

Digital Accountability

Empowered relationships - leveraged impact

Executive Summary

The digital opportunity

The digital age fundamentally transforms the way in which people relate to organisations. Central to the new engagement practice is that organisations actively invite others to act, connect and contribute to the shared cause. Emerging strategies of civil society organisations (CSOs) building on this paradigm are often called [people-powered strategies](#). They focus on facilitating and amplifying other people's and partner's actions and voices to leverage impact. This not only increases the pool of resources, skills, capacities and capabilities that CSOs can build on; it also increases stakeholder ownership and thus the chances of transformative impact.

Accountability is key to success

For these new strategies to work however, CSOs need to radically review their accountability culture and practice. Accountability, understood as an active and positive stakeholder relationship management with a focus on achieving the shared mission – is absolutely strategic to success of people-powered strategies.

The Digital Accountability project

The [Digital Accountability project](#), initiated and facilitated by the [INGO Accountability Charter](#), aims to identify and mainstream accountability practices that help CSOs seize the digital opportunity of people-powered work approaches. Thought leaders in our group come from ICSOs such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Oxfam and Transparency International and digital CSOs such as 38 Degrees, 350.org, Purpose and Tactical Technology Collective in addition to several [others](#).

Key findings

We found interesting trends of a new and [emerging accountability paradigm](#) that fully underpins and propels people-powered work approaches in the digital age. They include among others: ask stakeholders where you add greatest strategic value *for them*; share power – share responsibility; open your books for in-time transparency; move from quantity to quality relationships; ask stakeholders to continuously evaluate your impact; and be prepared to take more risk where it allows greater stakeholder engagement.

This paper sheds light on the new engagement culture in the digital age. It identifies opportunities and challenges for CSOs that follow a people-powered work approach. Most importantly it highlights emerging accountability practices to support this new model for greater stakeholder ownership and leveraged impact. It provides numerous concrete examples and a number of one-page user briefs for specific functions in CSOs that want to put this model into practice. Furthermore, a number of one-page user briefs for specific functions in CSOs that want to put this model into practice, will be published at a later stage. It is a living document and we would appreciate your feedback to develop it further!

Digital Accountability

Empowered relationships - leveraged impact

I. The Digital Opportunity

The digital age allows for a new dimension of interaction between civil society organisations (CSOs) and stakeholders. Instant, global, two-way communication is available at low cost. Almost more importantly – a digital communication culture has emerged in which stakeholders *demand* a new level of interactivity. This is a great opportunity for CSOs to strengthen their relationship with stakeholders and collectively leverage impact. Those capitalising on the new opportunity often call it a *people powered strategy*.

Accountability, understood as an active and positive stakeholder relationship management with a focus on achieving the shared mission, is a key strategic competence for success in this environment. Building trusted relationships and co-creating change towards the shared cause, allows CSOs to move from transactional to long term transformative change that is owned by the people they work with. It also offers access to an amazing pool of skills, capacity and knowledge that stakeholders offer to contribute.

The following paper looks at the trend of interactive stakeholder engagement in the digital age; outlines the huge opportunities and serious challenges it brings for CSOs that choose a people-powered work approach; and highlights how emerging accountability practices support success.

II. A new Citizen Engagement Culture

From mass communication to personalised interaction

Pre-digital communication has put people mostly at the receiving end of expert insights, government policies or corporate publications – just to name a few. This has fundamentally changed. In the digital age people take a much more active approach to customising and shaping their interactions with organisations, on issues and in regard to outcomes. The rise of the blogosphere in the early 2000's, open source collaborations in [Linux](#) and [Wikipedia](#), digital campaigns' organisations such as [MoveOn](#) and [GetUp](#) or social movements like [Occupy Wall Street](#) exemplify people's new engagement model. Key characteristics in all of them are: easy access, personalised in-time communication and taking an active role in co-shaping outcomes. Communication scholar Lance Bennett calls it a *shift* from the "dutiful" to the "self-actualising" citizen. People don't just want to be informed by organisations, but actively contribute and move in and out of issues they care about as their interests, desires and life circumstances change.

The digital impact opportunity

People's willingness and ability to actively contribute to a common cause offers a huge new opportunity - in particular to those CSOs for whom massive people support is conducive to achieving their objectives. It allows them to tap into enormous skills, knowledge, capacity and energy of like-minded actors. The core competence in this case is no longer to optimally leverage in-house expertise but to optimally connect and co-create with people and partners to advance



the shared cause. Creating the most favourable ecosystem for *them* to thrive is the key to success. Charles Darwin already said: *Those who have learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.* This has never been truer than in the digital age.

