Doing development right; the Rights-based approach

- A comparative case study on NGO accountability

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Abstract

Over the past decades, a convergence between civil and political human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and development NGOs have occurred. The fusion of the two disciplines have led to the construction of so called 'Rights-Based approaches' (RBA). One principal concept for RBA's is the question of accountability. Functional accountability is no longer seen as sufficient and more focus on social accountability have advanced. In previous research NGOs are repeatedly questioned for their level of accountability. This comparative qualitative case study therefore aim to examine how three Swedish based NGOs perceive accountability, with the purpose to contribute to the academic discussion of NGO accountability.

By using grounded theory and selective coding, this study will contribute with new empirical data to the ongoing development of RBA theory. Empirical data is collected through interviews, NGOs official strategies documents and analysed in relation to the empirically grounded theory. The main findings in this comparative case study is that organisations different backgrounds and values influence how they perceive RBA and accountability, and which methods are used to reconcile with accountability claims. The collected empirical data concludes perceptions of accountability mostly focuses on four interconnected key principles; power relations, democracy, transparency and empowerment.

Key words: rights discourse, development theory, perceptions, Diakonia, We Effect, Solidarity Sweden-Latin America.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, a convergence between civil and political human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and development oriented NGOs have occurred. Development oriented NGOs who previously steered clear of 'rights' issues since it was considered to political have come to recognize that the denial of people's rights often lies at the root of many of the problems which they aim to address. Likewise, the civil and political human rights NGOs are recognizing the important role development oriented NGOs plays in enabling people to access their human rights. Previously the two disciplines of development and rights have been treated as separate domains. The fusion of the two disciplines has led to the construction of so called 'Rights-Based approaches' (RBA). Development NGOs have strived to find new approaches to create sustainable change for people living in poverty. The changes have particularly meant shifts in the NGOs thinking and practice regarding participation, advocacy and accountability (Harris-Curtis, Marleyn & Bakewell, 2005:6-9). Participatory development approaches are not new to the development scene, methods for creating a participatory development strategy have existed for a long time. However, for development NGOs, a shift to RBA very much entail a move from service delivery to advocacy work, which further creates higher demands for NGO accountability (Harris-Curtis, 2003; Uvin, 2007; Kindornay, Ron & Carpenter, 2012; D'Hollander, Marx & Wouters, 2013).

> There is an increasing recognition that development actors have a responsibility to account to those whom they serve. (Harris-Curtis, Marleyn & Bakewell, 2005:10).

A principal concept for RBA's is the question of accountability (Uvin, 2007). The development of a rights discourse has commenced great attention to NGO accountability, where differences in functional and social accountability is addressed (O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2007). However, questions remain on how NGOs are dealing with accountability demands (Harris-Curtis, Marleyn & Bakewell, 2005).

> *On the one hand we must show results, and on the other we are expected to problematize. It is really difficult to get those two together (Andersson, A. Interview Stockholm, 2017-04-19).*
>
> *The question of accountability is about sharing information and how you build relationships, not formal systems (Ericsson, K. Interview, Stockholm, 2017-04-11).*

This comparative case study will thus be focusing on one of the principal normative concepts for RBA's, namely NGOs accountability to diverse stakeholders. By using grounded theory this study will contribute to the ongoing academic development of a theoretical framework for the

rights-discourse and broaden the plethora of studies regarding NGO accountability by examining organisations previously not part of scholarly studies of this kind. The main empirical data source consists of interviews which were held with selected informants in April and May 2017.

1.1 Problem and purpose

When it comes to the factor of accountability and NGOs thinking and practice there are some new elements in RBA compared to previous development approaches. And it is also here where most 'new' critique against development actors are found.

> The upward accountability of development agencies to their donors is no longer seen as sufficient. There is an increasing recognition that development actors have a responsibility to account to those whom they serve. A community that is more aware of its rights is more likely to make demands of development agencies and ask them to account to the community for their decisions and actions. (Harris-Curtis. Marleyn & Bakewell, 2005:10).

Accountability is no longer something exclusive between NGOs and its donors. With RBA NGOs take on a new role, in some ways a more political role, where NGOs are placed in a more complex relation with both donors and beneficiaries, who all can hold claims for the NGOs accountability for its work and its possible impacts. Thus, NGOs are placed in an accountability equation where there are multiple stakeholders to account for.

An adoption of RBA should therefore demonstrate a change in the relationship between organisations and its stakeholders. Additionally, this relationship change can offer implications especially in the case of Northern NGOs in their multiple relationships towards different stakeholders, such as partners, donors and Northern constituency and states. The accountability factor can become a prominent issue for NGOs, since they have many stakeholders to please. When NGOs become more political it can jeopardize their relationship with stakeholders, ruining relationships with governments or lose their privileges or funding. (Harris-Curtis, Marleyn & Bakewell, 2005). Here lies a fundamental question regarding the implementation of RBA; How can you ensure accountability and act accountable?

In previous research NGOs are repeatedly questioned for their role in the accountability equation. Since accountability is argued principal in RBA it is of interest to examine further. This study will therefore aim to look more closely at NGOs and their perceptions of

accountability, with the purpose to contribute to the academic discussion of NGO accountability towards different types of stakeholders.

1.2 Research questions

Questions which this study will focus on are;

- How do NGOs perceive their accountability towards different stakeholders?
- How is accountability expressed in official documents? And; How do staff reflect regarding their (organisations) role in the accountability equation?
- Has the adoption of RBA made the organisation rethink their accountability work? If so, how?

1.3 Definitions

The concepts discussed in this study may have diverse meanings and could consequently raise confusions regarding the study. To avoid confusion, the purpose of this section is to clarify and define the meanings applied for the main concepts discussed in this study.

1.3.1 Development Non-Governmental Organisations

The term NGO covers a range of types of organizations, for example INGO, CSO, PMO religious and political groups. The UN defines a NGO as:

> A not-for-profit, voluntary citizens' group, which is organized on a local, national or international level to address issues in support of the public good (Outreach UN).

Similar definitions can be found in scholarly literature on the subject. In their book 'International organisations' Karns, Mingst and Stiles define NGOs as:

> NGOs are voluntary organizations formed and organized by private individuals, operating at the local, national or international level, pursuing common purposes and policy positions. (Karns, Mingst & Stiles, 2015:242).

However, an important point they add to the definition of NGOs is;

> NGOs neither have mandate from government nor want to share government power (ibid.).

This statement focuses on the most constitutional essence of NGOs, that they do not possess or seek the same type of power as a state or government have. However, it is argued NGOs who

adopt a RBA have gained a new type of power which they previously did not have. Because of the shift from service delivery to advocacy work NGOs have become more political, indicating a 're-politicisation' of development (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Schmitz, 2012). NGOs are increasingly acting as promoters of human rights which requires working with governments and developing their capabilities to uphold their responsibilities as duty-bearers.

Since the 1990's NGOs have had an increased role on the development scene. Considerable amounts of development aid are now channelled through NGOs. With a continuous promotion of neo-liberal policies, the state as an actor and direct involvement in development actions has been reduced and instead transferred to the private sector and NGOs (Willis, 2011).

Development theories are diverse, some believe the key concept of development is economic growth and increase in economic wealth while others consider development as a greater autonomy and choice about how individuals live their lives. The theories also differ in who are the main actors. Some argue it is the state or government, others consider the market, NGOs or civil society. Many of the development theories are also based on the experiences of the North and development is therefore believed to only be possible in the Global South, since development has already happened in the North (Willis, 2011). Principally, development can be sorted into two blocs of change; economic growth and enhancing freedoms. The development theory in this study is the approach called Rights-Based development. This approach to development means that Human rights are not just ways of channelling development (meaning the right to a job provides an income), rather "the achievement of human rights in themselves are an objective of development" (Willis, 2011:151). Thus, the meaning of a development NGO in this study is an organization which works to realise human rights.

1.3.2 What is a Rights-based organisation?

Now that we have defined NGO and development this next section will describe the specifics of a rights based organisation. The definition is taken from Save the children:

> A rights-based organisation applies human rights values and principles to itself at all levels through its internal policies and practices. It doesn't just talk about them to others! It promotes participation, accountability and non-discrimination as much in its internal procedures as in its programme activities. In all of its dealings it treats people with respect and dignity, and in all of its actions it demonstrates a commitment to equity and fairness. (Save the Children n.d.a:129).

This description emphasises the importance of incorporating human rights in both rhetoric and programming, both internally and externally. Thus, to be considered a rights-based organisation one must implement human rights in all of its actions.

