

## The accountability of advocacy NGOs: insights from the online community of practice

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# **The Accountability of Advocacy NGOs: Insights from the Online Community of Practice**

## **Abstract**

Advocacy non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play an important role in society by keeping in check the power of corporations and governments and uncovering rights violations. They differ from other NGOs in terms of their agenda, funding structure and the stakeholders they serve, and operate in a context characterized by increasing demands for transparency, accountability and responsible advocacy. This study examines how the accountability agenda of advocacy NGOs is shaped by the need to maintain independence, preserve values and keep reputation unsullied when faced with financial and legitimacy pressures. A netnography method is employed to analyse the discussions taking place in the NGOs' online community of practice to understand the implications of the accountability challenges faced by advocacy NGOs through the perceptions of NGO professionals. The study reveals that the accountability agenda of advocacy NGOs is determined by the interrelated threats of financial vulnerability, potential loss of independence, legitimacy challenges and the high level of public scrutiny. The findings highlight that imperfect accountability mechanisms (e.g. financial reporting and performance management systems) hinder the ability of advocacy NGOs to demonstrate their accountability.

**Keywords:** advocacy NGOs; accountability; online community of practice; netnography.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Advocacy non-governmental organizations (NGOs) aim to promote and campaign for human rights, reveal and shame rights abuses and violations, and empower disadvantaged groups (Archer, 2003; Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004). The growing power of advocacy NGOs in setting international agendas, together with claims for their legitimacy mandates and ‘voice’ accountability, brought financial issues of advocacy NGOs under public scrutiny (Brown, Ebrahim, & Batliwala, 2012; O’Dwyer & Unerman, 2008). Hortsch (2010), while analysing the case of Amnesty International’s campaign *Counter Terror with Justice*, raised a concern for responsible advocacy and indicated that advocacy NGOs must choose their partners and donors prudently and be transparent and explicit in signalling their accountability. Hammer, Rooney, and Warren (2010) emphasized the need for “ethical fundraising, non-reliance on a narrow funding base” (p. 18) and the importance of advocacy NGOs not compromising their missions and values while constructing relationships with fund providers.

When the integrity of advocacy NGOs comes under public scrutiny, the ‘naming and shaming’ strategy that advocacy NGOs apply to human rights violators might well be turned against their own organizations and could challenge their own legitimacy (Schmitz et al., 2012; Dhanani & Connolly, 2015). Society expects advocacy NGOs to express their core values not only in their programmes but also in their fundraising and accountability strategies. Advocacy NGOs have to select their partners and affiliates carefully to mitigate any problem of interference and influence of NGOs’ missions, agenda and independence. Such selectiveness and prudence trap advocacy NGOs into resource dependence and make them more vulnerable to financial shocks than other types of NGOs (Khieng & Dahles, 2015; Verbruggen, Christiaens, & Milis, 2011).

While prior studies have viewed NGO accountability via its instrumentality and mechanisms (Assad & Goddard, 2010; Ebrahim, 2003), it is only quite recently that researchers have started to examine accountability contexts through the prism of conversations and dialogues (Agyemang, O’Dwyer, Unerman, & Awumbila, 2017; Dhanani & Connolly, 2015) and explore accountability discourses in social networking platforms (Bellucci & Manetti, 2017; Gallhofer, Haslam, Monk, & Roberts, 2006; Jeacle & Carter, 2011). The main objective of this study is to enrich our understanding of the accountability agenda of advocacy NGOs by examining how it is shaped by the need to preserve organisational values, independence and unsullied reputation despite the extreme vulnerability to funding, high accountability demands and legitimacy threats. The study approaches these complex issues from the perceptions of advocacy NGO practitioners on obstacles and challenges that they encounter in their everyday practice. It draws on the knowledge generated by these practitioners through dialogue and naturally created discussions on online social networking platforms.

This study uses a netnography method which involves analysing interactions and discussions in five openly accessed online platforms located on LinkedIn. As the first Internet-based platform primarily focused on networking and interactions based on professional identity, LinkedIn enables professionals from all over the world to gather in online communities of practice, thematic groups and forums to discuss and debate practices and viewpoints in an informal and trustful manner (Claybaugh & Haseman, 2013; Komljenovic, 2018). Non-profit accountants, managers and fundraisers utilize the online groups to engage in dialogue with fellow professionals, to share knowledge of accountability concerns and to rely on each other’s expertise in seeking practical solutions. The content of LinkedIn profiles makes it possible to identify advocacy NGO professionals. These aspects determine the rationale behind selecting this source of data to fulfil the research objective of this study.

As a relational practice, NGO accountability has tended to be studied with an emphasis on the perceptions of various stakeholders (Assad & Goddard, 2010; O’Dwyer & Boomsma, 2015) or

through revealing accountability practices and discourses within NGOs (O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008). This study mobilizes the notion of community, forum and togetherness of NGO professionals on an inter-organizational level and examines the accountability challenges advocacy NGOs face by obtaining valuable insights from the discussions NGO professionals consider worth creating online. As advocacy NGOs and activists have utilized social media for the mobilization of social movements and 'naming and shaming' campaigns and the provision of counter accounts and alternative viewpoints (Gallhofer, et al., 2006; Olsson, 2008), it is also of interest to examine whether social media and networking platforms are effective instruments for building a sense of an NGO professional community to exchange knowledge and practices.

The findings indicate that the online community of practice is an important arena that NGO practitioners use to discuss complex accountability issues of interest to their organizations. The study shows that the everyday accountability agenda of advocacy NGOs is shaped by the need to formally satisfy upward accountability demands of donors and to protect organizational values and independence by avoiding unethical fundraising approaches and donors' interference with NGOs' agendas and rejecting grants and donations that could bring into question their reputations and legitimacy mandates. The extreme level of fundraising competition and resource dependence have forced advocacy NGOs to adopt a business approach to fundraising and to hire accounting and fundraising consultants to enable them to comply with the complex requirements of financial disclosure and performance management. Despite their financial vulnerability and increasing expectations from the public, advocacy NGOs have had to divert their time and scarce financial resources from their core missions to mundane accountability practices, which may hinder their ability to demonstrate holistic accountability.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section presents an analytical framework for understanding the accountability of advocacy NGOs. Section 3 describes the research methods used to collect and analyse data. Section 4 presents the main findings of this study. The final section discusses the implication of the findings and draws some conclusions.

## **2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Advocacy NGOs: missions, agenda, financial vulnerability and independence threats**

Prior studies have segmented NGOs and used diverse methods to understand accountability issues, for example, in specific contexts (O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008), effective regulation (Cordery, Sim, & Zijl, 2017), and self-regulation of NGOs (Hammer, et al., 2010; Lloyd, 2005). According to the widely used classification of Cousins (1991), NGOs can be represented by four types of orientation: charitable, service, participatory, and empowering. The United Nations in its Handbook on Non-Profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts (UN, 2003) introduces the nine-group NGO classification that includes advocacy NGOs. Advocacy NGOs do not constitute a homogeneous group. Ball, Girouard, and Chapman (1997) identify six types of advocacy NGOs: governmental human rights bodies; inter-governmental and regional organizations; international advocacy NGOs; regional, national, or local NGOs; quasi-governmental truth commissions; and national or international criminal tribunals. This study considers international and national (local) human rights organizations, empowering NGOs and, to a great extent, civil society organizations and social movement organizations to belong to the category of advocacy NGOs. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Transparency International, Greenpeace, Anti-Slavery International and Helsinki Committees for Human Rights are among the most well-known advocacy NGOs.

