

“NGOS CERTAINLY FEEL THAT IT IS HELPFUL TO BE PART OF OUR GLOBAL ACCOUNTABILITY ALLIANCE”

Karenina Schröder

- *What benefits an international accountability charter brings to NGOs • and how organisations from the Global South are contributing to the agenda*

The INGO Accountability Charter (the “Charter”)¹ is intended as a firm commitment of large international civil society organisations – including Amnesty International, Greenpeace and BRAC – to transparency, accountability and excellence in what they do. The Charter provides the only global, fully comprehensive and cross-sectoral accountability framework for INGOs.

Recognising that the international NGO sector was increasing in size with a plethora of competing guidelines and regulations, its founders responded by incorporating a wide range of the existing codes into a common framework. It aims to provide a more streamlined and coherent approach so that INGOs are able to respond confidently to donors, governments and other stakeholders with regards their accountability efforts.

First signed in 2006 by 11 civil society organisations, the Charter now has 24 members. Members must report annually on a series of commitments which each organisation must adhere to – such as respect for human rights; transparency and professional management. These reports are reviewed by an Independent Review Panel which may, if necessary, request further information from the member organisation. The Panel specifically looks for institutional commitment of the reporting organisation and continuous progress on fulfilling their commitments to transparency, independence, effectiveness, participation, sound financial management etc. The reports and external assessment thereof are all published on the Charter’s website and are accessible to the general public.

The Charter’s day-to-day running is managed by its Secretariat which, since 2010, has been hosted by the International Civil Society Centre in Berlin.

Karenina Schröder, the Secretariat's Executive Officer, talked to Conectas about the origins of the Charter, the ways in which it has evolved, and the increasingly important role that Global South organisations are playing in establishing international accountability standards.

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Conectas Human Rights • How did the original idea of the Charter come about?

Karenina Schröder • In 2006, some of the largest global brands founded the Charter for a number of reasons.

Firstly, they felt that they needed to improve their own accountability systems. Not having shareholders to look at the impact and value of what they were doing, meant that the founders wanted to make sure that they themselves had more rigid systems to ensure that they were really generating the best possible outcome for the people they serve.

Secondly, and in particular for the advocacy INGOs such as Greenpeace and Amnesty, who were quite strong proponents in the early days, the more that these organisations demanded good governance, transparency and accountability from businesses and from governments, the more important it was for them to get their own house in order.

And finally, when the Charter was founded there were several hundred accountability schemes. While it is good that the issue is so high on the agenda, there is also a problem with having so many. It means that for many organisations, they need to report on a multiple basis to different donors and according to different accountability requirements at the national, regional, global or thematic area. Therefore, a cross-sectoral global complementary code such as the INGO Charter could also serve as a baseline to which each organisation adds different pieces that are particularly relevant to their regions or to their specific partners.

Conectas • How has the Accountability Charter changed since it was first set up? What have been the biggest changes?

K. S. • In a nutshell: it is more independent, more global and much more professional.

Originally, it was an organisation that was completely governed by its members. The autonomy of the organisation was significantly increased with the introduction of the Independent Review Panel. We have increasingly taken on external directors with two coming from the Global South. This helped the organisation to also become more global.

As we professionalised, it became harder for some of our members to comply with the necessary requirements and we lost some of the smaller members. At the same time we took every possible step to ensure that we remain lean, focus only on key issues and allow our

members to grow their accountability at their own pace and capacity. That is the beauty of an Independent Review Panel assessing each organisation individually and not just against fixed indicators.

Conectas - The only requirement to become a member is that an organisation must have a complaints mechanism in place. What is the reasoning for this, how does it work and why is it important?

K. S. - Unless you have very good systems in place to listen to your stakeholders, how can you ever be held accountable? I was surprised to find that this was by no means a given in organisations. A number of organisations - and in particular the advocacy organisations - were not very strong in collecting feedback from their stakeholders at the beginning. The service delivery and humanitarian organisations were slightly more advanced in this regard. However, all of them found it hard to meaningfully engage on the feedback. The digital age now allows (and many start using it) a completely new, much more direct and in-time relationship with their stakeholders.

Organisations increasingly understand that this mechanism is not just about receiving criticism. It is actually about inviting feedback from and having a constant conversation with your stakeholders on what you can do collectively. It allows them to tap into peoples' knowledge, networks and energy to achieve greater impact for the cause.

The complaints mechanism also allows organisations to correct something very quickly if things go wrong. So if a project that you've launched with the best of intent has some side effect that you have not anticipated, a really good stakeholder feedback system will immediately enable you to adapt your project. In the digital age, it is a means of rapid response to enable the organisation to adapt and to continuously improve what it is doing.

In terms of how this works practically, it very much depends on the context in which the organisation is working. Some organisations have ombudsmen. There are organisations that have little boxes where you can put a small piece of paper. Others have text-messaging feedback. There are also panels in the communities to get feedback. There is feedback through the radio as well. So a vast amount of tools and practices have been developed over time, which are always very sensitive to how women and children can raise their voices in communities and potentially non-benevolent political situations are taken into account.