1.3.3 Rights-based approach or Human Rights-based approach?

In previous research the terms 'rights-based approach' (RBA) and 'human rights-based approach' (HRBA) are interchangeably used by different authors, organisations and agencies. It is therefore important to present how these two can be distinguished to eliminate confusion. Some argue RBA can cover any kind of rights while by comparison a HRBA builds on the international normative system of human rights and obligations undertaken by most states (Barnik, 2010.) However, others treat RBA and HRBA as synonyms, where RBA also is considered to be based in international agreed normative system of rights. RBA can be considered a more general and broad term. As defined by Krikemann, Boesen and Martin:

> A rights-based approach to development is a framework that integrates the norms, principles, standards and goals of the international human rights system into the plans and processes of development. It is characterised by methods and activities that link the human rights system and its inherent notion of power and struggle with development. (Kirkermann, Boesen & Martin, 2007:9).

This is the definition which this study will lean on. Thus, in this study the two acronyms will be considered one and the same since RBA can be considered an umbrella term for all types of rights-based development work. It can be based in normative frameworks of any international covenant or conventions regarding various right, such as the Universal declaration of human rights, the Declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples or the Declaration of the rights of the child. Therefore, this study will use the acronym RBA.

1.3.4 Accountability

Accountability can in the context of this study be explained as functional and social accountability. Functional accountability is short termed, with focus on up-ward accountability from NGOs to funder organisations, to demonstrate accountability for spending designated funds for designated purposes. This is a typical way of receiving quantifiable and measurable outcomes and less tangible in social and political changes. Functional accountability thus offers little attention to accountability to groups whom NGOs directly affect by providing services or on whose behalf they advocate. NGOs who are dependent on resources from governments

experience a greater pressure to prioritise this up-ward accountability, which ultimately will affect the NGOs ability to work as a catalyst for social change.

Social accountability focuses on socially-oriented impacts and outcomes in a down-ward accountability towards beneficiaries. NGOs have a wider social impact when working with advocacy work and thus NGOs should be encouraged to move beyond the narrow scope of functional accountability, by encompassing accountability for the impacts their actions have on the individuals and wider environment. More focus should be brought to social accountability towards their beneficiary constituencies. Important factors as to how effective one's social accountability will be is how representative the organisation can be of those whom they seek to assist. Additionally, the extent of openness to involve beneficiaries and partners in the developing states, letting them determine the nature of their work and its impact. It can be difficult for a NGO to embrace social accountability in an environment where up-ward accountability towards funders are in focus (O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2007:449-451).

1.4 Delimitations

As previous studies have found there are many different definitions of RBA. This study will specifically focus on one of the normative 'pillars' incorporated in an implementation of RBA, namely accountability. The decision to limit the study to this singular 'pillar' is based in thorough reading of previous studies where it became apparent the subject is much discussed as an obstacle for successful implementation of RBA, but not as much studied in itself. By focusing on one of the aspects regarding implementation of RBA the study will contribute to the wider plethora of studies regarding RBA as a development paradigm. The study thus does not set out to make any general assumptions or conclusions regarding RBA as a whole, merely to add to the context in the means of a comparative case study.

The study is also limited to NGOs and will not discuss accountability in regards to other development actors such as states or international organisations (ex. The UN), since the scope would be too great to undertake during the time available for this study. Additionally, states and international organisations accountability are more researched and more visible since they are considered the main duty-bearers, which makes NGOs a more interesting case to examine.

1.5 Disposition

After this introductory chapter, the second chapter will focus on developing the theoretical framework for this essay. It will begin on a high level introducing the rights discourse and RBA. Finally, the theoretical concept of accountability and its relation to stakeholders will be presented. After the theory chapter, it is essential to disclose the scientific approach selected for this study. The third chapter will thus focus on motivation and explaining which methods are utilized for this comparative case study. In the fourth chapter the case findings with reconnections to theory claims are presented in four sub-sections. The empirical data is vast, so to create an assimilating flow of the chapter it is divided it into sections based on the main research questions. Chapter five consist of an analytical discussion where case findings and theory are critically examined. Finally, the sixth chapter offers conclusions and recommendations for future research.

2. Theorizing the Rights-Based approach and the importance of accountability

This section will start with the most prominent events which explains the emergence of RBA. It will present why human rights has been introduced as a method to achieve development. It will continue by presenting the (so far) expressed key normative concepts of RBA and address the main empirically based critique of the approach. The third section will discuss power relations and their importance when discussing development approaches, and very much so in the case of RBA. The last section will go further into the notion of accountability, one of the main pillars of RBA. It will discuss why accountability is principal for RBA.

2.1 Why rights? Why now?

Even though human rights as development principles were initiated in the 1980's it took several years before RBA became an internationally accepted approach. The actual move from the right to development to RBA occurred in the 1990's, when Northern development circles began to merge the previously distinct strands of 'human rights' and 'development'. In this way, the principles of internationally recognized human rights and those of poverty reduction was combined (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Uvin, 2007; Barnik, 2012; Carpenter, Kindornay & Ron, 2012). There are many contributing factors to the establishment of RBA. In

previous research, scholars have raised the most prominent contributors to the derivation of RBA. Firstly, during the cold war, a clear distinction between civil and political rights and economic and social rights existed. However, after the cold war these distinctions became blurred. Instead principles of an indivisible, interdependent and non-hierarchical nature of human rights emerged (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Carpenter, Kindornay & Ron, 2012).

Secondly, anti-colonial forces in the UN, when newly independent Southern nations became members of the UN, began to bridge the two domains of rights and development. The 1960-1990' also saw many compositions of UN declarations regarding rights. Such as international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights (1966), Declaration on the right to development (1986) and the Declaration of the rights of the child (1989). In addition to these declarations and covenants, a range of international summits and conferences were held in the 1980-1990s which greatly influenced the merging of development and rights. For example, the World conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 and the World social development summit in Copenhagen in 1995 (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Harris-Curtis, Marleyn, Bakewell, 2005; Carpenter, Kindornay & Ron, 2012).

Third, the increased NGO activism have also contributed, through an increased engagement and influence at world conferences and summits NGOs have taken on a role in which they can impact decision makers on international levels (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004).

Lastly, certain individuals who have inspired and influenced decision makers to a shift in development practices. Amartya Sen's theory of "Development as freedom" (1990) had great influence among development practitioners, and Kofi Anan during his time as the UN general-secretary called out for the UN system to mainstream Human Rights into all their activities and programmes (1997). This resulted in UNICEF, UNDP and OHCHR establishing a "common understanding" (2003) of RBAs for all different UN institutions (Uvin, 2007). The establishment of a common understanding among UN agencies raised the concept of RBAs to the international arena, making the approach universal. After this establishment, many international NGOs, bilateral aid agencies and international institutions committed officially to RBAs. The common understanding became a blue-print for how development practitioners should frame their development work (Carpenter, Kindornay & Ron, 2012; Miller, 2015).

2.2 A normative analytical framework of RBA

Despite the establishment of a 'Common understanding' within the UN, there is no single universal agreed conceptual definition of RBA. Organizations have their own interpretations and understandings of how RBA should be defined and implemented (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Greany, 2008; Schmitz, 2012; D'Hollander; Pollet & Beke, 2013; Miller, 2015). However, a consensus on the essential elements of RBA is emerging. These can be summarized with the acronym PANEL – Participation, Accountability, Non-Discrimination, Empowerment and Linkage to Human Rights norms (Gready & Vandenhole; 2014). The Swedish international development cooperation agency (Sida) uses a similar acronym, PLANET, to remember what to consider when applying RBA. Their addition to the framework is transparency.

Additionally, adoption of RBA is described as a shift from needs-based to rights-based, resulting in a shift away from service delivery towards capacity building and advocacy, a shift from charity to duties. Through the glasses of RBA, poverty is viewed as a result of disempowerment and exclusion. Development actors should therefore instead of focusing on assessing the needs of beneficiaries' aim to foster citizens to recognize and claim their rights,

Charity Approach	Needs Approach	Rights-Based Approach
Focus on input not outcome	Focus on input and outcome	Focus on process and outcome
Emphasizes increasing charity	Emphasizes meeting needs	Emphasizes realizing rights
Recognizes moral responsibility of rich towards poor	Recognizes needs as valid claims	Recognizes individual and group rights as claims toward legal and moral duty-bearers
Individuals are seen as victims	Individuals are objects of development interventions	Individuals and groups are empowered to claim their rights
Individuals deserve assistance	Individuals deserve assistance	Individuals are entitled to assistance
Focuses on manifestation of problems	Focuses on immediate causes of problems	Focuses on structural causes and their manifestations

Picture 1 Kirkeman Boesen & Martin, 2017

and to make duty-bearers honour their responsibilities. In this way, RBA is argued to address the complexity of poverty by addressing the root causes of poverty. RBA assert a lack of rights is the responsible factor for poverty rather than a lack of needs (Harris-Curtis, 2003; Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Uvin, 2007; D'Hollander, Marx & Wouters, 2013). In picture one, the main differences between RBA and previous charity and needs approaches is outlined.