Advocacy NGOs make corporations and governments accountable for disclosure of rights violations (Hortsch, 2010; Islam & McPhail, 2011; Lauwo & Otusanya, 2014), corruption and bribery (Islam, Dissanayake, Dellaportas, & Haque, 2018) and compliance with social, environmental and ethical standards (Belal, Cooper, & Roberts, 2013; Momin, 2013; Parker, 2011). They uncover abuses of rights through investigations and independent monitoring, ‘naming and shaming’, making use of campaign strategies (Bonner, 2005; Davis, Murdie, & Steinmetz, 2012; Islam, et al., 2018; Mutua, 2001), and mobilizing the community and the public to apply pressures on regulators and key actors in society (Brown, et al., 2012; Hammer, et al., 2010). Advocacy NGOs use accounting information (including counter-accounts, shadow accounts and social audit) in anti-bribery, anti-corruption and social movement campaigns to facilitate democratic change (Apostol, 2015; Catchpole & Smyth, 2016; Cooper, Coulson, & Taylor, 2011; Martinez & Cooper, 2017). They undertake ‘naming and shaming’ campaigns (Hafner-Burton, 2008; Hendrix & Wong, 2013; Meernik, Aloisi, Sowell, & Nichols, 2012) such as spotlighting human rights violators and abusers (Hafner-Burton, 2008), and collaborate with traditional and online media in order to create synergies and raise awareness of issues of public interest.

Publicity campaigns put pressures on governments and corporations to avoid or reduce abusive and corrupt practices, and to increase transparency and disclosure (Deegan & Blomquist, 2006; Deegan & Islam, 2014). In the international arena, advocacy NGOs have obtained official consultative status from transnational organizations (Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004), which allows them to influence public opinion and policy formation. They are often called ‘watchdogs’ which have “to occupy an uncomfortable space between state forces, the global governance system, and the private sector” (Hortsch, 2010, p. 129).

Preserving and protecting organizational authenticity and independence of judgements, agendas and activism are of paramount importance to advocacy NGOs for “building pressure and creating international machinery to end the [human rights] violations and to hold governments [and businesses] accountable” (Gaer, 1995, p. 394; Hammer, et al., 2010). Paradoxically, advocacy NGOs face a higher level of financial vulnerability than other types of NGOs. Most advocacy NGOs are dependent on external funding and face tough fundraising competition (Dhanani & Connolly, 2015; Keating & Thrandardottir, 2017; Schmitz, Raggo, & Bruno-van Vijfeijken, 2012; Verbruggen, et al., 2011). Other types of NGOs rely on revenues from various sources, including individual and corporate donations, grants, governmental transfers and to some extent on commercial activities (selling goods or charging service fees) (Anheier, 2014; Khieng & Dahles, 2015). However, the revenue sources of advocacy NGOs are limited, as they do not carry out commercial activities to raise revenues, and they typically rely on paid professionals instead volunteers.

Advocacy NGOs are usually less attractive for individual donors than charities (Ron, Pandya, & Crow, 2016). Funding for the concrete time-bound projects of advocacy NGOs comes from the European Commission and United Nations and a small number of independent foundations, including the Ford Foundation, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), MacArthur Foundation, and Open Society Foundation (Höhn, 2012; Mutua, 2001). Moreover, in contrast with other NGOs that can accept governmental funding, many advocacy NGOs have to stay financially independent from governments and powerful groups (Gaer, 1995; Mutua, 2001; O’Dwyer & Unerman, 2008):

Those [advocacy NGOs] who reject government funds cite concerns for their independence of action and thought. It seems fair to conclude that to be considered for acceptance, financial support must come from an industrial democracy with a

commitment to promoting human rights abroad; presumably, support from ... clearly authoritarian states, would be unacceptable (Mutua, 2001, p. 154).

In sum, advocacy NGOs have to operate in a situation of interrelated threats of financial vulnerability and potential loss of their independence of actions and judgements. Careful consideration of donors and partners is crucial for advocacy NGOs for many reasons, including public scrutiny and accountability demands and, especially, reputational threats of shady and controversial affiliations and interference, and, most importantly, the need for the constant pursuit of independence. Advocacy NGOs have a restricted pool of revenue sources, which makes them more financially vulnerable than other types of NGOs (Saidel, 1991; Trussel, Greenlee, & Brady, 2002). This problem is compounded by the financial accountability demands placed upon them by their donors while preserving their legitimacy in the eyes of the public. These issues are discussed next.

## **2.2. Financial accountability and legitimacy challenges of advocacy NGOs**

NGOs' accountability is relational (Agyemang, Awumbila, Unerman, & O'Dwyer, 2009; Bovens, 2007; Hortsch, 2010), context-specific (Höhn, 2012; Martinez & Cooper, 2017), and riddled with complexities (Candler, 2001; Mulgan, 2000). NGOs' relational accountability may be upwards (to donors), downwards (to beneficiaries) or holistic (Agyemang, et al., 2009; Anheier, 2014; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008; O'Leary, 2017; Unerman & O'Dwyer, 2006). While functional accountability narrowly focuses on project activities and financial performance indicators (Agyemang, et al., 2009), holistic accountability reconciles upward and downward accountability with mission, sustainability and the social impacts of NGOs' activism.

Society expects advocacy NGOs to be accountable for their values (Kilby, 2006) and preserve their identities, authenticity (Unerman & O'Dwyer, 2006), 'voices' and representativeness (Hammer, et al., 2010; Höhn, 2012; Wade, 2009). They are expected to build their credentials based on their values and ideologies in order to be able to promote a world-view on human rights and speak on behalf of society. Advocacy NGOs aim to obtain and keep a 'social contract' or a legitimacy mandate with society. In this respect, the International Council on Human Rights Policy asserts that "[advocacy NGOs'] success, even survival, depends significantly on their ability ... to demonstrate that they respect their own values" (Archer, 2003, p. 49) not only in their professional agendas, but also in terms of their financial integrity.

The challenges of legitimacy arise from the fact that advocacy NGOs have not been elected to represent and speak on behalf of society. For other types of NGOs, such as charities or humanitarian and development aid organizations, legitimacy mandates come from their abilities to effectively fulfil needs not addressed by the public or private sectors. The agendas and policies that the advocacy NGOs defend and advocate for are often politically motivated, which makes their legitimacy the most controversial, unstable and sensitive.

In addition, the application of a rights-based approach by international institutions and NGOs have changed perceptions of advocacy and human rights activism (Hansen & Sano, 2006). The rights-based approach integrates human rights principles into measures of global change and asserts that all people are 'rights holders'. Therefore, 'duty bearers' are indebted to protect their rights. It increases demand for accountability not only for state authorities, but also for NGOs (O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008; O'Leary, 2017) and 'duty bearers' acknowledge "social accountability initiatives ... as mechanisms for securing a new social contract" (Bukonya, 2016, p. 1162; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2007).

