



# Who do you work for?

Establishing a better match between justifications of research and effective accountability to claimed beneficiaries

**Carolina Johnson, Brendan Whitty and Michael Hammer**

Working paper May 2008

The One World Trust promotes education and research into changes required in global governance to achieve the eradication of poverty, injustice, environmental degradation and war. We develop recommendations on practical ways to make powerful organisations more accountable to the people they affect now and in the future, and how the rule of law can be applied to all. We educate political leaders, decision makers and opinion-formers about the findings of our research.

Carolina Johnson, Brendan Whitty and Michael Hammer are part of the APRI project team at the One World Trust. To contact the authors please email [bwhitty@oneworldtrust.org](mailto:bwhitty@oneworldtrust.org)

© One World Trust.

Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce from this paper for educational purposes only.

As the copyright holder, the One World Trust requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication

3 Whitehall Court  
London SW1A 2EL  
Tel +44 (0) 20 7766 3470  
Fax +44 (0) 20 7219 4879  
Email [info@oneworldtrust.org](mailto:info@oneworldtrust.org)  
[www.oneworldtrust.org](http://www.oneworldtrust.org)

Charity Commission N<sup>o</sup> 210180

**Evidence based policy making relies on sound research. Yet while the policy making processes are themselves increasingly under scrutiny, little work has been done so far on the accountability of the research organisations that significantly inform and influence public policy. This paper explores the accountability of research organisations from all sectors triggered by their claims to work on behalf of particular groups of beneficiaries, and the challenges to operationalise these in a way that is meaningful to the people eventually affected by the policy implications of the research. It finishes by challenging those organisations that claim to work on behalf of very widely defined, hard-to-identify or inaccessible constituencies to be more rigorous and transparent about the way they propose to engage with these groups. The aim of this work is to help address accountability gaps that may harm the legitimacy of important research and the validity of its results, reducing the overall impact and effectiveness of a wide range of research organisations, including from civil society, in the public policy process.**

Evidence-based policy making is a route to legitimate public policy: grounding policy in evidence ensures that public policy meets real needs, is seen as valid by a broad range of stakeholders, and is sustainable through the many cycles of often controversial political processes. It requires an increasing professionalisation in the working methods of those who are involved in the research collection, the analysis as well as the decision-making processes in governments or large organisations, including the capacity to judge research results by the methods used to generate them and the quality of the conclusions it reaches. In turn,

research activities that feed evidence-based policy making are expanding and have become, in their own right, more significant in relation to the resulting policy. This raises important questions about the accountability of policy relevant research processes, and the real or perceived legitimacy of their results, far ahead of a final policy based on such evidence actually seeing the light of the day.

To underpin the importance and validity of their research, many organisations that directly or indirectly seek to influence public policy with the evidence they provide put forward claims to work on behalf or in the interest of particular constituencies, including often quite widely defined groups of beneficiaries, such as ‘the poor’, ‘women’, or ‘future generations’.

The One World Trust’s project on Accountability Principles for Research Institutes was developed in response to this rising significance of research in public policy making and the challenges the organisations producing it may face. While advocacy groups are the “ideal type” of organisation working on behalf of specific groups of beneficiaries, initial research suggests that a variety of other organisations ranging in type from Oxfam to Monsanto claim to work on behalf of particular groups and evoke a whole set of expressions for the moral basis of their claims.

