Chapter 2 Perceptions of the legitimacy of international NGOs

Vivien Collingwood and Louis Logister

1. Introduction

1.1. Main questions and objective

This chapter examines how NGOs perceive the issue of legitimacy. Its purposes are mainly of a heuristic nature: the perceptions provide a starting point for revising theories of legitimacy, and extend our understanding of how NGOs function and the extent to which they are addressing legitimacy-related issues. This is intended to redress an imbalance in the current literature.¹ As argued elsewhere in this book, traditional theories of legitimacy are largely unsuited to the particular case of NGOs, and there is also a lack of systematic empirical research in this area.²

For this research, employees of internationally operating NGOs were interviewed about their perceptions of the legitimacy of their activities. Although the research was focused on NGOs, some stakeholders were also interviewed in order to gather illustrative material that could shed additional light on the perceptions of NGOs. It was thought critical to avoid offering NGO representatives a fixed definition of legitimacy, or a set of concepts that they could adopt or reject as they pleased. The aim was to find out how NGOs approached these issues and identify the terms that they preferred to use. A semi-structured interviewing

¹ For an overview, see Collingwood and Logister (2005).
² An exception is Alan Hudson (2000) who focuses on the move of UK-based NGOs from traditional aid towards greater involvement in advocacy and policy work, and the legitimacy claims that accompany this move.

strategy was thus adopted that was based on a number of core topics arising from the current literature, instead of a rigid set of questions (Patton 2002).

The interviews began with questions about the core topic, legitimacy: to what extent have the interviewees come across the issue of NGO legitimacy in their work? Is it an important issue to the organization? Was the issue originally raised externally (e.g., as a result of criticism from the media or politicians) or internally? How does an NGO view its own legitimacy with regard to its organization as a whole, and how does it justify its different activities? Various aspects of legitimacy were then broken down into sub-topics and probed further, depending upon how the interviewee responded to the initial questions. The topics discussed in the interviews included:

Representativeness and accountability. The literature suggests that some NGOs lack representativeness and accountability, both externally (connection with and representation of supporters’ or beneficiaries’ interests and values) and internally (structures of representation and accountability within the organization). To what extent do NGOs recognize the dilemmas posed by adequate representation, and how have they responded to them?

The role of public support for the organization. Following on from the issue of representativeness, to what extent is support from the general public important in reinforcing the legitimacy of NGOs?

Evaluation and learning. NGOs have been criticized for having insufficient monitoring, evaluation and learning processes in place. To what extent are monitoring, evaluation and learning procedures used, and how useful have NGOs found them?

External relations. NGOs are increasingly working with governments and the corporate sector to achieve change in policy and practice. Some analysts have implied that this results in a loss of independence. How do NGOs reconcile increased cooperation with the public and private sectors with their own aims and principles?

Funding and financial transparency. NGOs are often accused of lacking transparency in their funding. How have NGOs been affected by, and dealt with, this issue?