Because public expectations of advocacy NGOs are high, any sign of compromising values or inappropriate financial behaviour would be spotlighted by ‘naming and shaming’ campaigns in the media, leading to reputational damage and operational collapse due to public stigmatizing and a decrease in donations; in other words, “survival and legitimacy go hand by hand” (Deegan & Islam, 2014, p. 400). For example, the financial scandals involving well-known NGOs, such as Kids Company, BeatBullying, OXFAM, Bishop Estate, Feed the Children, Women’s Royal Voluntary Service, Foundation for Peace and Justice and many others, resulted in a legitimacy crisis in the non-profit sector (Gibelman & Gelman, 2001; Bothwell, 2004; Trivunovic, 2011; Fassin, 2009; Cordery et al., 2017; Keating & Thrandardottir, 2016) and increasing demand for the financial accountability and transparency of NGOs (Schlesinger et al., 2004; O’Sullivan & O’Dwyer, 2009). One of the most remarkable advocacy NGO financial scandals is the case of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, which filed for bankruptcy and consequently closed down due to massive fraud, economic crime and the embezzlement of €1.2 million by its financial manager (Trivunovic, 2011).

Upward and downward forms of accountability are interdependent, at least in relation to the allocation of resources that NGOs spend in order to signal their accountability and fulfil accountability demands. The predominant focus on hierarchical accountability could lead to a trend “to measure impacts mechanically, in order to provide an impression of precision” (O’Dwyer & Unerman, 2008, p. 804). However, too much of a focus on downward accountability might make advocacy NGOs look like service-oriented organizations to particular groups of recipients. This might be dangerous for the missions of those international advocacy NGOs that do not represent any particular population in their mission outreach but are campaigning against human rights violations worldwide.

In sum, multiplicity of the forms of and demands for accountability, accompanied by a high level of public scrutiny, expectations and legitimacy challenges, creates substantial pressures on advocacy NGOs. Even though NGO accountability research tends to highlight the importance of downward accountability (O’Dwyer & Unerman, 2008; O’Leary, 2017), it is often unclear which type and form of accountability advocacy NGOs should prioritize. The next subsection discusses the mechanisms available to advocacy NGOs to meet their upward, downward and lateral accountability.

### **2.3. Accountability mechanisms: stakeholder expectations, financial truthfulness and mission-based performance**

Accountability expectations are discharged through a forum “in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct; the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences” (Bovens, 2007, p. 447). The ‘forum’ of advocacy NGOs comprises different groups of stakeholders who voice their interests, demands and expectations (Keating & Frumkin, 2003; O’Dwyer & Unerman, 2008). The choice of accountability mechanisms depends on organizational type, structure, missions and activities (Agyemang, et al., 2009; Boomsma, O’Dwyer, Bebbington, & Unerman, 2014; Ebrahim, 2003). Table 1 provides an overview of advocacy NGOs’ external stakeholders. A particular type of stakeholder may simultaneously belong to multiple groups.

**Table 1: External stakeholders of advocacy NGOs**

| <b>Type of stakeholders</b>  | <b>Characteristics</b>   |
|--|--|
| <b>Beneficiaries</b><br>(i.e. recipients)  | The core mission of advocacy NGOs is to target beneficiaries, to provide them with free legal, mental and financial support (Archer, 2003).  |
| <b>Financial supporters</b><br>(i.e. donors and sponsors)  | <p>The most salient stakeholders when it comes to financial accountability (Assad &amp; Goddard, 2010).</p> <p>Two groups of donors may be identified according to their accountability demands (Archer, 2003; Keating &amp; Frumkin, 2003; O’Dwyer &amp; Unerman, 2008):</p> <p><b>‘Non-professional’</b> (mostly private) donors, who are inspired by the mission and the reputation of advocacy NGOs and are mostly driven by emotions and intuition.</p> <p><b>Foundations and grant providers</b>, which express high levels of concern about advocacy NGOs’ financial issues (Saxton, Kuo, &amp; Ho, 2012; Verbruggen, et al., 2011), demand special financial control and reporting (Archer, 2003; Keating &amp; Frumkin, 2003), and arrange financial inspections (Assad &amp; Goddard, 2010). These demands shape not only the activities of the concrete NGOs they support, but also the whole field of advocacy, social movement and human rights activism (Martinez &amp; Cooper, 2017).</p>   |
| <b>External stakeholders</b> with control, monitoring and cooperation functions (i.e. governments, partners, international monitoring bodies, international institutions, and community) | <p><b>International institutions</b> can function as financial providers, but most importantly, they create the arenas where advocacy NGOs might play semi-official roles, share the results of their investigations and affect decision-making processes (Matlary, 2002).</p> <p><b>Independent monitoring bodies</b> are intermediary agents between donors and NGOs. They provide information about financial health, accountability, transparency and the performance of NGOs, and they advise donors on how to choose reliable NGOs (Schmitz, et al., 2012); positive ratings of NGOs usually increase donor contributions (Krishnan, Yetman, &amp; Yetman, 2006; Sloan, 2009).</p> <p>At the national level, advocacy NGOs deal with <b>legislative and executive agents</b>: parliaments and governments. Advocacy NGOs try to avoid political or financial affiliations with governments (Archer, 2003; O’Dwyer &amp; Unerman, 2008), especially in developing and transitional countries. However, even functionally independent advocacy NGOs are obliged to report on their activities to government authorities.</p> |

Prior studies examining donors’ expectations of advocacy NGOs have found that donors conceive accountability narrowly and may have political preferences when allocating funds. For example, Höhn (2012) emphasized that “donors ... [consider] accountability as an icon of democracy, but in practice often focus on a much narrower definition of accountability as financial auditing” (p. 380). Lebovic and Voeten (2009) claimed that “despite ... [donors’] self-proclaimed commitment to human rights ... [funding] allocations are largely based on the political objectives of donors” (p. 82).



Transparency and disclosure of accounting information and accountability processes are the cornerstones of improving legitimacy in society (Keating & Frumkin, 2003; Saxton, et al., 2012). Greater accountability, disclosure and transparency (Schmitz, et al., 2012; Sloan, 2009) may be achieved through compliance with accounting standards (Verbruggen, et al., 2011) and provision of clear financial information (Schlesinger, Mitchell, & Gray, 2004).

NGOs' claim of financial accountability has a strong reputational effect, sends a positive signal to stakeholders, builds trust and minimizes risk in financial relationships (Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003). In this respect, Saxton, et al. (2012) argue that through "voluntary disclosure of pertinent financial and performance-related information, organizations are able to signal their efficiency, effectiveness, credibility, responsiveness, and, most importantly, their accountability, to current and potential stakeholders" (p. 1066). Hammer, et al. (2010) reported on over 30 self-regulation initiatives of advocacy NGOs in relation to improving their own accountability, financial transparency and disclosure. However, there are challenges for NGOs related to the implementation of private sector accounting frameworks and concepts, which may require an accounting framework tailored for their unique needs (Crawford, Morgan, & Cordery, 2018; Ryan, Mack, Tooley, & Irvine, 2014).