This paper provides a basic explanation for how the claims can be understood to trigger in all cases relationships of accountability between those who make the claim and the people who are subject to it, quite independently of whether the research process in practice actively involves or in its result affects the constituency in questions. It queries the basis of such claims and seeks to identify key challenges in operationalising them in a way that is meaningful to the relevant constituencies. The paper finishes by challenging organisations who work with hard-to-identify and inaccessible constituencies to be clear about how they would effectively engage with these, and how a conscious process can help research organisations to support the legitimacy of their work and evidence they provide to influence public policy

### **Legitimacy, accountability, and claimed constituencies**

Research organisations typically have a range of diverse and often conflicting stakeholders.<sup>1</sup> Some of these stakeholder relationships are clearly established: the relationship with donors, governments, and peer researchers in the policy community. In addition to these well-established relationships, there are also additional stakeholder relationships which may be unrecognised or unacknowledged by the organisation. Traditionally, a mandate to act on behalf of another comes from an explicit, agreed relationship with clear accountability responsibilities, such as that between a lawyer and client, a union and its members, or a government and its citizens. In some cases, however, a mandate is implied unilaterally, when an organisation claims to speak on behalf of another or claims their benefit as its motivation. In these cases of an implied mandate, explicit accountability relationships may not have been established, but the implied mandate still triggers expectations of accountability between the organisation and its claimed beneficiaries.

When research organisations explicitly justify their research or even overall existence with the claim that their projects are undertaken on behalf, or for the benefit of a particular group of people or “constituency” this implication of a mandate to work for a constituency triggers an expectation of an accountability relationship regardless of the organisation’s actual level of engagement with the constituency. If an organisation builds its moral basis on the public assertion that it works on behalf someone else, the legitimacy of this claim, and their accountability, is further bolstered by presenting a clear and measurable foundation for this

---

<sup>1</sup> See Whitty, Brendan ‘Stretched in all directions,’ One World Trust working paper (January 2008). For further discussion of what is meant by ‘accountability’ in the work of the Trust see Blagescu, Monica et al., Pathways to Accountability: The Global Accountability Framework, London: One World Trust, 2005.

assertion. Developing an accountability relationship is an effective way to do this, demonstrating and providing a publicly measurable basis for the organisation's claim to legitimacy. This involves, as a first step, a recognition of the accountability which moves the relationship from tacit to explicit and, second, the formalisation of the relationship through accountability mechanisms that can be tested, scrutinised and evaluated.

### **Constituencies and Claims to Benefit**

A number of research organisations justify their work with an explicit intention for their research to bring about benefit for a group. The scope and form of these accountability obligations varies depending on the organisation's particular claims, the way they are integrated with the organisation's activities, and their relationship with their claimed constituency.

In order to gain a sense of the variety and scope of research organisations' relationship with these claimed constituencies, what follows is a brief discussion of several different examples of research organisations who claim that their research benefits a particular constituency. It reveals a variety of claims and constituencies:

**Oxfam** and **Actionaid** are two of the most well known international NGOs, claiming to work on behalf of the poor worldwide. Oxfam, both at the secretariat and national levels, engages in what they refer to as "high-level research and analysis and lobbying", with the goal of changing international "policies and practices in ways which will ensure that poor people have the rights, opportunities and resources they need to improve and control their lives".<sup>2</sup> Research projects are undertaken with a clear expression of intention for their research to work on behalf of a constituency of 'poor people'. Actionaid also integrates policy research with campaigning and project work. Similarly aiming for "high-quality research, analysis, and policy recommendations", Actionaid articulates an even stronger mandate to work on behalf of the 'poor and marginalized'. Research projects are undertaken explicitly to support dialogue with governments, and developed with the participation of different levels of the organisation.<sup>3</sup>

'The poor' of course are not the only constituent claimed by international NGOs.

**Greenpeace** provides public justification for its work generally by claiming to work on behalf of a "fragile earth" that "needs a voice" and in the case of specific projects through such statements as the need to protect natural resources for "future generations".<sup>4</sup> The organisation conducts both policy-oriented and technology research, identifying problems, exposing environmental challenges, and, increasingly, trying to develop feasible alternatives. They work in a range of areas, for mostly focusing on various kinds of impacts of human activity on the environment.

Campaigning or advocacy organisations are also not the only ones who may undertake research to result in targeted benefit. For example, the **M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF)** in India, which conducts agricultural science research, was explicitly founded as a 'pro-poor' and 'pro-women' organisation seeking science and technology development that will benefit the rural poor.<sup>5</sup> The Foundation has a varied research portfolio that includes a strong emphasis on a participatory approach to research.