2.3 Power relations and the politics of location

Human rights have its roots in the European Enlightenment which contributes to the argument often heard in development discussions, that the concept of human rights is highly associated with Western traditions and therefore a Western idea which is not universally applicable (Harris-Curtis, 2003; Harris-Curtis, Marleyn & Bakewell, 2005; Uvin, 2007; Greany, 2008). Yet development NGOs and other agencies have in the recent decades put human rights at the centre of development. There is an emerging discussion regarding how donors should take into account and promote human rights (D'Hollander, Marx, Wouther, 2013).

Despite this discussion regarding the actual universality of human rights, one of the main benefits stated for the adoption of RBA in development work is the universality of human rights and the fact that these are international norms which are connected to a legal system which can help enforce human rights. It is argued because of the universality of human rights, they somehow work as justification of organisations actions. However, just as previous development frameworks, RBA is in fact predominantly driven by northern-based organisations. This entails a certain power imbalance between headquarters and grassroots networks. When NGO leadership decides to adopt RBA (or any other approach) there are significant power dynamics at play. Even though RBA is championed as a bottom-up and participatory approach the decision to chart a new path to development is with the northern based headquarters and not with the local levels and communities. The approach is being defined by international norms rather than the experiences of country level staff (Magrath, 2014). This is one hindrance in the practical implementation of RBA. The universality of human rights is making it problematic to implement RBA in practice; to bring the universal to the local is difficult. Contributing to this is an existing lack of common concerns between human rights activists and organisations and development practitioners at the country level. But also in some cases an absence of support exists among national and local political leaders to initiate such changes in development thinking. Thus, in order for RBA to live up to expectations, organisations must operationalize

global theory to national and local practice. Success of RBA therefore much depends on how fundamental relationships between NGOs and their primary stakeholders can change (Banik, 2010).

The primary role of development NGOs must shift and adapt a more complex mix of roles, involving sharing and negotiating powers in new ways. They will go from being implementers and drivers of development and become allies with people's organisations and social movements in a collective struggle for change (Vandenhole & Gready, 2014). It is crucial for the success of RBA that it does not become another top-down approach, experienced as 'dropped from the sky' at local levels, rather than it being embedded in the areas where it is implemented. The concept of rights must be fought for by the ones in whose name it is adopted for rights talk to truly have any significant meaning (Uvin, 2007; Gready, 2013). For RBA programming to be successful it should be driven by local demands which ultimately will lead to a diminished role of external actors (Schmitz, 2012). These arguments from previous studies brings us to the core question of power relations for the RBA; Who is talking rights? The power of speaking of rights will have very different effects depending on from who it is coming. People have different epistemological backgrounds and varies in ontological departures. Rights-talk carries different significance depending on the location of the source (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004). Thus, if RBA is to challenge power structures development practitioners must consider their part in the power equation.

Developing approaches espousing rights, such as RBA, the rights talk is above all talk of politics, of power and of social justice. For RBA to mean anything more than a re-labelling of the same old development, NGOs and individuals within them must (start to) recognize their own motivations and identity within the development framework. They must become critically self-aware, and not avoid or scare of addressing inherent power inequalities in their interactions with beneficiaries (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Darrow, 2005). By avoiding questioning oneself and the international system, no re-shuffling of the cards of power will occur. This will contribute to RBA promoting a hidden transcript of power (Uvin, 2007). If development organisations are serious about incorporating human rights into development actions the rights focus cannot be limited to projects.

This discussion contributes to the parallel empirical debate regarding NGO accountability, that the 'upward' accountability of development organisations to their donors is no longer seen as

sufficient. With RBA, NGOs are exercising powers which they might not previously been experiencing. The shift from charitable work, which is considered a-political, towards the 'political' stance of advocacy work NGOs acquires a new role which will ultimately lead to pressure for them to an increase in accountability towards those communities whom they serve. Accompanying the implementation of rights-based approaches is therefore expected that many practical measures build on good practice in development, especially in areas such as participation of and accountability to primary stakeholders. Emphasis should be put on 'downwards' accountability to the communities where the NGO is working (Harris-Curtis, Marleyn & Bakewell, 2005). In the context of development, the language of RBA offers the possibility to expand the notion of accountability for enabling rights to non-state actors. Since rights imply duties, and duties demand accountability (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004). Any actor working with rights issues is thus a duty-bearer in the sense that they have an impact on peoples' lives.

2.4 Dilemmas and challenges of accountability for RBA

The move from needs to rights, from charity to duties have created an increased focus on accountability among development organisations - because this is precisely what distinguishes charity from claims (Uvin, 2007). The rhetorical flirtation with rights which have become evident in previous research is a great shortcoming for RBA in its aim to provide real changes in development work. It is imperative for rights talk to become more than a 'buzzword' (as previous worlds such as 'empowerment') on the development agenda. Talking of rights is far too important to be casually whisked away in the rhetoric of development agencies. Since "It is talk that inspires and impassions, talk that animates and mobilises, talk that restores to people a sense of their agency and their rightful claim to dignity and voice" (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004:1433). Thus, without direct accountability from development agencies and organisations towards recipients, RBA will not provide any real change, in regard to power relations.

NGOs lack defined accountability and therefore the accountability relation between NGOs and recipients is arguably non-existent. RBA can therefore be questioned regarding an absence in possibility for direct accountability from the international development assistance structure. Considering this, the argument that recipients have been transformed from 'passive beneficiaries' to 'rights-holders' can be questioned (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004).

Moreover, politicians on national levels have pointed out that RBA is imposed on their countries, and that an effective accountability mechanism is totally absent between the international aid industry and the aid receivers. Donors are seldom held accountable by individuals and communities in the areas where they provide assistance. Additionally, national governments, who are held accountable by individuals and communities, express a lack of information regarding aid agencies accountability concerning failed projects and negative impacts resulting from an intervention (Banik, 2010). As Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi further reasons:

> Ultimately, however it is articulated and operationalised by a development agency, a rights-based approach would mean little if it has no potential to achieve a positive transformation of power relations among development actors. It must be interrogated for the extent to which it enables those whose lives are affected the most to articulate their priorities and claim genuine accountability from development agencies, and also the extent to which the agencies become critically self-aware and address inherent power inequalities in their interaction with those people. (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004:1432).

Rights can become real through mechanisms of accountability, where organisations commit to respond to criticism from beneficiaries (Gready, 2013). However, there are some expressed difficulties for NGOs to place themselves in the accountability equation since they can have several stakeholders who holds them accountable. Balancing accountabilities to multiple stakeholders is a challenge and can contribute to a 'identity crisis' where staff might not know, or have different opinions of, who they are [primary] accountable towards (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musmebi, 2004; Gready, 2013). Some might find their primary accountability is to the one providing funds, while others consider their primary accountability is towards the rights-holders with whom they work. A concern expressed in a study on ActionAid is that of RBA provides a lopsided form of accountability, where the state's role is overemphasised (Gready, 2013). Nonetheless, NGOs who adopt RBA should experience a shift, and maybe some implications, in the relationship between the NGO and its stakeholders, such as partners, donors and northern constituencies and states (Harris-Curtis, Marleyn & Bakewell, 2005). In the next section these relationships will be further elaborated.

2.5 The multiple relationships of NGOs

As discussed in previous paragraphs the accountability of NGOs can be fractured between actors providing funds and the NGOs beneficiaries in the areas which they work. This section will provide possible difficulties in NGOs relationships with their different stakeholders.

Relationship with states: RBA forces NGOs to take a critical stand against the practice of states in both the North and the South. NGOs adopting RBA cannot simply respond the resultant problems of state actions, it must also engage in research, awareness raising, campaigning and lobbying. For those NGOs who have Northern states as major donors a probable dilemma is the dual complexity of balancing continuation of receiving state funding but not become co-opt in the state's agenda. NGOs adopting RBAs might also find it increasingly difficult to work in states where human rights are not respected. A state might welcome a NGO who work to provide support for health or education, but might not be as enthusiastic to welcome and NGO who will criticise the states failure to provide such services.