The emergence of people-powered CSO strategies

Not surprisingly, the interactive model of co-creation is central to a number of recently developed CSOs strategies like that of Amnesty, Greenpeace, Oxfam, Restless Development or Transparency International. CSOs founded in the digital age such as 350.org, 38 Degrees, Amandla, Jhatkaa or Purpose were already built around this model, which comes under names such as *people-centric, people-powered, engagement-focused, supporter-led* or *membership-driven* strategy. Organisational emphasis here is no longer on expert staff implementing good programmes with people. Primary focus is rather on the ability to identify people and partners *outside* of the organisation who share the common cause and to successfully build their capacity and aggregate their voices and connective actions. Taking a *people-powered* approach is not new. The level of co-creation and the numbers of people involved actually is. But it does not come without its challenges – like most big opportunities do.



A billion acts of courage to preserve our environment



We place the voices of women, men and young people at the centre of change



350 is building a global grassroots climate movement*



We have millions of leaders at 38 Degrees

III. Challenges to People-Powered Work

Balancing organisation-centric and people-centric needs

The first challenge is to define “people”. Does it *only* include supporters or members? Then the organisation’s accountability to broader groups of affected stakeholders and sustainable change is questionable. Prioritising accountability to the mission and clarifying different accountability commitments to different stakeholder groups is important.

Further challenges arise when legitimate actions to preserve the organisations’ healthiness are not necessarily the best for long term impact. For example, every organisation needs to demonstrate success in short intervals. This may easily tip decisions towards short term actions rather than potentially more important long term activities. Campaigns focusing on dramatic incidents are easier to launch and run than those addressing important but silent heroes or topics.

Securing the next grant or growing supporter lists is important from an organisational and impact perspective. At times however the best contribution to sustainable change is to support another organisation. In most organisational cultures however this is not the preferred option. We tend to favour the expert, hands-on staff over the convenor and facilitator of other people's ideas and actions. Energy among staff is easier to maintain for short term action than persistent follow up. But it is the latter that is critically important – in particular where social movements have prepared the ground for change but did not have the perseverance for long term institution building.

Organisational needs are not per se at odds with success for people and the environment. But it needs an ongoing and very honest examination of *what* serves *what* and a high degree of responsiveness to people outside of the organisation to steer a good path.

People engagement needs to go beyond masquerade

It may seem that increased stakeholder engagement means per se greater accountability to them. But not every interactive, co-creational relationship ensures people become true partners in a shared mission. Some digital companies for instance with very interactive customer engagement practices at the product level use these relationships to extract personal information and manipulate people's wishes to optimise company profits.

For the new model to be successful, CSOs have to ensure that engagement of stakeholders is not just a masquerade to achieve organisational success, but necessary to advance the shared cause. CSO accountability in the digital age means creating an ecosystem in which people can contribute in a responsible, self-motivated and active way towards the change *they* care about. To tap into the digital opportunity of leveraging connective impact, CSOs have to become extremely responsive to what people want and offer and become the best service provider for people's expertise, capacity and skills to solve the shared issue.

IV. Accountability is Key to Success

Examples of people-powered work approaches include crowd-sourced strategies as in the case of [Restless Development](#) or [Amnesty International](#), the co-creation of campaigns like Greenpeace's [Detox campaign](#) or 38 Degrees' [Save Our Forests campaign](#) and volunteers contributing micro tasks as exemplified by the [Haiti Crisis Map](#) and [FixMyStreet](#).

Accountability, understood as an active and positive stakeholder relationship management with a focus on achieving the shared mission (not short term gains) – is a key strategic competence to reap full benefits of the new engagement model. Stakeholders look for more information; communicate faster; move in and out of issues; contribute more actively; and also demand a greater say in how things are run. The boundaries between organisations and their supporters, members and partners become increasingly fluid. This is not an easy constellation to manage. But CSOs whose strategies are built around mass people engagement, understand that it is these relationships which are absolutely strategic to success.

V. Emerging Accountability Paradigm

Which culture and practices of accountability do we need then to ensure: a focus on what people really want, a high level of interactivity and collective efficiency towards the shared goal? Accountability approaches that focus on compliance and accounting for results will only partly get us there. What we need is an accountability practice that propels listening, interaction, co-creation and sharing of responsibility for results. We capture some of the pioneer good practices below.

Ask stakeholders how to add strategic value

CSO strategies need to be radically clear on how the organisation adds real value and welcomes contributions to what numerous other actors already do in the same field. CSO interventions have to *replenish* not *deplete* relationships and communities they enter. Only then they will achieve the high level of stakeholder engagement - the heart of the new model. When preparing their [annual work plan](#), 38 Degrees asks its members which strategic priorities to focus on. They also [decide](#) on a weekly basis which topic 38 Degrees should campaign on. 350.org follows a similar [approach](#): only with a small team of paid staff, they support thousands of grassroots activists running their own independent, loosely affiliated organizations to advance the shared issue of climate justice. Also, [Internews](#) avails their world class media expertise and reach for communities to produce local news and information with integrity and independence.