This phenomenon is not limited to the civil society sector. Whether impelled by a desire to do good or to improve their image before another important stakeholder group – the general public – many large and transnational companies are increasingly making similar claims:

---

<sup>2</sup> Oxfam International, 'Policy & Analysis', <<http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/>>, accessed 29 February March 2008.

<sup>3</sup> ActionAid, 'What We Do', <<http://www.actionaid.org/main.aspx?PageID=20>>, accessed 29 February 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Greenpeace, <[www.greenpeace.org](http://www.greenpeace.org)>; <<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/press/reports>>; accessed 29 February 2008.

<sup>5</sup> M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, 'About Us', <[http://www.mssrf.org/about\\_us/index.htm](http://www.mssrf.org/about_us/index.htm)>, 29 February 2008

**Monsanto** has recently been trying to make a name for itself as a responsible company called to develop products necessary to avert an impending crisis in food production, working for the local benefit of farmers worldwide, especially those in poorer or at risk agricultural regions such as much of Africa.<sup>6</sup> According to Monsanto's own statements the company's research results may be used to support policy advocacy efforts, but the research activities themselves are justified as necessary for the world's increasing poor and hungry.<sup>7</sup>

**GlaxoSmithKline (GSK)** introduces itself and its research with the broad statement that "Our mission is to improve the quality of human life by enabling people to do more, feel better and live longer." This general assertion is refined, and the ethical justification of the company's research is strengthened, with the assertion that it works not only for the "20 percent of the world's population lucky enough to have the resources to pay for new treatments", but substantially on behalf of people in the poorest countries, who "may not represent a viable commercial market for some new medicines" but who still need access to medicines they cannot afford. Citing its importance to both the company's public integrity and attracting talented scientists, GSK asserts that it "is committed to playing a full part in addressing the healthcare challenges of the developing world." In its work in development contexts, GSK works through public private partnerships with governments and cooperation and dialogue with NGOs and international organisations.<sup>8</sup>

This brief review shows that many research producing institutions, including but not limited to advocacy organisations, make high level and foundational claims about their beneficiaries. These claims, however, are about global intentions, rather than specific research outputs of individual projects, making them vulnerable to the accusation of being hollow generalities without proper foundation in meaningful and tangible accountability relationships.

### **Constructing links with claimed constituencies**

Yet the benefits of making such claims, however general, are clear: through them a research organisation may gain access to resources such funders, media space, regulatory approval, or future customers. In fact, some regulatory regimes (such as for charities) directly ask for the definition of beneficiary groups, however widely defined they may be, without necessarily testing the applicant on its accountability towards this group.

What factors affect the need for a formal accountability relationship to legitimate a research organisation's claims to a mandate? Intuitively, an organisation's claimed moral justification should be considered in the context of their relationship with the community. This is a function of the 'closeness' (to use one metaphor from the literature<sup>9</sup>), or the depth and comprehensiveness of the connections between the research organisation and their claimed constituency. This refers to how embedded organisational decision-makers are in the beneficiary community. As organisation and constituency grow closer, mechanisms between organisation and constituents emerge and increase which, while they may not be expressly

---

<sup>6</sup> See Monsanto Pledge Report 2007 (<[http://www.monsanto.com/pdf/pubs/2007/pledge\\_report.pdf](http://www.monsanto.com/pdf/pubs/2007/pledge_report.pdf)>) and Keynote Address by Hugh Grant, Monsanto Director, at the Opening Session of The World Food Prize Norman E. Borlaug International Symposium in Des Moines, Iowa, on October 18, 2007 (available at <<http://monsanto.mediaroom.com/index.php?s=57&item=114>>, accessed 10 Feb 2008).