Relationship with donors: Some donors might be nervous to fund NGOs adopting RBA since they are moving into the more political arena. Not all donors recognise the link between rights and development. Additionally, some bilateral donors still use aid funds as a way to access internal markets and see it as a tool to serve their security interests. Thus, NGOs who are reliant on governments for grants might find it difficult to take a principled stance against the same government's practices. Even if donors have adopted a RBA, and make it a condition for funding, NGOs might find issues in reconciling the donors view if RBA with their own. Donors might require LFAs with detailed outputs and processes within a specific timeframe. If the timeframe is to short, it can create difficulties for NGOs to work with the participatory process required in RBAs.

Relationship with partners: NGOs adopting RBA can also find it causing a turmoil in their relationship with partners. The level of disruption in the relationship between Northern and Southern NGOs will depend on where the drive for adopting RBA originates (bottom-up or top-down). Adoption of RBA involves a dialogue regarding issues such as accountability, transparency and norms of behaviour between the partners. Northern NGOs should therefore become more open to partners refusing, disagreeing and analysing their operations. Moreover, by adopting RBA Southern partners might experience a security risk, since they engage in the discussion of human rights. This should be a consideration when Northern NGOs negotiate partnerships. The move into more political spheres might put the staff in the Southern counterparts exposed to an increased security risk.

Relationship with Northern constituencies: Explaining the role of an organisation and effectiveness of RBA might be difficult in some constituencies since they do not always comprehend them. Instead it might be more beneficial for an NGO to promote the more charitable, apolitical, aspect of their work, instead of pressing the rights issues. This can show a gap between NGOs public relation and marketing teams and the programme or policy teams (Harris-Curtis, Marleyn & Bakewell, 2005:36-39).

2.6 Theoretical summary

RBA in development have entailed changes in programming for development actors. The approach has given the development debate new air and brought new concepts and questions to the surface. One of which is the discussion on NGO accountability, where in previous development paradigms good intentions and sound values was sufficient claims for accountability. However, these types of claims are increasingly questioned. A demand for greater NGO accountability has emerged and they are coming from both governments and institutions as well as from within civil society itself, on which behalf NGOs argue they are working. The traditional terms of NGO accountability are thus no longer sufficient, which have lead NGOs to find new means of claiming accountability. The new development paradigm has transformed the accountability relationship between NGOs and their many stakeholders.

Adopting rights perspective in your organisations work ultimately increases the organisations political activity through advocacy work and raises questions regarding legitimacy. Thus, organisations become increasingly involved in the accountability equations. In previous studies, many scholars agree that a greatly important factor towards any real change for development seem to be the factor of NGO accountability. RBA seeks to empower rights-holders to claim their rights and hold duty-bearers accountable for upholding their obligations. However, as empirical evidence explains, accountability cannot exclusively be in regards to states and governments, it must also be imposed on the aid agencies and development organisations whom so far generally seem to leave their own accountability out of the equation. For RBA to contribute to any real change, development actors must find and work to uphold their own part of the accountability equation.

3. Method and material

This comparative case-study aims to find understanding of the way NGOs perceive and interpret accountability after adopting a rights perspective in their organisation. In this type of study a qualitative approach is most suitable to achieve this aim. The study outsets in empirical data which suggests an inductive tactic. Central for the empirical data is the interviews held with the selected informants. Interviews is suitable for the chosen methodological approach and for the subject studied.

3.1 Grounded Theory

This comparative case study aims at grounded theory based on empirical material in the form of previous academic studies concerning RBA. Moreover, the choice of using grounded theory for the study is advantageous since the underpinning of RBA is a theory rather than assumptions of change, and this theory should be based as much as possible in empirical evidence (Vandenholde & Gready, 2005:295)

The fact that the rights-discourse and rights-based approaches disseminating within the development arena is still under development, makes the motivation to use grounded theory in this study sound. Grounded theory is argued to contribute towards reducing the gap between theory and empirical research. Additionally, grounded theory builds conditions into theory claims, which help avoiding idealistic versions of knowledge and leaves the theory open for further development. Moreover, the methodological approach differs most prominent to other qualitative approaches in its emphasis on development of theory. Most grounded theory is aimed at substantive theory, which is considered transferrable rather than generalizable. Contrasted to a higher 'level' of theory which is based on generalizable conclusions (Strauss & Corbin, 1994:274-276). Grounded theory thus is well suited for this study where we are investigating a concept which is still under development and therefore the theory should remain open for further research and secondly, the study does not aim to find generalisations regarding the phenomenon.

Similar with other qualitative approaches data for grounded theory can come from various sources, which can be coded in the same way as interviews or observations. The strategies of grounded theory procedures are designed to develop a well-integrated set of concepts, which will provide a thorough theoretical explanation of the phenomena under study. A grounded

theory should describe as well as explain. Important to note is, in grounded theory representativeness of concepts, not of persons, is crucial. The aim is not to generalize findings to a broader population (Strauss & Corbin, 1990[a]).

The coding mechanism applied for this study is selective coding, a process where different dimensions are unified around a core category which represent the central phenomenon in the study (Corbin & Strauss, 1990[a]:14 & 1990[b]:116). The core category in this study is incentives for and perceptions of accountability. The dimensions have been acquired through operationalisation of the collected empirical data, in forms of interviews, organisations official documents and previous research. Four main dimensions where found while analysing the official documents, previous research and listening to the interviews. The dimensions where extracted by most commonly used expressions which were then paired into themes (which became the dimensions). Picture two provides an overview of the final coding scheme which is valuable for the analytical application of RBA and accountability practices.

Coding scheme
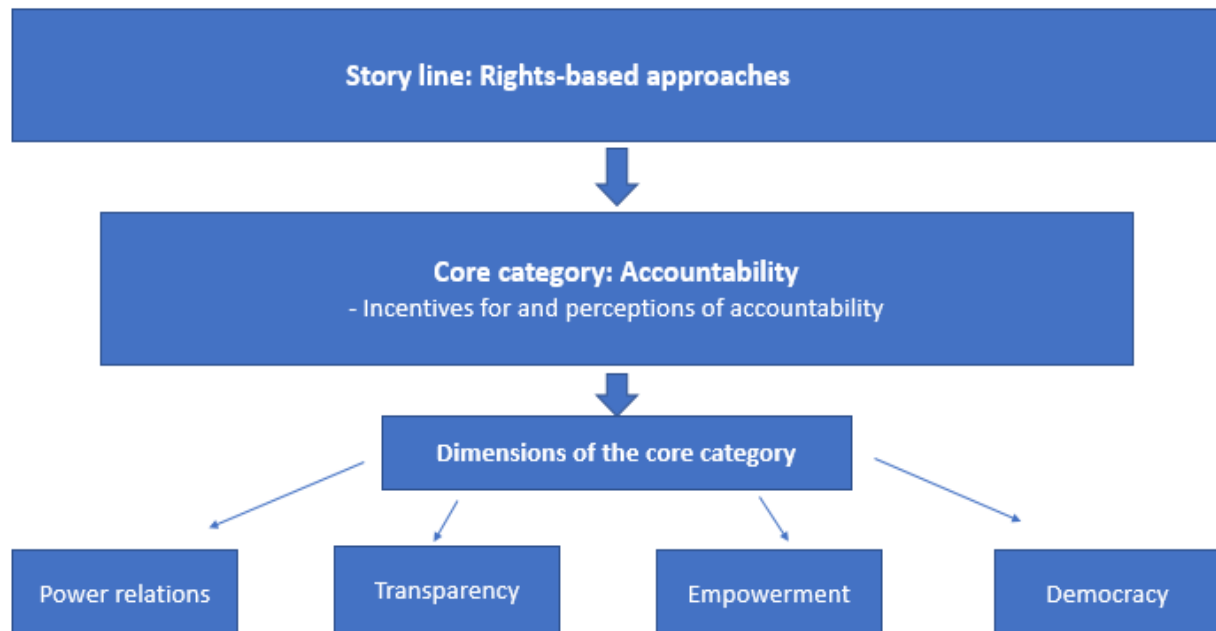
Picture 2: My elaboration, 2017-05-18

3.2 Empirical data and analytical approach

Three main sources for empirical data has been utilized in this study; peer-reviewed literature, interviews and official strategy documents of the selected NGOs.

Peer-reviewed articles was utilized to construct the theoretical framework. The study initiated with an explorative reading of previous studies regarding RBA. Articles have been selected from various peer-reviewed journals to obtain a variety of authors and arguments. Using peer-reviewed articles also contributes to the validity of the study. Articles have been strategically collected using online search engines[1]. Scholarly books provided the study with definitions for some of the discussed concepts and methodological basis.