NGOs often discharge accountability to their stakeholders by providing performance information and their administrative costs, although the choice of performance indicators may be contentious. Van Der Heijden (2012) suggested using a statement of functional expense that splits NGO's expenses into three groups: programme, administration and fundraising. Independent monitoring bodies, such as Charity Navigator, usually set a threshold of 25% for effective NGOs' administrative and fundraising expenses. Yet these thresholds can motivate NGOs to manipulate their accounting numbers (O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008; Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003; Trussel, 2003). For instance, Krishnan, et al. (2006) found that more than 50% of all US NGOs report zero fundraising expenses.

In addition to programme, administrative and fundraising effectiveness, advocacy NGOs' effectiveness may be evaluated through measures such as public recognition, trust and support, media coverage and achievement of specific targets (Archer, 2003), although these criteria may be difficult to quantify. Cingranelli and Richards (2001) reported that they were not aware of "any attempt to objectively measure the effort expected by ... [advocacy NGOs] in trying to change the human rights practices of a target government", and as such recommended advocacy NGOs to measure the "resources [that] have been spent trying to change the human rights practices" (p. 232).

In sum, performance management and financial reporting are important mechanisms to demonstrate NGOs' accountability. However, there is considerable ambiguity regarding the ability of these mechanisms to empower advocacy NGOs and enable them to meet their growing accountability demands. In addition to addressing this aspect, the study aims to examine the accountability agenda, concerns and challenges of advocacy NGOs shaped by the interrelated threats of financial vulnerability, potential loss of independence and legitimacy challenges by acknowledging the voice of the community of advocacy NGOs professionals.

### **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **3.1. Research method**

The study fulfils its objective of enriching our understanding of accountability challenges, concerns and practices of advocacy NGOs by drawing on the knowledge generated in the NGO online community of practice. In line with research on online platforms in creating visibility for accountability and social, environmental and dialogic accounting (Bellucci & Manetti,

2017; Jeacle & Carter, 2011), this study contributes to the debate on NGO accountability by viewing the accountability of advocacy NGOs through interactions and dialogues of the members of inter-organizational community of practitioners located on LinkedIn.

Communities of practice, or CoPs, are “groups of people who share a common interest” (Gilbert, 2016, p. 1214; Wenger, 2000) and gather for learning, knowledge generation and exchange, and endorsement of professional identity (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2005; Duguid, 2005). Traditional CoPs have been limited to certain geographical locations; however, the emergence of the Internet and social media has transformed and extended communicative interactions and engagements by enabling people to gather online regardless of physical location (Gilbert, 2016; Jeacle & Carter, 2011; Kozinets, 2002). In contemporary society, online social networking platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and Twitter have become important forums for sharing and communicating experiences and viewpoints. From their traditional ‘offline’ predecessors, online communities inherited the notion of reciprocity and belonging (Gilbert, 2016), informality, trust and reliability among participants (Claybaugh & Haseman, 2013; Jeacle & Carter, 2014). In addition to this, they enable the empowering of their members through “iterative mutual learning processes that are designed to promote transformative action” (Bellucci & Manetti, 2017, p. 875) and “helping modify the fabric of communal practices” (Gallhofer, et al., 2006, p. 684).

Powerful network configurations and social media attributes transformed conceptualization of society (Castells, 2002; Olsson, 2008) and, unsurprisingly, triggered growing research interest in the virtual space of social interactions and new types of data (Jeacle & Carter, 2011, 2014; Kozinets, Scaraboto, & Parmentier, 2018). Accounting scholars utilized data from online networking platforms for research on stakeholder engagement, corporate, social and environmental accountability issues, and dialogic and counter accounting (Bellucci & Manetti, 2017; Gallhofer, et al., 2006; Jeacle & Carter, 2011, 2014). The analysis of online data goes by many names, such as ‘social media listening’, ‘Internet mediated research’ or ‘virtual ethnography’ (Bellucci & Manetti, 2017; Jeacle & Carter, 2011). This paper adopts a netnography method which originates from digital media marketing and consumer behaviour research and has the potential “to provide a means by which all social science scholars may observe a host of human behaviour” (Jeacle & Carter, 2011, p. 296):

Netnography is ... a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from online, computer mediated, or internet-based communications, where both the fieldwork and the textual account are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology (Cova & Pace, 2006, p. 1092).

In contrast with other qualitative methods, netnography provides an opportunity to observe a large number of participants around the world as they engage in discussions based on their own interests. It is also less obtrusive (Langer & Beckman, 2005), minimizes respondents’ misreporting (Lee & Woodliffe, 2010) and the effect of the interviewer (with its potential for bias) on their opinions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Kozinets, 2015) and provides researchers with an opportunity to collect ‘contextually rich’ data (Kozinets, 2002).

### **3.2. Data collection and analysis**

This study mobilized netnography to capture engagement in dialogue, interactions and sharing of knowledge and concerns on accountability (Bellucci & Manetti, 2017) in five online professional groups located on LinkedIn. Being the first and the largest social media platform that persuades engagement based on professional identity rather than entertainment, LinkedIn

is acknowledged for the reliability of information about both individual members and accumulated statistics (Komljenovic, 2018) and for its environment with a high level of trust among the members (Claybaugh & Haseman, 2013). The preliminary screening of all available non-profit community groups on LinkedIn enabled the author to identify ‘open’ (the discussions are fully seen, shared and discovered on the Web) and ‘closed’ (the content is visible only to members) groups. As of October 2012, the publicly accessible (‘open’) and daily-active groups of NGO practitioners on LinkedIn were selected for this study, namely Mango Worldwide (MNG), Governmental – Not-for-Profit Accounting and Auditing Issues (GNPAAI), Non-profit Accounting & Grant Management (NPA&GM), Charity UK (C\_UK), and UK Fundraising (F\_UK).

According to the ethical standards of netnography (Kozinets, 2002, 2015), “manual, non-automated access of information on publicly available web pages should be acceptable without special permission” (Allen, Burk, & Davis, 2006, p. 607). “Taking a cautious position on the private-versus-public medium issue” (Langer & Beckman, 2005, p. 193), and considering the practitioners to be the authors of their own statements, the author has collected written consents that allow direct quotations. The group members who approved the direct quotations agreed to be quoted with their real names, which in itself supports respondents’ validation of this piece of research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). However, the quotations were anonymised to preserve the privacy and confidentiality of the practitioners.

At the first stage of analysis, the author analysed the content of available discussions based on their relevance to the context of advocacy NGOs’ accountability. The first-stage database includes 120 discussions. A ‘discussion’ is defined as a single conversation (‘thread’) on a given topic. All available discussions were collected from the dates of the groups’ creation or opening for the public (see Table 2). To preserve the authenticity of the discussions and maintain a neutral perspective in the research, the author did not engage with the studied community. The dataset consists of the discussions of accounting, management and consultant professionals employed by different NGOs. To maintain reasonable confidence in the professional identity of the participants, the author traced the personal information that they provided on LinkedIn (such as names and affiliations) and compared this data with the information available on their employers’ web-pages.