<sup>7</sup> While civil society organisations that establish a justification of mandate to act on behalf of others often closely integrate their research activities with this justification, for-profit companies generally segregate more within the company; while many companies now have established claims of social responsibility and programmes demonstrating the companies social justification, R&D or product development of the company is not necessarily included in that justification. Rather, the company relies on secondary activities and projects to provide the justification for its core activities.

<sup>8</sup> See the 2006 Corporate Responsibility Report, especially the CEO/Chairman's Letter and Q&A (<http://www.gsk.com/responsibility/cr-review-2006/downloads/intro.pdf>), and 'Developing Medicines and Vaccines for the Developing World', Dec. 2006 (<http://www.gsk.com/research/GSK-developing-world-2006.pdf>).

<sup>9</sup> Gray, Rob et al., 'NGOs, civil society and accountability: making the people accountable to capital', *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2006, page 342 note 38. The term is drawn explicitly from John Rawls' original discussion of closeness. It is in the absence of closeness in a relationship that a formal accountability is required. Similar concepts are developed in Mary Kaldor, "Civil Society and Accountability," *Journal of Human Development*, 4, 1 (2003).

couched in terms of accountability, may nevertheless feature many elements of established accountability mechanisms such as consultation, transparency, and feedback loops. In this way, an organisation that is “close” to its target beneficiaries can be seen as a legitimate actor for the group if they translate their informal ties into tangible accountability mechanisms.

Research organisations present a particularly interesting challenge in their accountability to claimed constituencies, as they are often not involved in implementation of projects, application of research outputs, or other direct engagement in the community. It is possible for a research organisation to express a mandate to work on a community’s behalf while never actually having any contact whatsoever with this community. In this context, either the demonstration of closeness with the constituency or the construction of effective processes of accountability with this stakeholder community is important to ground this claim and achieve organisational legitimacy.

Many research organisations have recognized the importance of such connections in supporting their claims to moral legitimacy. There are a number of research organisations that have claimed constituencies also describing their partnerships, networks, or the participation of members of the constituency in the research act. Implementing organisations such as Oxfam assert the appropriateness of their research on behalf of the broad constituency by linking their research to their work in the field. To accompany their very strong claim of a mandate, Actionaid highlights even stronger links to their target population: “within ActionAid, local, national and international parts of the organisation connect up and help us understand how policies and practices affect poor communities”.<sup>10</sup> MSSRF takes this a step further, highlighting the integration of the target population with the work of the Foundation, building participatory research, engaging the constituency into the research plan. Monsanto engages in the effort to emphasize connectedness, by pointing to links with NGOs that “have local knowledge, local contacts, local connections, and can connect best practices with needy farmers.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Identifying and accessing the constituency**

With the assertion of an accountability relationship between a research organisation and a constituency of beneficiaries, the question arises how this relationship can be and is put into practice. For this, much depends on whether the claimed constituency is both identifiable and accessible, neither of which should be taken for granted. For example, Greenpeace’s current advertising campaign includes the slogan “Greenpeace exists because this fragile earth deserves a voice”; the needs of “future generations” are frequently invoked to justify advocacy positions. Clearly, it is hard to imagine in what practical way Greenpeace could be accountable to ‘this fragile earth’ (which while significant, lacks the capacity to participate in an accountability relationship) or to people who have not yet been born. By claiming to be an agent for a constituency that cannot be understood to have agency or voice in the current context, Greenpeace itself cannot be understood to have a meaningful accountability relationship with its claimed constituency of beneficiaries. This is problematic as it puts into question the validity of the claim itself.

This does not mean that Greenpeace, or other research based organisations cannot be understood to be legitimate actors, but rather that these organisations face stronger needs to construct their legitimacy in practical ways through other channels than an accountability relationship to its professed primary, but unattainable, beneficiaries. This can be done in different ways.

---

<sup>10</sup> ActionAid, ‘Policy’, <<http://www.actionaid.org/main.aspx?PageID=32>>, accessed 29 February 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh Grant, Keynote Address at the Opening Session of The World Food Prize Norman E. Borlaug International Symposium 2007, <<http://monsanto.mediaroom.com/index.php?s=57&item=114>>, accessed 10 Feb 2008.