Interviews with selected informants are the main source for the empiric data collection and is essential in the analysis and testing of theoretical claims. Since the study aims to find if there are diverse perceptions when it comes to the organisational accountability, the analysis on interview material includes how accountability is deliberated and explained. By conducting interviews, one can find out whether staff members and official strategy documents expresses different priorities and opinions or if a consensus exists. Additionally, interviews can offer more information regarding the motivations behind accountability arguments which the official strategy documents cannot provide. The analytical focus reconnects to the theoretical framework and the dimensions of the core category.

Official strategy documents were mainly used to find fitting organisations to examine and as a complementary source to interviews in the case finding section. The strategy documents are additionally used to present the organisations. Analysis on official strategy documents focused on examining how accountability is promoted and expressed, and in which terms and circumstances the word is utilized by the organisation. As with the interviews, the analysis on official strategy documents reconnects to the theoretical framework and the dimensions of the core category.

3.3 Sample

In choosing the sample different aspects were considered. Firstly, many of the previous studies conducted regarding RBA and NGO accountability is repeatedly focused on the same

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[1] Google Scholar and Söder Scholar

organisations (mainly ActionAid, Amnesty and Save the Children). Secondly, this study is conducted in Sweden, which can be advantageous, since choosing NGOs which are based[2] in Sweden this comparative case study can broaden the scope of studies conducted on NGO accountability. Therefore, the choice fell on NGOs based in Sweden which have yet not been exposed to much academic research.

Three organisations were chosen for this study. Firstly, Diakonia which is a religious based NGO. They have made many organisational changes since the beginning of 2000's where decentralization, RBA and creating an accountability framework have been at focus. Secondly, Solidarity Sweden-Latin America (*Latinamerikagrupperna* hereafter referred to as SAL)[3], a popular movement organisation (PMO) free of party-political and religious affiliations who works closely in partnership with popular movements in Latin America. SAL have a rights-based perspective on their strategies and have been under some organisational changes in the recent decade, where the organisation has moved from being an organisation where membership exclusively consisted of individuals who were active (working) in the organisation to open up for the public (meaning now anyone can become a member). Their organisational difference from Diakonia provides a contrast among the organisations for this study. Third, the cooperative organisations We Effect. They are a decentralized organisation, just as Diakonia and SAL. The organisation is member-based and founded by Swedish cooperative and/or customer-owned companies and movements. We Effect have adopted RBA, and the rights perspective is central in their work.

Although the organisations differ in many aspects as from scope to size and strategies, they do have similarities. Firstly, they all receive funds from both governments and private investors. They are all receive funds from Sida, which they then channel to their partner organisations. Secondly, all have a rights perspective on their strategies and approaches (although the way of implementing varies). Thirdly, the three organisations have all emerged from Swedish civil society movements. Together these organisations provide both a varied and representative selection of the types of NGOs existing in Sweden.

Since staff at the selected organisations can have specific agendas and promote their organisations approaches and strategies an addition to the sample was made. The addition

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[2] Originating from, and headquarters in Sweden
[3] Acronym for their Spanish name; Solidaridad Suecia-América Latina

contains of two individuals who are not currently active in any of the organisations researched in this study. The two additional interviewees have diverse experiences from NGO work on different levels and can provide impartial information and reflections regarding NGO accountability.

- Charlotta Widmark is an anthropologist who has previously worked at an NGO and have conducted evaluations on NGOs programmes for Sida.
- Milton Soto has worked at both partner organisations to Diakonia in Bolivia and at Diakonia in Bolivia. Mr Soto built the county office of Diakonia in Bolivia.

3.4 Validity and reliability

Articles and books used in this study are peer-reviewed. Articles represent a range of different authors and views on the subject. The journals which the articles are published in are also diverse, making the data representative for the topic of this study. Although, since the focus has been on accountability in relation to RBA, this study does not reflect the complete and holistic ongoing debate and research on RBA. This study provides a short introduction to the field of RBA and the ongoing debate but the focus is on accountability and power relations. Trough the theory section one can follow the operationalisation process which is based in previous empirical findings. The different factors of RBA are presented and discussed, followed by the situating the focus of this study.

In addition to literature data interviews were conducted. The interviews are recorded[4] and can be revisited if required. The official strategy documents were retrieved from the NGOs official webpages.

Whether it is possible to find a representative sample for the study can be debated since merely the concept of what an NGO is can be questioned. However, with the definition of NGO used for this study and the geographical demarcation, Diakonia, SAL and We Effect offer a suitable and representative sample.

Relevance of transmitting the result of this study into other similar studies is sound. The aim is to contribute to the plethora of studies regarding RBA which would additionally be beneficial for future studies. Micro comparative case studies such as this, conducted multiple times, can help filling the gaps and eventually bring forth a generality regarding accountability in NGO

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[4] Except one where the recording device failed so the interview had to be carried out without recording

development work, which ultimately will provide answers to the question whether RBA will bring on change in international power relations.

3.5 Interviewing and ethics

The main empirical source for this comparative case study consists of open-ended interviews with selected informants at three NGOs and two external individuals not representing any NGO. The informants from NGOs are staff members who are involved in the day-to-day activities of the NGO, and are therefore more likely to have insight in the practical work of the organisation. Their views might also be more personal since they are part in the daily activities and see what works and does not, in contrast to a staff member who is at a higher level within the organisation who might only recite the information from their official documents and statements.

The aim of the interviews was to obtain perceptions and interpretations on accountability within development work. The interviews were designed to instigate a conversation regarding accountability and how it is experienced by the person interviewed. An open-ended interviewing method provided the interviewees with space to speak freely and interviewees were encouraged to give examples from their own experiences. Questions were utilized to keep the interviews focused on the subject and to keep the conversation ongoing. Central topics which were discussed during the interviews was how and if a change in accountability was experienced, and if so where the changes had occurred. Who NGOs are accountable towards was debated. Stakeholders were identified and discussed in relation to the NGOs and to the general development sector. The interviews also touched on the question of ranking stakeholders and their possible accountability claims, whether some are perceived as more important. The topic of how someone is an accountable development actor was also deliberated and how important accountability really is for an NGO and other development practitioners.

Interviews were held in Stockholm in April and May 2017. Each interview took approximately one hour and commenced with a brief introduction to the study, followed by referring to an increased demand for NGO accountability. No definition of accountability was provided from the researcher to interviewees since the defining of the concept is part of the study. In the interviews which were conducted in Swedish the Swedish equivalent word which was utilized were 'ansvarstagande', 'ansvarsutrkrävande' and 'ansvarighet'.

All individuals part in the interview process have been informed of the study's aim, what their role is in the empirical data collection, how the data would be used and ensured to participate under voluntary action. The material collected during interviews will exclusively be used in the purpose of this essay. The material is used for analysis and where quotes are used the interviewees have consented.

4. The case findings

In this section, the empirical findings acquired through interviews, official strategy documents and the organisations webpages are presented with reconnections to theoretical claims previously presented in this essay. Firstly, a short introduction of the organisations is presented. Secondly, findings regarding perceptions of RBA are presented. Continuing with perceptions of accountability and how organisations work to uphold their part of an accountability equation with different stakeholders.

4.1 The organisations

Solidarity Sweden-Latin America (SAL) is a politically and religiously independent popular movement organisation who together with locally based popular movements works towards a just and sustainable society. SAL does not conduct any projects of their own, they work in cooperation with local partners where they provide resources for their partner's projects (Larinamerikagrupperna, 2013). The organisation is not expressing an adoption of RBA; however, they utilize rights-language, refer to international rights conventions and attach a rights-perspective to their work.

The organisation has gone through some organisational changes in the recent years. In 2008 they changed their name from UBV to SAL which also entailed a shift in method and strategy for development cooperation. Instead of using volunteers the new strategy entails working with programs together with local organisations originating from indigenous people movements and farm movements. The new aim became empowering civil societies to influence political decision making processes regarding rights issues. In Sweden focus was set on campaigning for the questions prioritized by the local movements in Latin America. Adoption of their new political platform additionally entailed changing the organisations member base, from exclusively consisting of volunteers to now being open for the general public (Latinamerikagrupperna, 2010).

Diakonia is a Swedish faith-based development organisation. The organisation is rooted in the two Christian denominations; the Swedish Alliance Mission and the Uniting Church in Sweden. Theological reflection and the universality of human rights are the basis for Diakonia's mission, vision and goals.

