key catalyst for NGDO accountability focusing more now on beneficiaries, as it helped beneficiaries to “campaign and advocate for their own rights” (D) thereby increasing NGDO “fieldwork effectiveness” (D).

According to the Dóchas interviewee, the rights-based approach addressed the root causes of poverty revolving around power relationships, thereby inevitably prioritising beneficiary perspectives and needs in NGDO accountability. While he accepted that “there [wa]s often a clear power relationship in favour of aid workers relative to beneficiaries” (J), he argued that attention to the rights-based approach, where NGDOs raised awareness of beneficiary rights and used rights-based language as an integral part of their projects or programmes, was a key means to break down this power relationship. It could also facilitate the downward accountability that was necessary for an effective rights-based approach by encouraging local communities to hold NGDOs (as well as others) to account:

I don’t know how you can increase beneficiary power other than by awareness raising, by making people aware of their rights as a beneficiary. The rights-based language makes that an integral part of your project and downward accountability is central to achieving that … It says that people just don’t have to benefit from our kindness; they have a right. As long as we are only helping them reach their rights, we don’t get extra authority. (J)
Nevertheless, two interviewees from smaller NGDOs and the education leader challenged what they saw as this naïve view of the power relationships between NGDOs and beneficiaries promoted within the rights-based approach, particularly its implications for downward accountability. They accused Dóchas and Irish Aid of appropriating concepts central to the rights-based approach, such as participation and empowerment, and sanitising them “in order to give them [Dóchas and Irish Aid] some simple criteria upon which to base their work thereby giving them leverage when they [were] looking for increased government funding” (L). Moreover, in contrast to the positive perspectives above, the rights-based approach was viewed by these interviewees as neglecting “the power dynamics and inequalities” (L) in NGDO-beneficiary relations by downplaying the political realities in many developing nations. It thereby was regarded as making “a mockery of claims to embrace downward accountability” (L).

These interviewees argued that the rights-based approach could not foster the necessary downward accountability unless it moved away from its reformist roots and embraced more radical forms of aid delivery which, among other things, challenged corrupt governments. The notion in the rights-based approach that NGDOs could bestow power on those without power was seen as naïve and akin to a fundamental paradox as it was a clear display of power itself (Kilby, 2006). In response to probing, these interviewees acknowledged that their views had an explicitly ideological focus in that they were often frustrated that “Dóchas was moving too much towards a situation [where it was] largely [a] service contractor for the [Irish] state” (L) which they felt prevented a more radical discussion of the role and accountability of NGDOs in civil society (see Lehman, 2007: 647).

The Dóchas interviewee disagreed with the above claims about the ubiquity of the power imbalance between NGDOs and beneficiaries within the rights-based approach. In his work with a number of international and Irish NGDOs, he claimed that power relationships were more complex and that power could often rest with local communities. He recounted his experience of a village in India where villagers had numerous NGDOs working on their behalf and competing with each other to provide assistance to the villagers. The villagers set up quasi-committees which
targeted NGDOs that they knew had to distribute aid, thereby maximising the amount of aid they could attain:

I think local communities are clever enough to know that if they want money out of the NGO system they know how to milk it. They know that there are a million NGOs out there and if the NGOs don't satisfy the communities' wishes they can go to another NGO. In fact there may be too many NGOs, which actually challenges who really possesses the power in many circumstances. (J)

While some of the perspectives above differed as to the potential contribution and role of downward accountability as a central part of the rights-based approach to development, the prevailing rhetoric within Dóchas, the Irish Aid MAPS requirements, and among most of our interviewees - the exceptions being the education leader and two interviewees from smaller NGDOs mentioned earlier - celebrated this contribution. A central feature of this macro level celebration of, and commitment to, downward accountability within a rights-based approach was an explicit obligation to partner with local NGDOs on projects and programmes. This issue of local partnerships, central to the MAPS requirements, and its implications for downward accountability within the rights-based approach is now discussed in order to assess the extent to which the commitments and claims made above have been reflected in NGDO practice.

5.3 Local Partnership Models in the Rights-Based Approach – The Role of Downward Accountability

The adoption of the rights-based approach was widely, although not universally, seen as contributing to, and requiring, the furthering of downward accountability at a strategic level. At the micro level, Irish NGDO partnership arrangements with local NGDOs and beneficiaries (where possible) were seen as facilitating the transformation of the key strategic level elements of the rights-based approach, such as accountability and empowerment, into practice.

