

Accountability and Inaction: NGOs and Resource Lodging In Development

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Abstract:

From the late 1980s, research on NGOs had a normative focus and was vulnerable to changing donor preoccupations. This article contributes a new conceptual approach, analysing the practices through which relationships and resources are translated into programmes and projects. The theoretical justification for this move combines the new ethnography of development practice with a re-agency approach to transactions across time and space. The study is based on data including thirty hours of video ethnography involving interviews and field visits with Kenyan NGOs in a variety of sectors. The analysis focuses on the problem of accountability that emerged through the interactions of donors and state corruption. We argue that NGOs operating in capital cities often provide organizational solutions to this problem. Depending on donor preferences, varying amounts of resources become 'lodged' or absorbed in 'capital NGOs' as they provide accounts of programmes that satisfy donors. However, no matter the donor preferences, capital NGOs provide accountability independently of increased action with communities or increased resources transferred to them. We conclude that the institutionalization of the NGO field as a well-grounded specialization depends in part on the degree to which researchers can sideline the stories generated in inter-organizational contexts such as workshops and policy meetings, and substitute understandings based on accounting practices, resource flows and social ties.