Diakonia have been through a process of organisational change in the past years in relation to the adoption of RBA. Focus have been on decentralisation and on creating frameworks with new focus areas on how to work. Decentralization have entailed establishment of three level of organisation; Head Office, Regional offices and Country offices. Adoption of RBA have additionally necessitated creating new ways of working and an essential part have been the development of an accountability framework which was established in 2012. (Diakonia, 2014). In 2014 Diakonia became certified in Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP). The purpose of HAP is to assist as an assurance of accountability towards all different stakeholders. Diakonia have adopted RBA and it is a central part in their strategy as to how change happens (Diakonia, 2014).

We Effect is a cooperative organisation, independent of the state and runs organised social and commercial activates which aims to benefit its members. We Effect is a member-based organisation founded by Swedish cooperative and/or customer-owned companies and movements and have no party-political or religious affiliations. Today they have more than 60 member organisations. We Effect is a decentralized organisation, where decisions are taken close to the practical development work. The organisation has five regional offices (Europe, Asia, Latin America, Southern Africa and Eastern Africa), and its head office is located in Stockholm, Sweden. We Effect have adopted RBA and is continuously working on strengthening the focus on RBA in future strategies (We Effect, 2016).

4.2 RBA or not RBA? - Perceptions and opinions regarding RBA

Two out of the three studied organisations formally express and adoption of RBA, while one simply expresses adding a rights-perspective in their work. While discussing the rights discourse and RBA the interviewee at SAL provided an explanation for not formally adopting RBA which complies with previous theory claims which states; it is imperative for rights talk to become more than a 'buzzword' for it to provide any real change. Here SAL senses just that risk. The interviewee explained working with rights enabling processes is good, however by institutionalizing the term rights, the risk of rights becoming a 'buzzword' increases and rights

might be eviscerated in the process. The interviewee continued with reflections on a course held by Sida in HRBA.

> *Can't we just talk about what it is really about? It is about redistribution of power (Ericsson, Karin. Interview, Stockholm, 2017-04-11).* [5]

> *It was interesting to see how you can systematically work with HRBA, however, we have always worked like that...it [HRBA] is just another way of packaging it (K).*

The main objective in SALs work is to increase popular influence in decision making processes which affects the rights of individuals and groups who, because of structural circumstances, are forced to live in poverty and exclusion. Their change strategy expresses; "in order for change to occur a redistribution of power, opportunities and resources is required". SAL therefore relies on three equally important themes, power, democracy and rights-perspective, which permeates all their work (Latinamerikagrupperna, 2013[b]).

> *There are risks with exclusively discussing rights if not also including power. No redistribution will occur if we do not address both (K).*

For We Effect and Diakonia a formal adoption of RBA can be found in strategy documents. For Diakonia RBA is one of their two guiding principles which are; strategy for change/RBA and good donorship and partnership (Diakonia n.d.a:30). Interviewees from Diakonia explained that RBA is not new in the organisation and the added value the approach provides;

> *Working with rights is not new for Diakonia, however the way it is formulated and implemented might have changed in some ways...RBA have entailed putting pen to paper and explain what [Diakonia] does and for whom (Hammarberg, Linda. Interview, Stockholm, 2017-04-19).* [6]

> *The strategy for change specify components which is required for change to happen (empowerment, organisation/mobilisation & advocacy) .... but as we have noticed in evaluations [the strategy of change] is blind to gender issues. The rights perspective adds important dimensions and becomes the quality of the process [of change] (Andersson, Annika. Interview, Stockholm, 2017-04-19).* [7]

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[5] Hereafter referred to as (K)
[6] Hereafter referred to as (L)
[7] Hereafter referred to as (A)

The adoption of RBA is expressed as a way to put words on their already existing thoughts of acting democratically and good ownership and partnership. Additionally, RBA has generated a slight convergence between their humanitarian aid and development aid. In humanitarian aid rights talk might not be used, however its principles, such as non-discriminatory, transparency and accountability, are. Diakonia does not express any specific risks accompanying an adoption of RBA, however one interviewee reflects;

> *There can be a naïve conception, that just because it is on paper that is how it is in reality, but it does not have to be so. The most important factor is what happens between people on the ground. It is really about empowerment, and that people feel they have a right to participate (A).*

RBA became part of We Effect's official documents first in 2012, but has been a part of We Effect's strategy longer than that (Hauer, Michael. Interview, Stockholm, 2017-05-09[8]). We Effect views RBA as a process where "activities are developed in dialogue with our partner organisations and are characterised by accountability, transparency, non-discrimination and meaningful participation". (We Effect, 2016:8). In We Effect global strategy RBA is stated to "establish duties for citizens as well as for members of cooperatives and organisations" (We Effect 2012:6). The organisation is currently in the processes of developing a new strategy for 2018-2022 which will have a continuous focus on RBA, for both We Effect and its partners. It is not perceived as imposing an approach since the adoption will be on the partner organisations terms.

> *In previous strategies RBA was established for We Effect, however, in the new strategy we will go further in integrating RBA in all our operations, including our partnership relations (M.H).*
>
> *When we discuss RBA with our partners we usually do not talk of RBA as a framework, but as principles.... It is more about putting the principles into contexts than thinking we can come with a manual (M.H).*

Implementing RBA with partner organisations is additionally not perceived as something you do overnight, it will be a process which require constant dialogue.

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[8] Hereafter referred to as (M.H)

4.3 NGO accountability: perceptions and methods for achieving accountability

All the interviewees agreed accountability is highly important for development cooperation. While perceptions of how accountability is achieved is similar, the methods and approaches are somewhat varied. One of the three organisations have a clearly formulated agenda for accountability, while the other two at the most mentions accountability in strategy documents, but does not have separate plans for an accountability agenda.

Diakonia has taken several formal outlined measures to improve and document their accountability. One step was to become HAP certified (now called CHS), which they achieved in 2014. In 2012 Diakonia adopted an accountability framework in which RBA and Good donorship and partnership is stated to "provide the basis for Diakonia's perception and practice of accountability through its work" (Diakonia 2014:2). In the accountability framework Diakonia presents its definition of accountability:

> Accountability is the means through which power is used responsibly. It is a process of taking into account the views of, and being held accountable by, different stakeholders, and primarily the people affected by authority or power (Diakonia, 2014:2).

One relatively new component to Diakonia's accountability improvements is the implementation of a Complaints and response mechanism (CRM), which has the purpose of creating a direct link between civil society and partner organisations to Diakonia in Sweden. Implementing the CRM have met some difficulties and concerns regarding its possible effects from both partners to Diakonia and staff at the Swedish office.

> *Some partner organisations experience [CRM] as an internal control mechanism (L).*

> *If we go directly to the rights-holders it is like we are saying we do not trust our partners (A)[9].*

Because of these concerns, in some cases new solutions and approaches might have to be developed, specific to the context. "Rather than imposing accountability standards on its partners, Diakonia aims to share its standards and facilitate capacity building and support to them" (Diakonia, 2014:2).

> *We want to be a fair partner and a fair donor… [In order to be those] people affected by Diakonia's work must be able to hold us accountable… Accountability is a process which applies on all levels (A).*

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[9] This was expressed by staff during an education course held by a HAP representative.

SAL and We Effect do not have accountability methods and approaches comparable to those of Diakonia. However, it should not be interpreted as if accountability is not considered, it is expressed as extremely important by interviewees from both organisations. One interviewee reflected on the difference as to why SAL and We Effect have not established separate frameworks for accountability methods; it might be related to the difference in 'size' of the organisations.

> *A smaller organisation might rely more on vocal knowledge sharing, while larger organisations might need more standardized written frameworks in order to display how they work (Widmark, Charlotta. Interview, Stockholm, 2017).* [10]

This statement complies with interviewees from SAL and We Effect perception of their accountability work.

> *The question of accountability is about sharing information and how you build relationships, not formal systems... It is a question of trust. It is through transparency which I can show myself accountable (K).*

> *The core principle of accountability is the contact areas where members and organisations can meet and talk, and can claim accountability [from each other] (M.H).*

We Effect's strategies mostly concerns accountability in terms of state (duty-bearers) to citizens (rights-holders), the scope of accountability is somewhat widened during the interview. Accountability is during interview also discussed in terms of internal accountability and in relation to partners. Accountability is a central part of We Effects strategy through the implementation of RBA. We Effect states in their strategy "our development activities are developed in dialogue with our partner organisations and are characterised by accountability, transparency, non-discrimination and meaningful participation" (We Effect, 2016).

> *Our partners identify issues and come up with solutions, we do not implement any projects on our own [since;] ... It is difficult for a Swedish organisation to have accountability on a community level, which is why partners are so important (M.H).*

It is also expressed as an element of mutual accountability, where "focus [is moved] to development *by* people - not *for* people" (We Effect, 2012:5). We Effect see its role as "contributing with experience, advice and financing" (We Effect, 2016:8).