Greenpeace International itself, for instance, asserts that much of its credibility to act on behalf of the planet rests "... on producing accurate information based on thorough scientific research, and on making scientifically justifiable claims..."<sup>12</sup> It seeks to bolster this claim to accuracy and reliability by embedding parts of its research work in academic institutions, such as through its own research unit based at a UK university, and collaborative assessments with other recognised research groups. However, despite Greenpeace International's general commitment to broad stakeholder groups and engagement with them as part of its commitment to the INGO Charter<sup>13</sup>, the organisation provides only very limited external stakeholder engagement mechanisms. Indeed, only by becoming directly involved in Greenpeace's activities (as by becoming a volunteer), can one gain insight into its evidence and decision making processes.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond the question about the research standards which Greenpeace, like any other science based organisation needs to meet, the organisation may thus face the issue of how closed it can afford to be when justifying its claim to work with credibility on behalf of unattainable constituencies.

In contrast, the much smaller UK based International Institute for Environmental Development (IIED) chooses a different route. Its mission is "to change the world in partnership with others, and make sustainable development a reality, particularly for the world's poor". While equally claiming to benefit an unattainable constituency of beneficiaries, the emphasis of the IIED is to build legitimacy for their claims to assist "the poor" through a "wide range of lasting partnerships" which they form in the countries with which they work. This provides a more immediate nexus to people who can directly respond, and helps tailor their message: "Because international policy debates undervalue local knowledge and initiatives, IIED works with local people in poor countries to ensure their voices are heard."<sup>15</sup>

While both organisations work with in practice unattainable constituencies of beneficiaries, in the case of Greenpeace because future generations can in practice not respond, and in the case of the IIED because it is a smaller organisation claiming to generate benefits for a very broad group, "the poor", its strategies to underpin their respective claims are different: one chooses to use scientific rigour as a surrogate accountability mechanism, and the other a participatory partnership approach.

Both choices can produce the legitimacy these policy research producing organisations aim to generate, yet the first route remains to a much higher degree dependent on the acceptance of both its research in the scientific community, and of the assumed benefit by the general public and political decision makers as a matter of individual trust placed in the values of the organisation.

The existence of an undefined or ambiguous constituency in the vision and mission of a policy research organisation may not just reveal different underlying strategies concerning legitimacy. It may also indicate that the organisation does not want to establish a special relationship with any one constituency, and does not in effect wish to trigger a type of accountability relationship. The reason for this could include that its professional staff and brand could be obligated to work to new dependencies that may distract from working on the basis of conclusions reached in result of an allegedly objective research process. They could also reveal existing but not necessarily comfortable accountability relationships such as to influential donors, clients, or major internal power blocks including, in the case of companies, large investors.

---

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/about/our-core-values/accuracy-of-information>, last accessed 19/05/2008

<sup>13</sup> The INGO Accountability Charter was developed by a group of international NGOs. Greenpeace features it on its website: <http://www.greenpeace.org/raw/content/international/press/reports/ingo-charter.pdf>, last accessed 19/05/2008

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/about/our-core-values/stakeholders>, last accessed 19/05/2008

<sup>15</sup> Taken from "A world of difference: IIED Annual Report 2006/7".

The less identifiable and accessible a claimed group of constituents is, the greater is therefore the need for the users of any research produced by such an organisation to evaluate the institutional strategy used to legitimise its work as part of their appraisal.

Claiming as constituencies poorly identifiable, ambiguous or overly-broad groups therefore may offer short-term advantages to a research organisation, although in the long-term it may result in a lack of effectiveness. Among national and international organisations this is in consequence probably the most common sort of claim, encompassing “poor farmers”, “rural communities”, “the women of country X” and so on. Yet this type of claims is problematic in many other ways. While these people certainly exist, and individually are often quite able to express themselves, the challenge is to establish an accountability relationship with them that is meaningful, capturing both individual voices as well as catching the broad sweep of issues they face.

