Abstract Reference Number: 101

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Title

NGO-Government accountability relationships in Samoa

Abstract

This research examines what forms of NGO-Government accountability relationships are operating in a small island developing state (SIDS) in the Pacific Island, Samoa. It does so to provide an understanding of the impact of certain NGO-Government relationships on the constructs and practice of accountability in a SIDS context. This research adopts a constructivist form of inquiry and sourced data from a total of 36 semi-structured interviews with NGO representatives and Government officials in Samoa. The data collection process required the use of talanoa techniques. Talanoa is a type of dialogue that is viewed non-threatening in a Pacific Island context used as a customary method for creating and transferring knowledge (Halapua, 2003; Vaioleti, 2006). In this research, talanoa approach enabled frank and open discussions underpinned by trust relationship and cultural connectedness between the researcher (Samoan) and the participants. This research draws on the underused Bourdieusian concepts of doxa and illusio, which describes the notion of ‘taken for granted’ and whereby individuals are ‘taken in and by the game’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), respectively to explain the workings, and effects, of NGO-Government relationships on accountability.

This research finds two forms of NGO-Government relationships, cooperative and adversarial (Najam, 2000; Young, 2000), that are maintained in Samoa. Cooperative relationships are found to be the more common of the two. This was found to be attributed to Samoa being a small developing state where NGOs are not at capacity to work independently on developmental projects, and the Government recognises that NGOs are the most essential implementers of their plans. In addition, this research finds that constructs and practice of accountability by NGOs is no different whether they are in a cooperative or adversarial relationship with the Government. NGO accountability remains to be dominated by formal reports, including financial statements because
they are seen legitimate and accepted as the appropriate forms of discharging accountability (doxa).

This paper contributes to the scarce amount of NGO-Government accountability relationships research, particularly within SIDS context. It does so by arguing that regardless of whether NGOs and Government are engaged in a cooperative relationship, indicating a sense of closeness (Gray et al. 2006), constructs and practice of NGO accountability practice remains to be underpinned by dominant practices of formal reports (doxa). This reflects the extent to which NGOs and the Government are both ‘taken in and by the game’ whose rules are determined not by them; but by the external funders (illusio). The use of Bourdieu’s concepts of doxa and illusio to examine NGO-Government accountability relationship is also a novel contribution of this paper. A cooperative NGO-Government relationship in practice is essential in SIDS in the South Pacific such as Samoa, particularly in achieving a nation’s development goals as well as contributing to improve accountability for development assistance from external funders.

**Keyword**

NGO-Government relationships, NGO accountability, doxa, illusio, SIDS