Consistent with the MAPS requirements, all large and several medium-sized and small Irish NGDOs at the time of this study claimed to have moved to operate through local partnership approaches embracing key aspects of rights-based approaches to development. These moves involved partnering with locally-based
NGDOs in developing countries to deliver aid. For example, Trócaire emphasises how its local NGDO partners “work with [local] communities to identify their needs and ... help them devise solutions to th[eir] difficulties” (Trócaire, 2008b). The local partnership approach to aid delivery has been widely acclaimed as enabling a “more efficient use of scarce resources, increased sustainability and improved beneficiary participation in development activities” (Lister, 2000: 228), all objectives informed by the rights-based approach. The approach was also seen as central to legitimising the work of many Irish NGDOs in developing countries. According to Fowler (2002b: 251-252), in its ideal form the local partnership approach facilitates the achievement of downward accountability through a “willingness to hand over more control to partners and/or beneficiaries” (Edwards and Hulme, 2002: 208) thereby “establishing solidarity between [Northern] NGDOs and [Southern] NGDOs” (Porter, 2003: 134).

However, analysis of the data in this study suggests that the structure and enactment of local partnership relationships by many Irish NGDOs may not afford the primary attention to downward accountability within the rights-based approach that Fowler (2002b) suggests should be central to these arrangements. A number of perceived reasons for this were uncovered. These included: an apparent lack of Irish NGDO attention to oversight of downward accountability within locally-based NGDOs; a reluctance to transfer influence to locally-based NGDOs by allowing them some influence on Irish NGDO governance and strategy; the perceived control of local partner NGDOs by local elites who were often distant from, and unrepresentative of, local communities; and a perception that local partner NGDOs did not require downward accountability. These reasons are discussed in more depth in the following four sub-sections.

5.3.1 An Absence of local NGDO oversight
Despite the commitments explained above, and an acceptance that ‘local’ partner models could promote connectedness with local communities and recognition of beneficiary rights, there was widespread concern, particularly among the interviewees from small and medium-sized NGDOs, that these local partner models were in practice operating at a distance. This was perceived to be
especially problematic in terms of how local communities could hold both local partner NGDOs and the Irish donor NGDOs accountable. It was claimed that not enough pressure was placed on local NGDO partners to demonstrate accountability to communities and that downward accountability on the part of local NGDOs was often presumed or simply ignored by the Irish donor NGDOs.

Many Irish donor NGDOs were therefore seen to be not overly exercised in practice by their role as duty-bearers within the rights-based approach. Apparently they exhibited little concern with ensuring that the rights of beneficiaries to hold them to account and to direct involvement in programme and project design and delivery were being realised through local NGDOs. An interviewee (D) from a medium-sized NGDO admitted that as his NGDO worked primarily through local NGDO partners, its beneficiary-focused accountability was poorly developed and needed improvement as his NGDO did not press local NGDO partners on this issue. Another MAPS-funded interviewee from a medium sized NGDO reiterated this point and recognised that while his NGDO “presumed to act on behalf of what [they] call[ed] [their] ‘partners’ in the Third World”, their “downstream accountability” (F) through their local NGDO partners was underdeveloped. He claimed that little thought had been given to this “as the risks of losing funding” (F) as a consequence seemed remote. However, he felt strongly that his NGDO needed to focus much more on ensuring that “those whose lives we are affecting [have] … a proper say and a proper sense of ownership in [the NGDO’s] work” (F).

These perspectives were reinforced by the Irish Aid interviewee who recounted that while working as an aid worker in India she had to constantly cajole local NGDOs into developing deep relationships with communities to ensure that the communities were satisfied with how resources were being used. However, she admitted that this form of oversight of local NGDOs was not commonly practised and needed to change if beneficiaries were to have a greater say in development processes. When probed as to the possible reasons for this neglect, she indicated that she felt that some Irish donor NGDOs were wary of their legitimacy in the eyes of local NGDOs given that these donor NGDOs were often not directly engaged with their supposed key constituency, the beneficiary. This, she argued, made them cautious about pressing local NGDOs on their own downward accountability, especially as many
local NGDOs were beginning to challenge donor NGDOs with regard to the focus they imposed on local NGDOs without in-depth knowledge of local conditions:

There is pressure coming on donor NGDOs from local NGDOs who are questioning why Northern NGOs should come in with resources and use those resources on expensive expatriate personnel or on structures or systems that are not necessarily appropriate to the local situation. (K)

5.3.2 Resistance to transferring influence to locally based NGDOs
Exacerbating the above perceived lack of practical initiatives by the Irish NGDOs to actively encourage the involvement of beneficiaries in accountability dialogues, some large and medium-sized NGDOs, despite much public rhetoric, also appeared resistant to allowing local partner NGDOs significant influence in their governance, focus and decision making. For example, the documentary analysis undertaken as part of this study uncovered no evidence of substantive local NGDO partner involvement in the governance structures of any of the NGDOs interviewed. Two interviewees from medium-sized NGDOs and one interviewee from a large NGDO referred to reluctance within their organisations to embracing participation aimed at giving local NGDO partners or beneficiaries an input into their NGDO’s focus and activities as part of their local partner model.

One of the medium-sized NGDO interviewees recounted asking his international director how local NGDO partners could have a more direct role in his NGDO’s governance structure. The director responded that it would happen “over [his] dead body” (F) as he felt it was not what local partner NGDOs or ultimate beneficiaries “needed or wanted” (F). Another interviewee from a medium-sized NGDO insisted that there was little to be learned from local NGDO ‘partners’ and felt they should merely do the work they were instructed to do – in contrast to the local partner rhetoric promoted in his NGDO’s public proclamations. Hence, there was little sense of an acceptance of a duty to be accountable to local NGDOs and beneficiaries. In particular, many MAPs-funded NGDOs apparently committed to implementing rights-based approaches were seen to be unaware of, or uninterested in, what Filmer-Wilson (2005: 218) terms the ‘added value’ of downward accountability in aiding the effectiveness of rights-based development approaches:
In reality, a lot of the stuff around participation and accountability to the communities and partnership with the communities is not particularly well understood by NGOs and not particularly well respected. (E)

5.3.3 The composition of locally-based NGDOs

Reinforcing the above problems of lack of Irish NGDO encouragement for local NGDOs to engage in accountability dialogues with beneficiaries, coupled with a resistance by some Irish NGDOs to make the necessary transfers of influence to local NGDOs, there was a perception that many of the personnel in the local NGDOs might have problems effectively ‘connecting’ with their beneficiaries in any attempted accountability dialogues. The need to speak the rights-based approach language, and the financial (upward) accountability pressures placed by Irish NGDOs on their local NGDO partners (a demand which seems to have been particularly acute in Concern Worldwide (INTRAC, 2005a: 30), has led to many of the locally-based NGDOs being staffed by local, highly educated, literate individuals who are capable of interacting easily with Irish donor NGDOs:

They have to show that they can financially account, so they need to build certain kinds of systems, to employ certain types of people that are able to produce reports, both narrative and financial, of a standard that would be required by donors. (K)

According to the Irish Aid interviewee (who had previously worked for a large NGDO) and the interviewees from all the medium-sized and small NGDOs, the rights-based approach trend tended to favour local partner NGDOs who were staffed by members of the so-called “elite” within a local society and “were able to speak English, interface with donors, [and] speak the donor language” (K). A key concern of these interviewees was how connected this made these individuals to the people on whose behalf they were supposed to be working – the beneficiaries. They were worried that this led to a lack of representativeness within many local partner NGDOs and a tendency to view beneficiaries “as supplicants rather than equals” (Porter, 2003: 139).

Kamat (2004: 168) has highlighted this trend more generally in local community-based NGDOs where professionally trained staff drawn from established sectors of local societies have replaced those “who identified closely with the poor, were
committed to social justice work at the grassroots ... [and] ... were conscious of the need to deprofessionalize in order to build relations with the poor”. Atack (1999: 862) has also observed how “development projects or programmes can often only involve local elites or specific social groups and end up reinforcing rather than subverting local structures of inequality and discrimination” (see also, Edwards and Hulme, 1996; United Nations 2006: 12 and 21). Similarly Scholte (2003, cited in United Nations, 2006) notes that donor NGDOs need to question “whether they are working with [a] Western educated elite and thus compounding the inequalities in [developing] countries, and not hearing the views and attitudes of others in th[ose] societ[ies]” (United Nations, 2006: 26). Given these perceived trends, the Irish Aid interviewee asked:

What about their [locally-based NGDOs’] actual connectiveness to those on whose behalf they are supposed to be working, who are marginalised, who are living in poverty, who are often illiterate? That for me is a huge question and I am not sure we as donors are doing an awful lot to try and help people find solutions to that ... We need to create mechanisms for local NGDOs to incentivise them to develop and structure downward accountability relationships. (K)

The Irish Aid interviewee and interviewees from the small NGDOs also indicated that the long established way of working with local partners assumed, without enough evidence, a connectedness to local communities through local elites and meant that there was resistance to altering a model that needed, in their view, to become closer to and more accountable to beneficiaries. For one interviewee from a medium-sized NGDO this was a key feature of the local partner approach that was flawed and needed development:

We haven’t quite got it conceptually yet, and we certainly haven’t found a way of implementing a more equal or at least a more transparent downward accountability model to our stakeholders. (F)

These perspectives further signify how many Irish NGDOs do not appear to have re-conceptualised their accountability relationships with local NGDOs and beneficiaries in line with the requirements of rights-based approaches to development. Even if improved participatory arrangements with local NGDOs were to transpire, there is still the possibility that these local NGDOs are themselves distanced from the needs
of beneficiaries, of which Irish donor NGDOs may know little given their apparent lack of attention to oversight of local NGDO downward accountability relationships.

5.3.4  A lack of demand from local NGDOs and beneficiaries

Even if the constraints on effective downward accountability revealed in the previous three sub-sections were to be overcome, there is a further perceived problem – of a very different nature - in implementing the effective downward accountability practices that are a key part of the rights-based approach, and this is a perceived lack of demand from local NGDOs and from their beneficiaries to engage in downward accountability dialogues.

For example, some interviewees defended their lack of willingness to include local NGDOs and beneficiaries in their governance and decision making structures by referring to the risk that this could overly impose on already stretched local NGDO partners, who therefore had little interest in being involved in governance issues. An interviewee from a small NGDO claimed that that the local partner model in her NGDO risked “overwhelming partners and beneficiaries” (H) while two other interviewees (one from a large and one from a medium-sized NGDO) doubted whether beneficiaries or local partner NGDOs (representing beneficiaries) in developing countries really wanted more accountability – or if it was even “appropriate” (B) for them to expect this. Concern Worldwide, in its initial attempts at partnership with locally-based NGDOs, failed to include local partners in its governance structure and management decision processes due to claimed concerns that it might overly impose on its local partners (see INTRAC, 2005a: 29).

The task of finding a balance between enabling more meaningful local NGDO and beneficiary participation in decision making as part of a rights-based approach without overburdening local NGDOs was one an interviewee from a medium sized NGDO felt was the crucial next step for Irish NGDOs:

I think … the real moral challenge for this century is moving beyond the charity model in our relations with those we are working with in the South. The real challenge is to find a way of working that is genuinely equal, is genuinely empowering, without being overburdening by asking them to come to 95 meetings – national, international etc. (D)
An interviewee from a small NGDO claimed that local partner NGDOs were often primarily interested in receiving money to spend on basic activities. She maintained that they “had got used to dealing with donor NGDOs” (G) and merely went through the motions of reporting back on what was spent and where it was spent. They had little interest in more developed relationships. However, she emphasised that this was partly a result of donor NGDOs not pushing them more on their level of their representativeness of local communities.

5.4 Discussion
In contrast to some of the key elements of the rights-based approach embracing active, meaningful participation and beneficiary direction in development programmes, the perspectives gleaned in this study largely revealed a “paternalistic top-down attitude” (E) towards local NGDO partners and beneficiaries. No evidence was found of ideal rights-based partnership working relationships involving a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate (see Lister, 2000: 228) despite the increasing rhetoric surrounding these approaches. The impression imparted was that the local partner models, while varying in the extent of their application, allowed little scope to challenge the status quo of the Irish NGDOs’ operations and were more akin to what Lewis (1998: 504) terms “dependent” partnerships where little negotiation or debate is permitted over the purposes and activities of Northern donor NGDOs. Implicit in many of the perspectives, particularly from large and medium-sized NGDO interviewees, was an attitude suggesting that Irish NGDOs knew best, with partnership often viewed as “a politically correct mode of relating” (Porter, 2003: 134). This involves “lopsided friendships” (Porter, 2003: 133) that embraced little of the depth of accountability or the level of formality that Kilby (2006) sees as central for substantive downward accountability relationships.