The NGO online community of practice portrays an impression of a professional and reliable network with a knowledge ‘entry fee’ (i.e. the group members appear to have sufficient knowledge, education and experience to discuss specific accounting and accountability issues). The group participants demonstrated a low level of emotionality, used professional language and discussed professional subjects. The group members identified themselves as professionals by establishing credibility among themselves and offering their expert advice and opinions. The content of their discussions shows that the participants considered the groups as suitable places for addressing the everyday issues and challenges of NGO accountability, engaging in dialogues and seeking practical advice from each other. The issues of concern for each group are listed in Table 2. By linking the professional majority in each group to the issues of concern identified within the same group (see Table 2), it is observable that managers, accountants and fundraisers are concerned about different but interrelated issues, with each group’s interests sharing some overlap with another group but also having distinctive concerns differentiated from those of the other groups. For instance, the group dealing with financial and project management in developing countries (MNG group) are concerned about corruption issues; consultants and fundraisers (UK\_F and C\_UK groups) are mainly focused on fundraising strategies and relationships with donors; accountants from NPA&GM and GNPAAI groups focus on accounting, reporting and control.

Table 2: An overview of the concerns of NGO practitioners

| <b>Group/year of creation (becoming open)</b>                               | <b>Professional majority</b>                             | <b>Issues of concern</b>  | <b>Other discussed issues</b>   |
|---|--|---|---|
| Mango Worldwide (MNG)/2010  | Finance<br>Project management                            | Bribery, fraud, corruption and anticorruption measures                              | Developing countries' specifics, project management, costs allocation, costs minimization, partnership, grants application    |
| Governmental - Not-for-Profit Accounting and Auditing Issues (GNPAAI)/ 2009 | Accounting<br>Finance                                    | Non-profit accounting and reporting issues, internal control, segregation of duties | Accountability and reporting to donors, corporate governance, audit, International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) fraud |
| Non-profit Accounting & Grant Management (NPA&GM)/ 2009                     | Accounting<br>Finance                                    | Financial reporting issues, costs allocation, revenue recognition                   | Relationships with donors, performance measurement, corporate governance, needs for accounting standards improvement          |
| Charity UK (C_UK)/ 2010   | Community and social services<br>Consulting<br>Marketing | Different forms and challenges of fundraising, relationships with donors            | Corporate governance, ethical issues, performance measurement, reporting  |
| UK Fundraising (UK_F)/ 2009   | Community and social services<br>Consulting<br>Marketing | Fundraising, relationships with donors  | Compensation issues   |

Advocacy NGO professionals consider themselves to be part of the larger online non-profit communities of practice. In order to ensure that the dataset can provide reliable and relevant information about advocacy NGO practitioners, the author identified two types of informants in the studied groups: “informants who are especially sensitive to the area of concern and the more-willing-to-reveal informants” (Dean, Eichhorn, & Dean, 1969, p. 285). The first type of informants included members who created discussions by highlighting issues of concern to them; the second type of informants contributed to the discussions by responding to the issues. The informants in the dataset comprised: professionals employed by advocacy NGOs, including ecological, women’s and children’s NGOs with dominant empowering and advocacy components in their mission statements – 42.5%; professional accountants and fundraisers who work for all types of NGOs – 30%; charity employees – 12.5%; religious NGOs’ employees – 10%; professionals who are employed by other types of NGOs – 5%. It can be noted that practitioners employed by advocacy NGOs had a strong presence in the voluntary online discussion forums and were keen to engage in dialogue about accountability issues.

The study does not attempt to generalize, but to understand accountability issues faced by advocacy NGOs. In the second stage of analysis, the statements of advocacy NGOs' employees and professional accountants and fundraisers (with traceable experience of working for advocacy NGOs) were extracted from the originally selected discussions. These statements (165) formed a second-stage dataset and were used to address this study's objective. Analysis and interpretation of netnographic data is "based primarily on the observation of textual discourse" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 64) and consists of "classification, coding analysis and contextualization" (Langer & Beckman, 2005, p. 193). The author followed the steps of Langer and Beckman (2005, p. 197) in analysis of the statements in the second dataset:

The body of the entire text was read through several times. Emergent conceptualisations were altered on successive readings. The material was structured, coded and summarized, then explained and interpreted. Multiple coding of the topical focus of the postings was supplemented with ... identity information about the contributor.

All statements were analysed manually. The text of particular statements were interpreted through the identification of patterns and issues of concern (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2012) in order to prioritize the focus on the meanings shaped in the discussions (Lukka & Modell, 2010), rather than on the forms of expression or the word choices made by the participants (Kozinets, 2015). The plausibility of explanations is achieved by applying several rounds of analysis (Kozinets, 2015), presenting multiple and contrasting explanations and elements of respondents' validation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), and giving voice to the 'Others' (Lukka & Modell, 2010), that is, to the advocacy NGO practitioners, accountants, managers and fundraisers in order to view the accountability challenges of advocacy NGOs through the eyes of their employees engaged in informal and trustful discussions with fellow professionals.

## **4. FINDINGS**

This section presents the study's findings on different interlinked aspects of advocacy NGOs' accountability revealed in conversations and discussions on the analysed online networking platforms. This section is structured as follows. The first subsection exposes through the eyes of NGO professionals how financial pressures and vulnerabilities affect the accountability agenda of advocacy NGOs. The second subsection discusses issues relating to preserving the values and independence of advocacy NGOs, while signalling accountability and engaging with stakeholders. The final subsection highlights the challenges of applying existing accountability mechanisms (such as financial reporting and performance management systems) faced by advocacy NGOs.

### **4.1. Implications of financial vulnerability for the accountability agenda of advocacy NGOs**

This subsection discusses two themes revealed in the analysis: a shift towards upward accountability while neglecting accountability to beneficiaries and implications of extensive competitive pressures on the accountability and fundraising agenda of advocacy NGOs.

**Upward and downward accountability.** The analysis demonstrates that, although advocacy NGO practitioners acknowledged the need for their organizations to be accountable to multiple stakeholders, most attention and priority was paid to donors and upward accountability issues. Figure 1, which shows a 'word cloud' (a visual representation of the dataset), demonstrates the strong focus that NGOs place on their donors. The word cloud is created by the incorporation

of all textual data from the second-stage dataset into the Wordle program and shows the frequency of each term by the size of the word. Advocacy NGOs’ practitioners discussed relationships with donors and the importance of donations for sustainable operationalization more frequently than other issues (the appearance of the word ‘donor(s)’ is highest (17%) among all concepts mentioned in the dataset).



Figure 1: A dataset word cloud

The findings reveal that NGOs treat individual and institutional (organizational) donors differently. The major source of funding determines the type of fundraising strategy and the ways to approach donors and signal accountability to them. The practitioners who represent the organizations relying on funding from individual donors claimed that the implementation of different motivational techniques is more effective for attracting donors than a demonstration of financial performance:

You need to present the need in a way that is emotive and compelling. Then you can argue that your organization has the solution, and needs money to implement it (a fundraising consultant, UK, GNPAAI group).