Conectas - What are the kinds of trends that show up in the annual reports?

K. S. - We have ten commitments which our members must report on - ranging from stakeholder inclusion to transparency to ethical fundraising. For each of these commitments, we ask three questions: 1. Do you have a policy in place in relation to the commitment?; 2. Is that policy well known in practice by staff?; and 3. Do you have evidence that it works well?

We are doing increasingly better on numbers 1 and 2, and still not well enough on number 3. However, we have sharpened the understanding of what these commitments mean. So while people used to think that inclusion just referred to gender – and would just report on how many women were employed and how many women an organisation was reaching through its various programmes - we have successfully broadened the discussion so that inclusion means looking at who is potentially *excluded* from the programmes – on the basis of, for example, ethnicity, age or disability. We have successfully managed to encourage member organisations to devise policies that are positive and far-reaching. Our members invest in implementing these policies and so we also hope to see, in the future, more evidence of these policies working well.

Conectas - The majority of your members still tend to be Global North-based organisations. Is it a challenge for you to reach organisations in the Global South? Have any of your southern members been able to offer tips to your northern members?

K. S. - We have recently welcomed two organisations from the Global South - BRAC from Bangladesh and the Taiwan Fund for Children and Families. However, it is not so easy for us to gain the same kind of visibility and credibility in the Global South where we have just not been so present in the past. We are addressing this through our project called the Global Standard for CSO Accountability.

Through this programme we have reached out to nine organisations – the majority of which are from the Global South based in India, Kenya, Uganda, Colombia, and the Philippines – that do similar work to us. This is really our answer to this missing link to the Global South as it is a southern-led exercise to look at what is at the core of CSO accountability standards.

Over the course of the next three years we will develop a collective CSO accountability standard. PricewaterhouseCoopers donated time to look at the various accountability codes that these nine organisations are using to establish how much overlap there is. What we have seen is that organisations in different locations have developed relatively similar ideas regarding accountability mechanisms. It will be great to see if we can develop this into one collective basic standard with certain sub sets for specific regions and contexts.

Conectas - We are seeing increasing restrictions on the rights of INGOs in a number of jurisdictions worldwide. Does the INGO Charter hope to have an impact on how those organisations are viewed in these jurisdictions?

K. S. - We definitely see this shrinking civic space. We see it as a huge challenge. One challenge is if we ask our organisations to be extremely transparent, how does that play out for them in reality in, for example, Russia? It is a problem. We need to be aware of what can we demand from whom. We want to make sure that being part of the Charter helps an organisation to fight some of the challenges that are presented in non-benevolent surroundings. The organisations that we are working with in India and Uganda are telling

us that very often CSOs in their countries are being accused by governments of being unaccountable, corrupt and performing badly. On these grounds, they get a bad reputation. Against that background, these NGOs certainly feel that it is helpful to be part of our global accountability alliance. They can then fight back by saying “actually, we meet the requirements of a Global CSO Accountability Standard that has been globally agreed as being a good reference standard for accountability.” At the same time, if the Charter is perceived as something that is international and not national, there may immediately be a suspicion that this has something to do with interference from the outside. This is a hot topic and not easy to resolve. We are very sensitive to developments and we are eager to learn from our Southern partners on how best to proceed so that global solidarity can play out in their favour.

Conectas - What does the future look like for the INGO Charter? Where do you see the organisation heading in the next five-ten years?

K. S. - The challenge for us is to look at how the digital age allows for a completely new version of accountability. We used to live in an age where the organisations defined with their members what they wanted to do, they presented this to the outside world, they reported on progress and then someone external evaluated. In the new era you crowd source your strategies and you look at a much broader constituency to take strategic decisions, you constantly co-create what you implement, because you permanently ask all your stakeholders how they like it, whether you should change it, if they have a better idea, or if they have another network to connect to. You then co-evaluate whether this is actually adding value or not. As the organisation Keystone Accountability always says: “Accountability is not only the right thing to do – it is also a very smart thing to do.”

NOTES

1 • The full text of the Charter is available here: http://www.ingoaccountabilitycharter.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/INGO_CHARTER_web.pdf, accessed October 1, 2015.

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*Interview conducted in July 2015 by Juana Kweitel
and Oliver Hudson (Conectas Human Rights).*



KARENINA SCHRÖDER – *Germany*

As Executive Officer of the INGO Accountability Charter (the “Charter”), Karenina facilitates the acceptance and implementation of the Charter in the ICSO sector. Previously Karenina served on the board of Transparency International Germany for six years and was responsible for the strategic organisational development and was the coordinator of its Advisory Council. She also founded and managed the working group “Transparency in the Non-Profit Sector” and the “Academic Working Group of Transparency International Germany”.

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