These perceptions might be considered somewhat surprising given the aforementioned calls from the Irish government, Irish Aid and the print media for greater evidence of effectiveness of aid delivery and the express commitments of many Irish NGDOs to downward accountability as a key aspect of their implementation of rights-based approaches – particularly when seeking MAPS funding (see also, O’Dwyer and Unerman, 2007). However, public assessments of MAPS NGDOs’ enactment of local partnerships have also highlighted some variety in
the “degree of engagement” (INTRAC, 2005a: 28) with beneficiaries. They indicate that while NGDOs appear to be more positive about embracing greater downward accountability only Trócaire (a large NGDO) and Christian Aid (a medium-sized NGDO) seem to be moving to implement downward accountability in a substantive manner.

The education leader interviewed for this study had little sympathy with the aforementioned reasons for restrictive enactments of local partnerships which she had also observed while working in the field. She was especially critical of the low level of resources devoted to substantively involving beneficiaries in guiding and assessing NGDO activity. Likewise, an interviewee from a small NGDO also questioned “the extent to which [large NGDOs] adequately put resources into participation and partnership” (H):

I will give you an example. If you take gender and participation of women in the likes of Concern (off the top of my head) ... it would be very interesting to do an analysis on the participation of Southern [hemisphere] women, staff and partners in Concern project planning, consultation, implementation, management, all different levels. That is just one example, you could take any of the NGDOs [and] pick any other kinds of examples. (H)

Based on their field observations both the education leader and the small NGDO interviewee doubted whether Irish NGDOs were really committed to “learning from the poor” (Porter, 2003: 140) and becoming “junior partners in relation to Southern NGDOs” (Atack, 1999: 862), something they deemed essential to realising the key characteristics of the rights-based approach:

Trócaire operate[s] through working with partner organisations ... But on the other hand, who questions what Trócaire [is] about? ... Trócaire is still defined largely by Trócaire in Ireland, be that the general public, the staff, the church or whoever it is, you know what I mean? (L)

These findings chime with those of Kilby (2006) who found that while the NGDOs he studied felt that downward accountability was an important part of measuring programme effectiveness, it was not a central feature of their accountability as they were wary of becoming “beholden to a particular, and arguably, narrow constituency” (Kilby, 2006: 957). Within local partnership arrangements, Kilby (2006:
found that Northern donor NGDOs allowed beneficiaries some level of “participation” [but not] “representation” in a strict accountability sense”. This is somewhat similar to the ‘ceremonial contacts’ with beneficiaries that the United Nations deem insufficient if one wishes to effectively realise rights-based approaches to development. Participation with representation is crucial to empowering beneficiaries and its perceived absence among many Irish NGDOs was a key feature of the critiques emanating from small NGDO interviewees and the education leader.

Furthermore, the findings find little evidence for, and indeed suggest a level of reluctance for, the transfer of some power from NGDOs to partners and beneficiaries. As noted earlier in the paper, Offenheiser and Holcombe (2003) argue that such a transfer of power is a prerequisite for developing the genuine partnership relationships between donor NDGOs and locally-based NDGO that are necessary for effective realisation of the rights-based approach to development.

To summarise, the above analysis suggests that while commitments to the complementary combination of the rights-based and local partnership approaches central within the MAPS requirements facilitate the appearance of attention to beneficiary/local NGDO participation, these do not often extend in practice to delivering power to beneficiaries or to locally-based NGDOs to influence the focus and activities of the Irish donor NGDOs. Consequently, a key feature of downward accountability needed to support the effectiveness of the rights-based approach – the ability of beneficiaries to effect change in the actions of NGDOs – appears largely absent. This is compounded by the lack of significant potential for “rectification” by beneficiaries (Mulgan, 2003: 30) which implies they have little “ability to impose a cost” (Keohane, 2002: 479, cited in Kilby, 2006) on donor NGDOs.