Therefore, advocacy NGOs oriented towards individual donors or members would be more likely to signal their accountability by using various visual attributes of accountability (such as flyers and presentations) and approaching their donors directly and informally (stands, fundraising dinners, phone calls) in order to convert past ‘stories of success’ into future revenue streams. Financial performance indicators and effectiveness would be much less important for addressing donors and would only be needed for maintaining a positive and sustainable public image to support the NGOs’ legitimacy and trustworthiness. The financial scandals in the past reveal (Gibelman & Gelman, 2001; Keating & Thrandardottir, 2017) that in situations when donors are not interested in scrutinizing the financial performance and financial accountability of the NGOs they support, there is a higher risk of financial fraud and mis-reporting of performance, which once disclosed in the media would cause such organizations to collapse.

In contrast, organizations financed by institutional funds focus on developing a more systematic and structured approach in donor relationships and upward accountability. For

example, MNG group members discussed the best approaches for preparing grant applications when an emotional component is not important and formal criteria are used:

I'm trying to develop a tool to help organizations decide whether or not to bid for different grants. ... Questions I have so far are 'Is this proposal in line with existing organizational strategies? ... Does this proposal add significant ... added value to the existing strategies which make it worth considering? ... Is the donor of longer-term strategic interest? (an NGO consultant, UK, MNG group).

This situation is typical for the majority of advocacy NGOs, especially those in Europe, where the level of private donations is lower than in the USA and organizations mostly rely on grants from institutional foundations. Such NGOs would aim to build a long-lasting relationship with a particular donor organization to secure its funding. There is a risk of them being accused of relying on a narrow group of funders, building too close affiliations and compromising their own independence and agenda in order to satisfy donors' requirements. In addition, the formal and structured mechanisms of financial accountability (which are discussed in subsection 4.3) would be more relevant for those organizations.

In contrast to an exaggerated focus on upward accountability issues, the analysis revealed only a few statements focused on the interests of beneficiary groups. The study did not identify any specific discussions dedicated to downward accountability. There could be various reasons for this. First, many advocacy NGOs are working on short-term projects with a flexible agenda depending on emerging socio-political challenges in various contexts, and, therefore, even though the practitioners seem to be able to identify the purpose and mission of their activities, it might be difficult to identify the beneficiary groups precisely. Second, the opportunistic utilization of online platforms causes discussing and seeking advice on the most urgent and burning accountability issues:

Donors definitely ask more questions today ... It gets us in the habit of answering/reporting back. And that's something we should be doing. When we demonstrate to our donors that we're effective, and they can see the impact of their gifts, they're more likely to continue to give (a director of development, USA, NPA&GM group).

This quote reveals that the everyday agenda of advocacy NGO practitioners is preoccupied with the need to ensure the stability and continuity of revenue streams and formally designed accountability to existing donors. Therefore, the needs of the most salient and powerful stakeholders are prioritized, and less powerful stakeholders are downgraded. It is also important to interpret this aspect in the knowledge that all discussions on online networking platforms are created and moderated by the practitioners based on their own interests and information needs. The netnographic approach allowed pure naturalistic observation and averted any danger of guiding participants towards discussing downward accountability issues.

**Competitive pressures and business approaches.** The findings of this study show that resource dependence and extremely tough fundraising competition force advocacy NGO managers to mobilize business approaches to fundraising, which is reflected in the concepts and terminology used in discussions (such as 'competition', 'donor markets', 'branding', 'return on investment (ROI)'). For example, the CEO of an advocacy NGO from the USA suggested to his fellows in the GNPAAI group to think 'like business persons' and to consider donors' financial support as investments:

Fundraising planning should always include the numbers that an NGO is willing to invest in generating income, and projected ROI.

His opinion was supported by a fundraising consultant from the UK:

Your ROI is far higher in the US than in the UK. You should be prepared to invest in donor acquisition, which will not produce net income till year two. Reserves should be used to fill the gap.

Several other participants, including an advocacy NGO senior development executive, claimed that in order to keep their organizations growing, they used business valuation terms and indexes, ROI and SWOT analysis (i.e. identification of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) in planning fundraising, and surplus revenues that were used for 'reinvestment' for building 'revenue generating capacity'.

The massive acknowledgement of applying ROI and SWOT techniques observed among the participants of the studied community signals the risk of opportunistic utilization of inappropriate practices. The obvious disadvantage of utilizing the ROI approach, considering donors as investors and donations as investments, is a shift and outflow of attention and financial resources away from the main missions and targets to the maintenance of stable revenue streams. Moreover, the danger of advocacy NGOs being viewed as game players in the competitive donor market by non-profit professionals, and extensive reliance on SWOT analysis, i.e. identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats compared to other 'competitors' for funding, opens up various precarious compromises, such as making strategic choices about the cases for advocacy.

#### **4.2. Protecting organizational values, independence and reputation**

The complexity of the advocacy NGOs' operationalization and accountability is determined by the fact that, even under conditions of extreme resource dependence and financial vulnerability, they have to avoid making financial decisions that could harm their values and independence of actions and elude any interference that might affect their reputations and legitimacy in the eyes of general public. This subsection analyses three themes revealed in the online discussions: the ethics of fundraising compensation by results; the dilemma between accepting controversial donations and potential reputational harm; and the balance between being accountable and transparent for their donors and the independence of agendas.

**Payment by results and NGO values.** As the previous subsection revealed, tough fundraising competition motivates NGOs to mobilize business approaches and employ professional fundraisers and consultants. The idea of 'paying by results' or 'paying commission' to fundraisers has also evolved from the business world where motivational result-oriented bonuses and compensations synergize with ideas of profit maximization. However, the observed discussions revealed that when the business approach contradicts the original ethics and mission of advocacy NGOs, the participants tend to focus on the nature and fundamental principles of the non-profit activism and not on the fundraising targets.

Concerns about whether to tolerate a fundraiser's compensation based on results were raised in several groups. The discussion observed in the NPA&GM group contained 19 statements from 10 contributors. Two participants considered the idea of payments by results to be rational for the engagement and motivation of fundraisers to achieve certain quantitative targets; two others occupied a neutral position. However, the majority of contributors were strongly against using result-oriented compensation and stressed the priority of organizational values:



Purpose is the most important thing. We do not want even place our organizations in compromising our missions ... or promoting self-interest over the common good (a director of development, USA, NPA&GM group).

I think payment on commission is just wrong. ... Supposing someone gave £1m, they would be furious that a percentage was going to the fundraiser (a fundraising consultant, UK, UK\_F group).

Even though some participants considered such compensation an effective way to motivate fundraisers, they claimed that it could destroy the original nature of non-profit funding principles, where supporters donate for the achievement of the NGO's mission and not because of the specific fundraiser. Two other discussants (a director of development in a children-empowering NGO and a donor relations manager in an advocacy NGO) claimed that compensation for fundraising based on results was contrary to the purpose of NGOs to serve the public and such compensation could damage stakeholders' trust and the legitimacy of their organizations.

**Financial dependence, reputation and controversial donors.** Even in situations of extreme financial vulnerability, advocacy NGO practitioners were frequently discussing the need to reject certain donations if acceptance could lead to controversial affiliations, compromise of values or threats to legitimacy:

We have received a cheque from the Jimmy Savile Trust<sup>1</sup> which I feel obliged to first flag up to the trustees. ... I would like to be able to tell them how other charities have handled JS donations and whether there has been any fallout from supporters or press (a fundraising professional, UK, UK\_F group).

