1. Introduction

The number of international NGOs and their involvement in international regulation on issues related to the environment, development and human rights has grown enormously over the past decade. A fairly recent phenomenon that adds a new dimension to the legitimacy discussion is the growing importance of the Internet in today’s society and the use of this technology by NGOs. Extensive Internet and e-mail campaigns have shown the usefulness of the Internet for NGO activities. The existence of Internet-only NGOs—NGOs that operate solely on and through the Internet—would raise interesting issues, with regard to the regulatory aspect of legitimacy in particular. For instance, such NGOs cannot be registered in a domestic country (see Chapter 6). The research identified no such Internet-only NGOs. However, some NGOs, although having registered offices in the offline world, heavily depend on the Internet for the way they operate. Network NGOs that aim to provide information about human rights and environmental issues from all over the world are particularly dependent on the Internet. For these NGOs, the Internet is an inexpensive way to inform people, and e-mail a low-cost and fast way to communicate with partner groups from other continents. Even though Internet-only NGOs were not found, there are NGOs that make extensive use of the Internet and this raises interesting issues concerning the legitimacy of these NGOs. An example of such an issue is whether NGOs use their websites to publish

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information about their financial and organizational structure. If they do, this may contribute to the regulatory aspect of legitimacy.

Vedder (2006) proposes a distinction between dispositional legitimacy, the legitimacy of the NGO as a whole, and occurrent legitimacy, the legitimacy of certain activities of an NGO (see also Chapter 1). Although most of this chapter deals with occurrent legitimacy, the legitimacy of specific website activities, some data—information on the website about the NGO—is also relevant to dispositional legitimacy.

The two questions that will be addressed in this chapter are the following. How do NGOs use the Internet or, more specifically, their website? How do NGOs perceive the legitimacy of their website activities? These two questions will be answered empirically by analyzing NGO websites. The empirical data will be used to formulate normative ideas about the legitimacy of Internet activities of NGOs. (The final section of this chapter will focus on the reliability of the information on NGO websites. Chapter 7 will provide a more thorough analysis of the concept of legitimacy based on all contributions to this book).

In Chapter 2, traditional NGOs were examined as to their ideas about the legitimacy of NGOs. The method used was interviewing; in this chapter, websites will be analyzed. The research questions in this chapter are directed at the use of the Internet for external communication, discussions with donors, the mobilization of people, etc. With the research method used, the ways in which the Internet is used as an internal organizational tool cannot be determined. Of course, clues such as intranet links may be looked for on the website indicating that the website is not only used for external communication but also for internal communication. But the absence of an intranet link or a separate member login does not justify the conclusion that the Internet is not used for internal or organizational purposes. If online meetings are scheduled or a link to the intranet is visible, it is fair to say that the Internet is used to a certain extent, but the importance of the intranet for the organization cannot be reliably gauged. In this chapter, therefore, only external communication is addressed.

2. Selection of Internet NGOs

The past decade witnessed optimistic accounts that the Internet would be instrumental in realizing a more democratic system of global governance by facilitating communication between people. An international discourse with participants using the Internet was expected to help