> *Local ownership is vital, it would not work without it...together with partners we identify the main obstacles for the fulfilment of the human right and the responsibility of the duty bearer, what kind of accountability can be claimed and set goals...it [the process] must be in harmony with the local context (M.H).*

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[10] Hereafter referred to as (C)

Empowerment is an additional important component for accountability. In all three organisations strategies empowerment is pervading. The incentive for empowerment is to increase people's participation in decision-making processes, which will give people a greater possibility to influence their own lives and communities in which they live (We Effect 2016, Diakonia, n.d.a. & Latinamerikagrupperna 2013). One interviewee expresses rights-principles to be circular.

> *[It is] in the dynamics between rights-holders and duty-bearer's empowerment happens (M.H).*
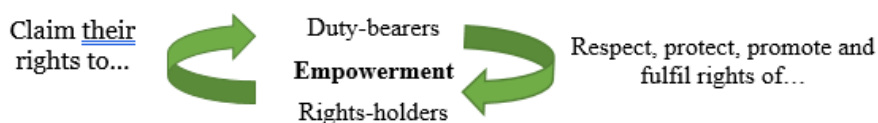
Picture 3: Provided via email by Michael Hauer of We Effect, 2017-05-17

SAL's strategies generally focuses on accountability in the relation between states, companies and rights-holders. It is also visible that internal accountability is an ongoing process "SAL works to strengthen their own member's insight into their own accountability, to not create conflict situations within SAL" (Latinamerikagrupperna, 2013[a]:10). During the interview, it became apparent accountability is expressed as concepts and by processes through which accountability can be achieved. One example is how SAL builds relationships based on trust and transparency.

> *[SAL] establishes relations in a different way compared to other organisations, since we are a popular movement organisation… [Thanks to this] it is easier for us to keep a dialogue with beneficiaries and thereby get good accountability (K).*

SAL identify themselves as part of a global movement, and place themselves very close to the societies in which their partners work. The importance of dialogue and joint decisions is highly emphasized. We Effect who are a member based organisation also experience themselves close to the societies in which their partners work. Great emphasis is placed on cooperative principles and democratic principles (such as member democracy, democratic governance and internal control) which they share with their partners. This is also reflected in We Effect's global strategy.

> *We aim to practice as we preach...we share our principles with our partners (M.H).*

> Being an agent of change involves actively assuming responsibility for helping to solve the problems identified within the organisation or cooperative" (We Effect 2012:6).

All organisations examined have great focus on establishing local ownership and partnership based on trust and transparency. One interviewee expressed the increased local ownership can possibly affect the relationship between NGO and partners

> *[It] becomes more complex, but can contribute to increased accountability, under the premise of understanding your role and considering power relations (C).*

Additionally, it corresponds with the theory statement of the politics of location, that the concept of rights must be fought by the ones in whose name it is adopted for rights talk to truly have any significant meaning.

> *It is crucial we do not put ourselves in the driver's seat, it is supposed to be the other way around (M.H)*

> *It is crucial NGOs only act in the shadow as a partner to local organisations (Soto, Milton. Interview, Stockholm, 2017)[11]*

Additionally, SAL expresses interpretive precedent must therefore lay with the ones most affected by a situation (Latinamerikagrupperna, 2013[b]).

Power relations are identified as a central concept of accountability where the importance of dialogue with stakeholders is emphasized. Facing power relations is a step towards becoming an accountable organisation. Interviewees agrees understanding your [organisations] role and considering power relations is extremely important for accountability.

> *We must share values to be partners ...[however] negotiate in the context. People have different ways of seeing problems (M)*

> *It [accountability] can balance the roles of both [local organisations and Swedish NGOs] (M)*

> *[In development aid] it is always about power relations…It is imperative that you can talk about power relations (A)*

Although relating to power relations is crucial, it is however for some experienced as problematic since "on the one hand we [SAL] are a funder, on the other we obtain the administrative control, and third we engage in strategic political alliances working towards a common goal" (Latinamerikagrupperna, 2013[b]:9).

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[11] Hereafter referred to as (M)

4.4 Accountability and stakeholders

In the theory section, it is claimed success of RBA depends on how relationships between NGOs and their primary stakeholders can change. The theory additionally proposed some difficulties which rights-work can entail for NGOs in relationships with different stakeholders[12]. The case findings for relationships with stakeholders will be presented in this section.

Interviewees agree in that different stakeholders might be prioritized depending on your role in the organisation when it comes to accountability. Additionally, it is expressed different stakeholders have different opportunities to demand accountability. Moreover, it is not easy to establish where the NGOs accountability ends and another stakeholder should take over responsibility.

> *All should be treated equally; however, it can depend on your role. You might feel a greater accountability towards the [stakeholders] you see the most (A).*

> *Both sides [partner organisations and Swedish NGOs] are accountable to their constituencies, but there must be a dialogue between the two counterparts so they trust each other (M)*

Relationship with donors: A vertical chain of demand is experienced, where donors sends orders to NGOs, who then have to mediate those orders to their partners. However, the examined organisations are working to change the patterns of hierarchical relationships by sharing all information from 'above' to their partners.

> *It used to be more like a chain of demands where [NGO] receive demands from [donors] which then was sent to partners… put there is an ongoing change here (M.H).*

> *We can only change the way we are working, and there is a great difference between sending orders and taking joint decisions (K).*

Another relationship change which is recognized is the increased demand for reporting results and accountability held by the organisations donors.

> *On the one hand we must show results, and on the other we are expected to problematize. It is really difficult to get those two together (A).*

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[12] Some interviewees found the term 'stakeholders' problematic to their situation and rather referred to 'different relationships' instead. However, in this essay 'stakeholders' will be utilized since the theory refers to 'relationships with stakeholders'.

We have to protect our partners from the demands which is established in the international aid sector...we work as a cushion between our partners and demands coming from donors (M.H).

It is experienced as a built-in contradiction for RBA, where results have been prioritized by funders on the expense of problematization. It can also become limiting for organisations, where staff might choose to leave work because reporting demands becomes too overwhelming. Aid should become more democratic, but it is not. Instead a greater struggle and competition for 'winning' funds are experienced. Concerns exists regarding a continuous focus on short termed quantitative results which can be boasted on organisations webpages and to funders to meet their demands on measurable results. Boasting "flashy" results are also expressed as important to obtain and retain private funders in the Swedish community.

Accounting obligations are more compelling, and thus prioritized… You don't bite the hand that feeds (C).

There is a risk that you only keep on ticking of boxes, but nothing really happens. Results can appear years after we have left (A).

How do you sell our work in a "sexy way"? (K).

The increased demand for accountability is nevertheless seen as understandable in the sense that it enables funders to guarantee *legitimate* organisations receive funds.

Accountability is important for legitimacy and being responsible in organisation and methods, showing that what we do have effects (K).

Relationship with states: The governments in the states which the examined NGOs act are experienced as increasingly interested in the Swedish NGOs activities and who they support. Five out of the six interviewees express a 'shrinking space' for democracy where states establish measures which complicates the rights-work for NGOs and their partners.

[for example] in Asia some states developed such complicated regulations for NGO tax which could not be achieved… when the state became too uncomfortable with an NGO it could retract the NGOs registration because of not fulfilling the tax rules (M.H).

The increased controlling of NGOs by states is although not completely seen as unreasonable:

States wanting more insight in what international NGOs do in their country is only logical. One imperative difference is however if the state want to control civil society or not (C).

'Shrinking space' is not limited to a specific region it is expressed as a global trend where protectionist actions are increasing, limiting the democratic space globally.

Relationship with partners: One change in relationship within all three examined organisations have been the increased focus on partnerships with local organisations to enable and constitute local ownership. It is additionally expressed as a way to increase accountability towards civil society. The relationship with partners is not about telling people what to do, it is about having a dialogue. Partners are crucial in the development of strategies, programmes and projects. Local knowledge is expressed as extremely important since you need different approaches depending on political climate and cultures.

> *[increased local ownership] is a logical and good development. It will induce change in the relationship, since a new type of acknowledgement for the local abilities arises (C).*
>
> *Colleagues from the local context have context specific knowledge which could not possibly be gained in other ways (A).*
>
> *There is no meaning in creating strategies which are not anchored in the realties where they are intended to be implemented (L).*

Increased local ownership also provide a sense of sharing accountability between the Swedish NGO and their partners. Although sharing the accountability might be the best option (since the other options; going back to total ownership of external NGOs or giving complete ownership to local partners are no good), some issues exists, when partners gain in ownership they additionally obtain new demands on reporting and accountability.