My current organization doesn't take government grants, large grants that would compromise the efficacy of our work (a philanthropy officer, USA, NPA&GM group).

Therefore, advocacy NGO professionals are aware of the high level of public scrutiny and expectations and tend to prioritize the missions, values and independence of their organizations instead of stable revenue streams in situations where certain fundraising actions, affiliations or interferences could be considered as controversial.

**Transparency and the threat of donors' interference.** The observed discussions were quite controversial when participants debated the level of transparency and disclosure that advocacy NGOs should provide. Some participants, including the marketing director and programme officer of one of the biggest US advocacy NGOs, valued transparency as the core foundation for building trusting relationships with donors. Others argued that it was enough for donors to know that their funding was supporting core objectives, and donors' interference in the operationalization of NGOs needed to be avoided:

We had a process ... where management set the plan, trustees agreed it, and then fundraisers raised the funds to implement it. There was no discussion with donors re giving for projects out of budget. We knew better than donors how best to

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<sup>1</sup> The Jimmy Savile Charitable Trust was a charity foundation established by the UK TV and radio personality Jimmy Savile in 1984. During the sexual abuse scandal in 2012, when Savile was accused in multiple sexual assault cases, the charity announced redistribution of its funds among other charities and NGOs and its own closure. Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-20038794>.

achieve our mission. This avoided a lot of argument (a fundraising professional, UK, UK\_F group).

Very often [NGOs] have to chase funding for programs and can be 'forced' by these same funders to take on other programs which are on the periphery of their mission (a professional accountant, Canada, GNPAAI group).

The negative potency of donors' interference with NGOs' agendas is a well-known threat in the non-profit world (Ebrahim, 2003; O'Dwyer & Boomsma, 2015). The extensive control and reporting systems applied by some institutional donors or powerful philanthropists to the NGOs they support create a lot of space for potential influence on NGO missions and agendas. Even for charities and humanitarian or development aid organizations, donors' recommendations and the declared purposes of grants could lead to a potential need to compromise. In the case of advocacy NGOs, which are often engaged in politically controversial cases or fighting against regimes or corporations, strong donors' interference could extinguish, weaken or mislead the activism. Therefore, advocacy NGOs have to balance transparency, openness and accountability on one side, with avoidance of donors' interference in terms of target setting, direction of activism and agendas on the other side.

#### **4.3. Mechanisms of accountability: challenges and imperfections**

This subsection discusses two themes related to the mechanisms of financial accountability: accounting and reporting challenges and performance management. The studied networking groups were extensively utilized by the advocacy NGO professionals to share their concerns about the mechanisms of accountability available for their organizations and rely on each other's expertise in seeking practical solutions. They engaged in lengthy discussions of the imperfections of accounting, reporting and performance management practices, and highlighted the challenges they faced in their day-to-day practices. The challenges of using existing accountability mechanisms, such as financial reporting and mission-based performance, occur because their standards and principles often originate from business-oriented practices that are not relevant to NGOs.

**Accounting and reporting challenges.** Practitioners claimed that many accounting software programs available on the market were oriented to business types of transactions and accepted payments only against invoices. Therefore, in order to get meaningful reports within the existing accounting systems, NGOs need to recognize donors as customers and their contributions as sales receipt or invoices:

How are you entering the donations? Are you entering them as a sales receipt or invoices or just connecting them with the donor's name on the deposit screen? (a director of administration at an advocacy NGO, USA, NPA&GM group).

In principle, the suggested approach is incorrect, because the donor is not equivalent to the customer of a business organization, nor is the donor a beneficiary of NGO activities. Despite the discrepancy, accountants use this approach to find a pragmatic solution for the challenges they face.

The members of accounting discussion groups expressed their doubts about whether financial reporting in their present form could be an effective tool for signalling accountability, for

instance, while discussing the reporting form IRS Form 990 used in the USA for NGOs that accept tax-deductible donations:<sup>2</sup>

As part of the audit process I have to complete all the questions on the 990. It is a pain and I doubt anyone ever reads them (an NGO financial consultant, USA, GNPAAI group).

I have heard some express doubt that funders actually look at the 990, much less use it as an informational tool for assessing a non-profit's performance (an accountant at an advocacy NGO, USA, NPA&GM group).

The 990 is much more complex than years ago. The additional time required to work with our auditors to comply with the reporting requirements added to the final cost of the audit. I am a CPA ... and this report confuses me as well...smaller [NGOs] don't have the funding to afford a skilled in-house Accountant or Finance Manager (an NGO accountant, USA, NPA&GM group).

NGO practitioners claimed that the complexity of accounting standards has had a negative effect on the quality of financial reporting and, therefore, on the transparency and accountability of NGOs that cannot afford to retain permanently employed accountants. The need to hire professional accounting services leads to substantial resource outflows from the original missions of advocacy NGOs.

**Performance management.** In contrast to the expressed business approach to fundraising, advocacy NGOs practitioners do not want to be judged on a business-oriented performance measurement. They claim that performance pressures are coming from foundations' reporting requirements and philanthropists with business background who expect the demonstration of clear performance indicators from NGOs:

With changes in foundation and government reporting requirements we are more often than not being asked to report on the impact that we have made with the funds that we have received (a chief operating officer, USA, NPA&GM group).

The practitioners did not support the idea of using quantitative indicators of performance, because it is not always possible to define programme and administrative expenses fairly and financial indices do not correspond to the specific nature and goals of their organizations.

Too often business oriented professionals approach the operations of ... [NGOs] from a 'maximize surplus' or 'minimize cost' perspective ... [NGOs] need to operate from a 'maximize value' point of view. Maximize value drives reinvestment from cost savings into new opportunities so that available resources are fully utilized (an operations and systems manager, Canada, NPA&GM group).

The non-donors are the ones who create the impression that ... [NGOs] spend too much on admin, and this is picked up by the media. [NGOs] then get defensive, and try to hide the costs (a fundraising consultant, UK, UK\_F group).

Several consultants of advocacy NGOs argued that the large NGOs were responsible for setting performance standards, based on the thresholds of programme/administrative expenses. Such organizations justify fundraising expenses by calling them 'education' (for example, when

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<sup>2</sup> Because most of the accounting group participants are from the US, the major accounting framework that is considered is US GAAP.

advocacy NGOs provide human rights information on their fundraising flyers) and create pressure on other NGOs to show a reduction of administrative costs:

The largest [NGOs] are the ones who caused us all this trouble by setting a standard that they themselves never met. They just called fundraising appeals, 'education', and spent gobs of money on fundraising ... These large [NGOs] make those of us who are trying to keep costs down into a terrible joke. They destroy our reputations and think of what we could do with those billions of dollars (an NGO consultant, USA, NPA&GM group).