6. Summary and Conclusions

The efficacy with which the large and growing amounts of development aid funding, flowing from richer to poorer countries, are used has a very real impact on the basic quality of the lives (and, indeed, the life expectancy) of large numbers of very poor people in the developing world. It has been recognised by some NGDOs and funders of development aid (and in the academic literature) that downward
accountability to beneficiaries has the potential to be an important tool in the quest to improve the effectiveness with which finite development aid is deployed (see, for example, Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Edwards and Fowler, 2002; Goetz and Jenkins, 2002; Ebrahim, 2003a, 2003b; ActionAid International, 2004; Ebrahim, 2005). As such, it has been claimed that downward accountability can play a key role in the development and implementation of effective rights-based approaches to development that are currently being strongly promoted by donor governments and NGDOs. In this role, appropriate downward accountability mechanisms should help NGDOs become learning organisations, interacting and mutually learning with their beneficiaries (in addition to other stakeholders) and thereby developing deeper understandings of the aid delivery solutions that are likely to be most effective in practice in each aid situation.

While there has been recognition of the desirability and potentially beneficial impact on the rights-based approach of forms of downward accountability, there has been little academic study of the outcomes of attempts by development aid funders to encourage NGDOs to develop these forms of accountability. The main aim of this paper has been to address this gap in the literature by identifying and assessing the extent to which these downward accountability mechanisms in NGDOs have had the potential in practice to contribute to the effectiveness of rights-based approaches to development. In particular this paper sought to build on the insights provided by O’Dwyer and Unerman (2007), who had previously examined the impact of accountability initiatives between the Irish government funding body and Irish NGDOs, by now investigating experiences of Irish NGDOs in attempts at fostering greater downward accountability both between the Irish NGDOs and their local partner NGDOs in developing countries, and between these local partner NGDOs and their beneficiaries.

The case narrative illustrates a substantial degree of resistance among Irish donor NGDOs in practice to the implementation of the more effective downward accountability mechanisms necessary for the fuller realisation of the benefits of a rights-based approach to development. It also illustrates issues of power differentials between different parties being ignored or treated naïvely. It has revealed and examined several issues perceived as endangering the practical realisation of the
rhetoric promoting downward accountability as part of the rights-based approach, and it has identified some of the obstacles that need to be addressed before more effective downward accountability can be successfully implemented. In particular, it has identified that growing commitments to realising the benefits of rights-based approaches to development by the sample of NGDOs examined in this study were often coupled with merely rhetorical commitments to adopt downward accountability mechanisms as a critical element of the rights-based approach.

The role of local partnerships between Irish donor NGDOs and their locally based partner NGDOs in developing countries who delivered the aid to beneficiaries was seen to be key – both within the rights-based approach and in the perceived benefits of downward accountability helping to realise the potential of the rights-based approach. However, the realisation in practice of effective downward accountability within both the interactions between the Irish funder NGDOs and the local partner NGDOs, and from the local partner NGDOs to the ultimate beneficiaries, was not well enough developed to realise its potential.

Analysing this local partner-level downward accountability in terms of the criteria established by Kilby (2006) as essential for effective downward accountability – depth of accountability and level of formality – the accountability in practice revealed in this study has shown that there were problems due to: an apparent lack of Irish NGDO attention to oversight of downward accountability within locally-based NGDOs; a reluctance to transfer influence to locally-based NGDOs by allowing them some influence on Irish NGDO governance and strategy; the perceived control of local partner NGDOs by local elites who were often distant from, and unrepresentative of, local communities; and a perception that local NGDOs did not require downward accountability.

These insights have the potential to inform the development of more effective downward accountability practices and thereby more effective rights-based approaches in the NGDO sector. This is because advance awareness of the impediments and resistance to greater downward accountability can be an important factor in overcoming these obstacles to more effective rights-based approaches to aid delivery aiming to improve the quality of life (including life
expectancy) of many people. In particular, public policy needs to be developed to both further embed the growing commitment to greater downward accountability as part of the rights-based approach to development by NGDOs in donor nations, and to help transform this commitment from being largely rhetorical to becoming more fully realised in practice. As the NGDOs in this study largely embraced the principles of the rights-based approach to development, and rhetorically recognised the need for effective downward accountability mechanisms as part of the rights-based approach, the combination of pressures on NGDOs outlined in this paper seem to be effective in developing rhetorical commitments to downward accountability. Although these have been effective specifically in the Irish context, policy makers in other countries could look to the combination of direct governmental pressure on NGDOs (in this study, through the White Paper on Irish Aid, a government report on aid expenditure, and the MAPS process) along with fostering greater media debate and greater public scrutiny of the effectiveness of aid delivery – tailored to the circumstances of each country – to put effective pressure on NGDOs to develop commitments to downward accountability as a key element of the rights-based approach to development.