Share power – share responsibility

As people take a more active role in shaping activities, they also become more accountable themselves. This is good to increase ownership. But for it to work, the organisation needs to be crystal clear on what stakeholders can and cannot decide – what is and *is not* people-led. Despite all people-power, there is still an important stewardship role for organisations to play to ensure *overall* effectiveness and integrity. CSOs are probably best where bottom-up people’s interests are facilitated and coincide with globally coordinated action. But people need to know the exact terms of engagement. When will an organisation prioritise the stewardship over the people-led approach and how will they ensure it is well within the mandate of their supporters?

Avaaz recently [asked](#) its members if they should take their feedback *religiously* or use it as a guide and 75% voted for the latter option. [Campact](#) members decide what to campaign on, but only within the limits of the organisations’ [codified value base](#). [UAViators](#) has formulated a [code of conduct](#) that ensures minimal mutual accountability of all participants in the network but sets all else free. The model is always the same: people are given more freedom to shape outcomes but within a clearly identified space and terms of engagement. In Wikipedia, they have an interesting first tier of distributed accountability. The community is invited to [persuade](#) any violators to adhere to the agreed quality standards which allows communities themselves to become the first guardian of the organisation’s accountability to the outside world.

Open your books

Transparency is the pre-condition for people to interact in any meaningful way. In the digital age, information has to be easily accessible, customised and delivered in-time and on demand. Organisational siloes must be eliminated to ensure consistency of information. In co-creation

processes, external actors have to get immediate access to organisational data. A good example is when Amnesty International provided supporters with direct access to [satellite imagery](#) on human rights violations to help collectively assess the information. [ARTICLE 19](#) plans to provide donors with access to the first level of their internal online project management and reporting system to allow them to track progress regarding implementation and impact of activities as defined by the outcomes and targets in their new strategy, the Expression Agenda 2016-21. Starting a journey to transform Plan International into a more transparent organisation, the first [decision](#) of Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen, as CEO, was to open her calendar so all colleagues could see her activities and book time with her directly, without going through a gate-keeper.

From quantity to quality relationships

There is an inherent danger that people-powered strategies like Greenpeace's [one billion acts of courage to defend the climate](#) or Amnesty International's [aspiration to engage 25 million people every year](#), focus on the quantity not quality of relationships. Numbers of people engaged are a good first indicator of relevance and success. To achieve long term transformative change however, it is important to come to meaningful and empowering relationships. Accountability practices must look [beyond vanity metrics](#) and focus on how people for e.g. move up an [engagement pyramid](#). Greenpeace's [Mobilisation Cookbook](#) is a great resource of examples on how to engage people beyond just *clicking to crowd sourcing* the content of campaigns. The active [training](#) of hundreds of people to perform direct nonviolent actions is a next step up their specific engagement ladder. [MoveOn](#) has developed sophisticated tools to continuously measure how engaged their supporters are and how to further improve this relationship. [Jhatkaa](#) measures after large campaigns how deeply supporters still feel involved in the topic and if the interaction was empowering for them. [Root Change](#) monitors if online relationships translate into offline collaboration – indicating more lasting stakeholder involvement. Very often the answer is NO. In the [Obama re-election campaign 2012](#) by contrast Kate Catherall found that one of the most powerful things they did was to [connect](#) people personally street by street on very specific issues of Obama's programme. Talking to their neighbors on issues they personally cared about, significantly increased people's engagement in the cause. As the chair of DFID-CSO Learning Partnership steering committee, Restless Development led a group of the PPA partners to develop a more holistic theory of change for the learning partnership. This included measuring [improved relationships as a success indicator](#) as an output toward stronger civil society relationships and helped to make the theory of change more transformational in its intent - beyond the simple creation of learning products. This helped to shift the discourse between DFID and its 42 strategic CSO partners and to improve partner engagement and collective success. Organisations truly following a people-powered work approach need to define success in terms of long term and meaningful constituency engagement and find ways to make it a reality.

Evaluate success collectively – others will do it anyway

Current accounting practices for impact are still very much driven by donor requirements and demonstrable numbers. People's and partner's view on how helpful the intervention is and constant adaptation based on their feedback remains an aspirational concept of accountability in most cases. But in times of TripAdvisor and Amazon ratings, this is no longer good enough. The digital age offers direct feedback platforms and people will use them anyway. So we better offer it ourselves and profit from the vast and valuable information we get. Examples of external

evaluation platforms - which already exist - include the [What Went Wrong Foundation](#) that looks at failed aid projects or [WikiRate](#) that evaluates the CSR performance of businesses. [Aid Watch Palestine](#) offers smart platforms and tools to improve a dysfunctional aid system in Gaza. [Making All Voices Count](#) supports a citizen feedback platform run by 47 NGOs and local government institutions in Kenya. Today, organisations such as the Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) have become much more accessible to communities who contact them directly if advertised funds on TV do not arrive within days. Feedback by stakeholders is instant, global and critical but also immensely useful. The new accountability practice needs to put a premium on continuously asking people and partners for feedback and using it to take better informed decisions.