In sum, with respect to increasing upward accountability demands, advocacy NGO professionals understand that donors are interested in financial trustworthiness and demonstrating achievement of external outcomes by using donations. However, the practitioners prefer donors to focus on qualitative indicators of performance and provide the professionals with freedom in relation to disclosure of decisions. In addition, they are concerned that substantial time and financial resources are outflowing to accounting, fundraising and consultancy services due to the need to comply with complex requirements of financial and performance disclosures.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The main mission of advocacy NGOs is to indicate, investigate and signal the effects of political and economic decisions on human rights and conditions of disadvantaged groups (Brown, et al., 2012; Davis, et al., 2012). It makes these organizations a vital component of civil society. The implications of a rights-based approach to development and calls for responsible advocacy have drastically increased the accountability demands and pressures on advocacy NGOs (Hammer, et al., 2010; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008). This study contributes to prior research on NGO accountability (Agyemang, et al., 2017; O'Dwyer & Boomsma, 2015) by enriching our knowledge and understanding of the accountability agenda of advocacy NGOs and examining how it is shaped by the high level of financial vulnerability and the constant and continuous needs to pursue their own independence, values and unsullied reputation.

The mobilized netnography of online networking platforms (Jeacle & Carter, 2011; Manetti & Bellucci, 2016) enables this study to extend prior accountability research by exploring the sense of an NGO professional community. The findings reveal the notion of forum, togetherness and willingness of NGO professionals to engage in dialogues with their fellows, to share knowledge of accountability concerns and rely on each other's expertise in seeking practical solutions on an inter-organizational level. The study provides valuable insights into communal crowd-thinking, developing and sharing collective practices and attitudes in an atmosphere of informality and trust, and, therefore, enables us to better understand the phenomenon of accountability through the perceptions of the NGO professional community.

The analysis revealed a plethora of accountability challenges and concerns that advocacy NGOs need to address to maintain their legitimacy in society. The findings of the study support a claim that financial vulnerability, legitimacy in the eyes of general public, and independence are among the main concerns shaping the advocacy NGOs' accountability agenda. The study shows that the pressures of financial vulnerability and public scrutiny of financial matters of advocacy NGOs are higher than for other types of NGOs. As with other types of NGOs, the advocacy NGOs' accountability agenda is preoccupied with various formally designed forms of upward accountability (Agyemang, et al., 2017; Cordery, et al., 2017; Crawford, et al., 2018). However, at the same time, even in situations of extreme financial dependence,

advocacy NGOs aim to remain independent in decision-making and actions. They attempt to control the level of tolerated interference from donors in their operationalization and agenda and avoid affiliations with toxic donors in order to signal a commitment to holding themselves accountable and demonstrate compliance with their own missions and values.

In contrast to prior research on downward accountability (Agyemang, et al., 2009; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008; O'Leary, 2017), this study has not identified NGOs interest in accountability relationships with stakeholders other than the donors. The present study supports the concern of Wellens and Jegers (2014) and Schmitz, et al. (2012) about overestimating the importance of downward accountability in everyday practices of NGOs and their employees. One of the possible explanations for this could be related to the fact that international advocacy NGOs do not represent any particular (local) disadvantaged population in their mission outreach, but are, in fact, advocates for human rights values globally, reflecting on emerging socio-political agendas and challenges.

The evidence presented in the study demonstrates that increasing fundraising competition forces advocacy NGOs to hire professional fundraisers and consultants and to use business approaches and terminology. They tend to mobilize investment business practices (such as ROI calculation and SWOT analysis) for their fundraising planning and encourage each other to think like business people and treat their donors as investors. The extensive reliance of the advocacy NGO community on irrelevant business practices oriented on profit maximization and winning competitive battles signals a dangerous trend in potential focus and resource outflows from the core missions.

In contrast, however, to Dhanani and Connolly (2015), who claimed that NGOs apply business tactics and strategically guide their accountability practices due to self-interest and therefore "failed to reflect the fundamental principles ... and the values they promote" (p. 632), the present study shows a more complex understanding of this aspect in relation to advocacy NGOs. The studied discussions revealed that, even though the strongest focus is on funds maximization, there are certain business practices that the NGO community finds to be contradictory to main values of advocacy activism and, therefore, cannot accept or tolerate them. For example, payment by result to fundraisers is certainly able to boost some fundraising campaigns but the NGO professional community considers this approach to be highly unethical and able to damage public trust and the legitimacy of their organizations.

The insights revealed by this study are particularly valuable to support the idea of the non-profit sector's further segmentation and diversified approach while aiming to understand the implications of specificity of the distinctive types of NGOs on policy regulation and self-regulatory practices (Cordery, et al., 2017; Lloyd, 2005; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008). The requirement to pursue professional independence and deliver on their missions in a situation of extreme financial dependence and legitimacy controversies escalates the need to distinguish the accountability and operationalization of advocacy NGOs from the accountability of charities (Lu Knutsen & Brower, 2010), churches (Laughlin, 1990; McCarthy, 2007) or development aid NGOs (O'Dwyer & Boomsma, 2015; O'Leary, 2017). Therefore, the study argues for softening accountability pressures on advocacy NGOs, listening to the voices of the advocacy NGO professionals and acknowledging them as a community of practice for developing new diversified lenses on accountability and social expectations of these type of organizations.

In addition, the study demonstrates a linkage between the challenges and complexities in the utilization of accountability mechanisms (such as financial disclosure and performance management) and the difficulties for advocacy NGOs to demonstrate accountability. The empirical evidence suggests that the existing forms of financial disclosure for non-profits are

burdened with complexity and controversy, especially in cases of revenue recognition, costs allocation and reporting. In this respect, this study contributes to recent claims about the irrelevance of the business-oriented accounting frameworks for application in the non-profit sector (Crawford, et al., 2018; Ryan, et al., 2014). In addition, advocacy NGO practitioners do not support the application of business-oriented (quantitative) indicators for measuring their performance. They emphasize the imperfections of existing performance management systems that do not accurately represent the success or failure of their organizations, force them to manipulate their costs allocation and create the necessity for organizations to hire professional fundraisers and consultants. This leads to resource outflows that may detract from the mission of the advocacy NGO. This corresponds to previously expressed disagreements concerning appropriate performance management systems in the non-profit sector (Agyemang, et al., 2009; Hall, 2014).

In sum, the accountability concerns of advocacy NGO professionals have multiple facets and forms of expression. The fact that advocacy NGOs constantly pursue, seek to secure and often signal their independence limits the number of their donors and restricts types of tolerable resource providers. These constraints render their financial positions more unstable compared to other types of NGOs. Within such an environment, there is a need for constant balancing in an attempt to cope with the interrelated threats of financial vulnerability and the potential loss of independence.

Several directions could be suggested for further research on the accountability of advocacy NGOs. First, the type of observation applied in this study gives an opportunity to collect currently available data. For further research, the author suggests the consideration of a higher level of interaction with the online-based community of practice. Second, the study has mostly focused on external factors shaping the accountability agenda of advocacy NGOs, such as dependence from fund providers, the need to fulfil public expectations and protect independence of values and actions. However, the study reveals that accountants, managers and fundraisers of advocacy NGOs have various issues of concern regarding the accountability of their organizations. This diversity could be further explored in terms of internal pressures and interactions in shaping organizational accountability. Finally, the findings of this study provide a rich background for in-depth case studies on the accountability agenda of advocacy NGOs looking at the issues of concern expressed by advocacy NGO practitioners and how these concerns could be mediated.

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