However, transforming these rhetorical commitments at the macro-level into practice at the micro-level appears, from the evidence in this study, to pose additional problems. In particular, public policy needs to be developed to foster more effective accountability mechanisms both between NGDOs in donor nations and their partner NGDOs at the local level in developing nations, and between these local NGDOs and their beneficiaries. To do this, such public policy needs to explicitly recognise and adapt to take into account, and aim to reduce where possible, the power imbalances that will inevitably exist between donors, NGDOs in donor nations, locally-based NGDOs and beneficiaries.

Insights from this study indicate that reductions in these power imbalances could be fostered through: greater involvement and oversight by NGDOs in donor nations of the practical implementation of downward accountability mechanisms by the locally-based NGDOs they fund; developing requirements for locally-based NGDOs to have involvement in the governance and decision making of the NGDOs that provide their funding; changing working and reporting practices required by donor
NGDOs so that staff working at the grassroots level in developing countries do not need to come from an educated elite, and therefore staff could be recruited who could more readily ‘connect’ with the beneficiaries; and educating both beneficiaries and staff running the locally-based partner NGDOs of the benefits of effective downward accountability.

If funders (such as the Irish and other governments) recognise the desirability of the NGDOs they fund adopting these effective downward forms of accountability to help improve the efficacy of their aid funding, then they need to address the above impediments to the practical implementation of more downward forms of accountability. Specifically, they need to work in partnership with the NGDOs they fund to ensure that any funding tied to adoption of downward forms of accountability is contingent upon the substantive implementation of such forms of accountability, rather than mere empty rhetorical support for downward accountability as part of a rights-based approach. Educating the public in donor nations to appreciate that the outputs from aid funding (potentially improved with use of effective downward accountability) are more important than the amounts donated to individual projects (solely requiring monitoring through upward accountability) might help foster broader public demands for genuine and effective dialogue between NGDOs and their beneficiaries.

We would encourage other researchers to examine shifts in accountability in other NGO ‘sectors’ and contexts as it is only through studies of this nature that we can come to better understand the complexities involved in trying to give voice to broader groups of stakeholders. These issues are of critical importance, as if they can inform the practical transformation of NGO accountability through their input into public policy debates, then they have the potential to help foster greater responsiveness by NGDOs to the needs of their beneficiaries, and thus help to improve the efficacy of aid delivery. This is an issue of the utmost urgency, as every day that passes without NGDOs ascertaining how to improve the practical impact of the US$135 Billion of annual aid flowing from OECD countries is a day when large numbers of very poor people in developing countries suffer unnecessarily.
References


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Table 1: Members of Dóchas

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<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
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<tr>
<td>ActionAid Ireland</td>
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<td>Afrí</td>
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<td>Aidlink</td>
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<td>Amnesty International – Irish Section</td>
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<td>Bóthar</td>
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<td>Centre for Global Education</td>
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<td>ChildFund Ireland</td>
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<td>Children in Crossfire</td>
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<td>Christian Aid Ireland</td>
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<td>Church Mission Society Ireland (CMSI)</td>
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<td>Comhlámh</td>
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<td>Galway One World Centre</td>
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<td>Gorta</td>
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<td>Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs (ICJSA)</td>
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<td>Irish Council for International Students (ICOS)</td>
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<td>Irish Missionary Union (IMU)</td>
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<td>Trócaire</td>
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<td>Vita (formerly Refugee Trust International)</td>
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<td>World Vision Ireland</td>
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Table 2: Interviewees

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<th>NGDO size</th>
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<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>3 interviewees (designated A, B and C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>3 interviewees (designated D, E and F)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>2 interviewees (designated G and H)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Other primary players in Irish NGDO sector</th>
<th>Number of interviewees and designation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dóchas; Irish Aid; ‘Thought leader’ in Irish development education; Head of development aid workers’ support organisation</td>
<td>4 interviewees (designated I, J, K and L)</td>
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