Attune risk taking and ownership

Unless CSOs let go of control to a good degree, they will not fully capitalise on the new opportunity of co-creation to leverage impact and improve stakeholder relationships. A good accountability frame helps finding the appropriate risk appetite. Where risk averseness is too high, people may not engage. Where it is too low, there is a risk for people and the organisation. Clarity needs to be provided on what can and cannot be protected in the case of people engagement. Open recognition when something goes wrong is just as important as constant monitoring and quick response when things derail, since the snowballing effect can be huge in no time.

Transparency International for instance chose a much higher risk appetite when launching its campaign [Unmask the Corrupt](#). To increase public engagement in the issue, they asked people to nominate the most corrupt cases (including individuals and institutions) in the world. Despite heavy investments into legal and IT protection, this still meant taking a greater risk than in previous activities which was the price for greater people engagement. The red line they didn't cross was voter's safety as people could only vote anonymously. Amnesty International works with local partners and human rights defenders in dangerous political circumstances. This is more effective than outside lobbying, but it puts people and the organisation at a higher risk. A good example of mastering this is the launch of the [Greater Caribbean for Life network](#). To this end, Amnesty International [worked](#) carefully and through soft approaches (publishing research, linking activists together, doing advocacy missions to the region) – all culminating in the successful launch of a local network in a region that traditionally had very little specific abolitionist activity. When Greenpeace launched the [Green Wire platform](#) for friends of Greenpeace to run their own campaigns, staff was hugely worried about quality control and brand protection. Two years later, it was recognised as a superb tool for stakeholder engagement who ran great campaigns. The key here is to take a smart and flexible approach to risk management. Let go where you can to allow people to engage and allow for trial and error. Protect the core; watch how things unfold in dynamic environments; and only step-in when necessary.

VI. Benefits of Digital Stakeholder Engagement

Where people-powered work approaches are optimally supported by people-focused accountability practices, the potential benefits are significant:

- **Focus on impact:** Putting a premium on long term effective relationships with people, partners, local actors, donors or supporters helps overcome organisational-centric behaviours and keeps focus on the impact stakeholders want to see. It provides a healthy counterbalance to quick wins with glossy actions or short term activities to increase supporter lists or brand recognition. Putting stakeholders on the co-pilot seat is a good check on where real value is added.
- **Empowered relationships:** People-powered strategies and accountability practice underpin the centrality of relationship building for sustained success. “It is our primary obligation as CSOs to facilitate empowering social relationships. For it is these relationships, history teaches us, that can truly change the world”, says Danny Sriskandarajah of CIVICUS. The new accountability model will support CSOs to live and breathe the new relationship focused model.
- **Increased credibility:** Where CSOs are seen as truly interested in: helping other actors; trying to understand their struggles; sharing power; building capacity; celebrating their successes; and helping others relate to one another to advance the common cause – this will do a lot more than any campaign to build and re-build public trust in CSOs in difficult times of shrinking civic space.
- **Scaled impact:** An accountability practice, that constantly keeps our focus on what people and partners around us value, also allows us to tap into their knowledge, skills and capabilities for the common cause. This is the key to scaled impact in the digital age. For the new value creation paradigm is not to leverage in-house capacity but to intelligently align within a large pool of like-minded actors and create an ecosystem that is favourable to connective success. One interesting example in his regard is the [Haiti Crisis Map](#). Within hours of the earthquake, Patrick Meyer found thousands of volunteers who filled an interactive map of where things were destroyed, what was needed and who offered which help. No humanitarian organisation had ever managed to get this kind of information in equivalent speed, preciseness and with constant actualisation.

To ensure people powered strategies truly fulfil on their promise to engage a large number of people and partners in co-creating greater impact it needs a strong accountability practice. However, for the above described accountability trends to come alive, it needs people who do it! That is why we are soon going to capture all findings of the Working and the Reference Groups in user briefs for: Board Members, CEOs, COOs, Strategy Directors, Campaigns/Programmes Directors, HR Directors and others.

Let's keep this document alive!

This is a living document which we want to share with everyone who finds it useful. It will be particularly valuable if you can [let us know](#) what you think; add further examples; question certain assumptions, etc. We will get back to you and to everyone else who is interested to further develop a digitally attuned practice of accountability with us.

For more information, please contact:

Mahmoud Farag

Programme Officer, INGO Accountability Charter

Email: MFarag@icscentre.org