> *Sometimes our partners are more accountable to us instead of towards their own board. Much time and energy is put into reporting to us at the cost of internal accountability. This is something we want to change.... Member-based organisations should fight for their members and realize their wishes. The main accountability should be towards its members (M.H).*

Relationship with rights-holders: All organisations are clear in stating they do not hold a position in the states where projects are conducted, the partner organisations do. To some extent the main accountability towards rights-holders is expressed to lie with the local partners, however all studied organisations places themselves closely to the rights-holders, especially in the cases of SAL and We Effect who both in strategy documents expressed their organisations as being part of a global cooperative and/or social movement (We Effect 2012. & Latinamerikagrupperna 2013). For Diakonia, their CRM creates an important link between

Diakonia in Sweden and the rights-holders in the areas where activities are conducted. The development of increased local ownership has created new possibilities for the organisation to be a part of the community in which they are active. This is expressed as a good development since NGOs being accountable towards their target groups is extremely important.

In addition to the stakeholders identified in the theory section SAL identifies a new emerging stakeholder, transnational companies (TNC). TNC's are expressed as an issue for achieving the goal of a fairer power distribution (Latinamerikagrupperna 2013)[13]. TNC's who are cooperating with international NGOs are becoming increasingly common in the extractive industries in Latin America;

> *A mining company who are initiating work in an area might start cooperating with an international NGO, and through the NGO offer projects to local communities (K)*

5. Analytical discussion

The purpose of this comparative case study is to examine NGOs perceptions of accountability and thus contribute to the wider academic discussion regarding NGO accountability. The rights discourse, with development of approaches such as RBA, have intensified the discussion of NGO accountability (Harris-Curtis, Marleyn & Bakewell; 2005). This study has found some confirmation that the power and authority of aid actors are critically examined and frequently connected to the question of accountability; With who lies the accountability? and; To whom are you accountable? In this comparative case study, it has become clear the question of accountability is of great importance for the examined NGOs.

The theory in this essay states rights can become real through mechanisms of accountability (Gready, 2013). If this is to be true, great efforts are required from all types of development practitioners to become accountable actors. The studied organisations all expresses accountability as essential for themselves in their roles and to the organisations in general. Transparency and addressing power relations is expressed as two of the most prominent means of being an accountable actor. It is crucial to address possible power inequalities and being transparent in your methods, organisation and relationships towards all stakeholders.

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[13] Also confirmed via interview with K, 2017.

The initially stated problem for this study was that accountability is a concept existing exclusively between NGOs and its donors (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004), also called functional accountability. However, the result in this study implies the examined organizations reflects that mutuality is essential for the concept of accountability, it is a concept which applies on all levels for it to truly live up to its meaning. Breaking the (by some interviewees) identified hierarchical chain of accountability can be a struggle, but experienced as an important one. Although, a person's role within the organisation might create a sense of prioritizing some stakeholders accountability claims over others, this must not necessarily be confused with ignorance to accountability claims from the other stakeholders. Rather, as in any workplace, different roles have different prominent stakeholders which you must relate to. Nonetheless, one must remember NGOs can only change their own way of working, other stakeholders must also adhere to the altering of hierarchical accountability for it to have a transformative effect over the hole spectra of the accountability chain.

RBA is stated to have the possibility to change the power imbalance, but only if stakeholders can transform their relationships (Banik, 2010). The NGOs which are examined in this study are all demonstrating efforts to be accountable actors of change, by taking power relations to the centre stage. In this study, it becomes obvious development cooperation as a concept is always a product of a particular set of power relations. The interviewees put great emphasis on the importance to remember rights must be discussed in the context and by those whose rights you are fighting for. As it often does in development work, it becomes a question of power and knowledge. Here empowerment is crucial, making sure people feel they have the right to participate in these discussions and decision making processes. Otherwise, just as feared in theory claims and by one of the examined NGOs, the concept of rights runs the risk of becoming a 'buzzword', leaving the concept of rights eviscerated (Uvin, 2007; Gready, 2013; Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004).[14]

Accountability is additionally expressed by interviewees as being about democracy, that decisions are taken jointly and are developed through dialogue and exchanging of knowledge. As stated in the theory, most development theories are based on Western experiences, as 'the correct way to development'. Western knowledge is promoted on the global arena, which is argued in the theory, creates a legitimation for Western states and organisations actions (Willis,

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[14] Also confirmed via interview with K, 2017.

2011 & Magrath, 2014). Even though none of the examined organisations dealt with this question directly, the strategies organisations are implementing to redistribute power is a confirmation that the Western based development agenda is questioned, and one might even call it outdated. It is visible in the increased focus on local ownership [partnership] and methods for building accountable relationships with those partners. Development strategies and programmes are planned by the rights-holders themselves, 'a people's agenda, by the people for the people' (this truly correlates to the sustainable development goals (SDG) which also is known as "The people's agenda"). Prominent for the studied NGOs is to provide support for local organisations, letting them define the issues and solutions. This contributes to bridging the gap between global norms and local interpretations.

Furthermore, this study supports the notion stated in the theory that organisations have their own interpretations and understanding of how RBA and its concepts should be defined and implemented (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Greany, 2008; Schmitz, 2012; D'Hollander; Pollet & Beke, 2013; Miller, 2015). The examined organisations different backgrounds and values influence how they perceive RBA and accountability, and which methods are used to reconcile with accountability claims. Civil society movements and cooperative movements seem to experience a more incorporated accountability mechanism which is connected to their organisational background. While other 'larger' NGOs might perceive a need for producing formal frameworks to establish an accountability mechanism. Whether one method is better than the other is not possible to conclude from the data collected in this study, neither is it the aim of the study. What can be concluded is as stated above, organisations have different interpretations and understandings of how RBA and its normative concepts should be defined and implemented. Therefore, one can argue more than one possible approach exists to becoming an accountable NGO.

6. Conclusions

One question for this study was determined to observe the adoption of RBA, and how an implementation might have affected NGOs accountability work. In this study, none of the examined organisations expresses any significant change accompanying an adoption of RBA or a rights-perspective. All express rights have always been part of the organisations work. Although increased focus on partnerships have been presented in this study, it is not expressed by the examined organisations as a direct connection to RBA or rights-perspectives, rather it is

experienced more as a natural development for the organisations. Concluding, an adoption of RBA and rights-perspectives for the studied organisations have mostly entailed a relabelling of the same development. However, the case findings do demonstrate that the examined organisations direct great efforts to re-distribute power and to address power inequalities. So, even if this development is not recognized by the examined NGOs as an effect of adopting RBA and rights-perspectives, the changes are still visible.

Additionally, this study had two questions formulated to examine NGOs and its staff perceptions, reflections and methods regarding accountability. The collected empirical data concludes perceptions of accountability mainly focuses on four interconnected key principles*; power relations, democracy, transparency and empowerment*. Accountability is perceived to be achieved through developing methods which enables the organisation and its stakeholders to act in accordance with these principles. However, development of methods to achieve the principles depends on the organisations background and value-base. In one way, simply agreeing on the value of the principles enabling accountability will create a pledge of an accountable relationship.

Upholding accountability is expressed as a continuous process which requires constant work and dialogue, from all stakeholders involved. Nonetheless, some recognition appeared during the interviews, that accountability towards specific stakeholders might be prioritized due to the role one holds at the NGO. However, everyone interviewed expressed all accountability claims should be treated equally. The purpose of accountability is perceived as an enabler for equitable relationships with stakeholders. Still, a risk for accountability exists; if it is too narrowly defined to mean merely the reporting of documented results, no change in power will occur, and thus RBA would not contribute to any real change, and accountability in general will at the best be weak (but not non-existent as stated in theory).

6.1 Future research

Due to time limitations and lack of funding it was not possible during this study to meet and interview partner organisations or other types of stakeholders. Although comparative case studies, where the scope is limited to one type of stakeholder can be beneficial, future studies can take off where studies like this one end. By examining the whole accountability equation one could better see whether an NGO is an accountable actor to all its stakeholders, or whether

some are prioritized, or determine if some might have difficulties with claiming accountability. Studying the stakeholder chain in a specific case or organisation can contribute to the existing plethora of studies on NGO accountability. It would contribute towards a better understanding of the full picture of different claims of accountability and how they are perceived and dealt with on different levels of the stakeholder chain. Additionally, it would provide opportunities for finding accountability weaknesses and problematics, and where further work is required.

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