In practice realising organisational accountability towards the totality of such groups is difficult, not least because accountability relationships have some transaction costs. The solution to address this problem may thus lie in compartmentalising the accountability relationships for their practical realisation, and subsequently aggregating their results.

Within large organisations, such as Oxfam, this is often implemented quite successfully through efforts to engage across a wide of their projects with the relevant subgroups of the claimed overall constituency. Key to making this work on a systematic basis is to build and strengthen the relevant policies and management systems so that the organisation as a whole can develop and retain the capability to be accountable to its stakeholders.

Yet smaller organisations, amongst which many research institutions fall, cannot draw on this advantage of scale. Their claim of working for the benefit of a very broad range of beneficiaries can often only be realised in the individual research projects themselves which generally have a narrower targeted group of beneficiaries than for instance ‘poor people’ in general, and focus on particular regions or sectors. Frequently such research organisation have also either emerged from or have close connections to that constituency, even if working at distance. However, while working at project-level with more narrowly identifiable constituencies may make an accountability relationship easier to support, it fails to address the wider dilemma and does not satisfy the claim that many research organisations make towards larger, more indistinct group of claimed beneficiaries.

### **Conclusion: steps towards improving beneficiary accountability of research organisations**

Accountability of policy-relevant, research-producing organisations to their claimed beneficiaries is an issue of increasing importance as the legitimacy of the research process relies in part on the legitimacy of the research providers. In addition to advocacy groups, public, corporate or civil society organisations also seek to influence public policy, and also make claims about the beneficiaries of their work or constituencies they work for, such as being ‘pro poor’ or working on behalf of ‘future generations’. In many cases these claims are not only made to realise individual advantages, such as access to specific resources, but also in response to a growing public expectation that their aims are transparent.

Whatever the motive, the simple act of claiming to work on behalf of a particular group triggers an accountability relationship with the people who are part of it. Yet, in many cases, these claims refer to hard to identify and inaccessible groups of beneficiaries and there are no tangible mechanisms in place capable of matching the breadth and high level of the claims with a meaningful accountability relationship that allows a mutual engagement with the relevant constituency. The resulting absence of or weakness in accountability can have a problematic impact on the perception of legitimacy and validity of the results a research organisation produces, and affect its overall impact and effectiveness in the public process it

seeks to directly or indirectly influence. Smaller research organisations in particular may be more prone to challenges on this issue as they cannot draw on aggregated understandings emerging from a broad range of accountability relationships realised in practice at more narrowly defined project level.

At present there are no set rules or mechanisms on offer by which organisations can validate their moral justifications in all cases, and while there may be some inherent advantages that can come with size, other factors may impede on the accountability of larger organisations that do not affect smaller research bodies in the same way. There are thus some inherent advantages for all research organisations in the development of meaningful accountability mechanisms, not least as part of organisational risk management and to enhance impact.

While experience from other work the Trust conducts on issues of organisational accountability suggests that common accountability principles for research organisations ought to cover the main dimensions of accountability of transparency, participation, evaluation and complaint and response, a 'fixed standard' approach is unlikely to be appropriate. The actual realisation of good practice accountability principles will need to take into account the context of the research activity, the organisation, its constituencies, and the relationships that exist between them.

---

This working paper is part of the One World Trust's project on accountability principles for policy relevant research institutes (APRI) aimed at developing a better understanding of the accountability challenges research organisations face and developing tools to help them to address these. The project is carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada and is part of the One World Trust's ongoing work on the accountability of global organisations, engagement of citizens in political processes, and international law and regulation to make global governance more accountable. More information about the project is available on the Trust's website [www.oneworldtrust.org](http://www.oneworldtrust.org), or by contacting Brendan Whitty at [bwhitty@oneworldtrust.org](mailto:bwhitty@oneworldtrust.org).

---