

## ANTECEDENTS OF THE ACCOUNTABILITY PROFILE OF THIRD SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This essay proposes that the accountability profile of third sector organizations is based on the relational nature of the interactions maintained with all actors involved in this complex process. To depict this reality, a literature review is used to confront accountability approaches proposed by multiple authors in contexts that are diverse. The theoretical origins, the contemporary reality of accountability are explored besides the historical, ethical, legal, economic and principal-agent perspectives. Then, the complementary frameworks proposed by prominent authors and the practice of third sector organizations accountability presented in the literature, are described as the main basis that shape the accountability profile of the third sector organizations. In the “Concluding Remarks” the topics of the study are aligned, and other research problems are proposed to future academic endeavors.

**Key-words:** Accountability, Accounting, Accountability Profile, Third Sector Organizations.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Third Sector Organizations’ activities are related to people lives and other entities, like firms and other nonprofits, this relationship is called here Accountability. To understand the relevance of this construct, its necessary to know that the origin of this contemporary concept, according to Bovens (2006, p. 6), is literally related to accounting in its sense of bookkeeping.

In 1085, after Norman conquest of England, the property holders were required by King William to render a count of their possessions. A census was developed for taxation and establishment of royal governance. Over time, as Bovens (2006, p. 6) explains, accountability became more connected to fairness and equity than to its accounting origins. As an Anglo-American phenomenon, there was a shift in the accounting relationship, in which the authorities became held accountable by their citizens.

In explaining what the word is nowadays, Bovens (2006, p. 7) points that “Accountability has become an icon for good governance both in the public and in the private sector.”. The author shows that, for empirical analysis of the concept “[...] it is important to distinguish between conceptual, analytical and evaluative issues”.

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This theme is presented as a challenge to all kinds of organizations. In case of corporations, as posed by Coule (2015, p.79), the stakeholder and democratic theories require them to extend the scope of accountability being responsible, as required by external public and taking responsibilities for actions. Related to the third sector organizations, the author believes the construct has a sense of interdependence instrumental and moral with the other actors, in its socializing forms.

In the last decades accountability has been studied by multiple scholars (Tetlock (1985), DiMaggio (1990), Kearns (1994), Bogart (1995), Chisolm (1995), Fry (1995), Hammack (1995), Lawry (1995), Sinclair (1995), Najam (1996), Rose-Akerman (1996), Lerner & Tetlock (1999), Mulgan (2000a), Mulgan (2000b), Dubnick (2002), Miller (2002), Ebrahim (2003a), Ebrahim (2003b), Helming, Jegers & Lapsley (2004), Lee (2004), Bovens (2006), Gray, Bebbington & Collison (2006), Benjamin (2008), Ebrahim (2010), Knutsen & Brower (2010), Saxton (2012), Coule (2015)).

Based on the relevance accountability processes, their individualizing and socializing effects play in all kinds of organizations activities, Roberts (2001, p. 1547) explored “the complex interaction of these effects in the context of Anglo-American systems of corporate governance”.

The challenge of revealing this theme moved Gray, Bebbington and Collison (2006, p. 319) that sook to “explore and develop understandings of accountability specifically in the context of the NGO and then extend these insights to the accountability of all organizations”.

In the scholarly and political arenas, as Bovens (2006, p. 8) says, accountability is used as a synonym of transparency, equity, democracy, efficiency, responsiveness, responsibility, and integrity, in a utopic sense. He also presents transparency, liability, controllability, responsibility and responsiveness as additional dimensions of the concept, which calls *umbrella concepts*. In this way, Ebrahim (2003a, p. 193) presents accountability with a “broader and multifaceted view”, which “central challenge” lies on a “complex balancing of multiple kinds of accountabilities”.

This variety of conceptualizations of accountability “author believes that [...] make it impossible to stablish empirically whether an organization is accountable, because each of the various elements needs extensive operationalization itself and because the various elements cannot be measured along the same scale.” Bovens (2006, p. 8). The author affirms that, *latu sensu*, it is an evaluative concept, about which there is no consensus.

This essay proposes that the accountability profile of third sector organizations is based on the relational nature of the interactions maintained with all actors involved in this complex process. The paper takes the following form: First, in the next section extant literature is reviewed about accountability, its meaning, composition, relations and different perspectives that shape it as a reality in the third sector organizations universe. Then, the accountability profile of third sector organizations is defined and structured according as proposed by Kearns (1994), Ebrahim (2003a) and Ebrahim (2010). The “Concluding remarks” section brings the essay to a close.

## 1. ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is defined by Bovens (2006, p. 9) “as a relationship between an actor and 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 judgement, and the actor may face consequences”. In this relation, the actor can be an individual, an official or civil servant, an organization, a public institution or a government agency.

As Ebrahim (2010, p. 2) complements, it is a process in which individuals and organizations are made responsible for their actions and must report to recognized authorities. The author asserts that four core components of accountability are identified by the literature: Transparency, Answerability or Justification, Compliance and Enforcement or Sanctions.

Also, according to Ebrahim (2003a, p. 194), the construct “may be defined as the means through which individuals and organizations are held externally to account for their actions and as the means by which they take internal responsibility for continuously shaping and scrutinizing organization mission, goals, and performance”.

These accountability elements presented by Ebrahim (2010, p. 3) involve the collection of information made accessible for public scrutiny, clear explanation for the decisions and actions implemented or not with possible questions, procedures and outcomes that can be evaluated and monitored. The actor can also be required to present complementary information by the forum to make the accountability process complete and effective.

There are accountability relations in which the obligation of the actor is formal or informal and, sometimes, the actor does not have the forums like principals. In case of account giving, Bovens (2006, p. 10) affirms that in this relationship the actor is obliged to inform about his conduct to the forum, which has the right to pose questions and pass judgement about the adequacy of the information or legitimacy of the conduct.

The author also asserts that some kinds of sanctions or rewards to the actor may be part of the narrow concept, that is, to face consequences. Another important aspect of the accountability proclaimed by Bovens (2006, p. 12) is that “[...] there should be public accessibility of the account giving – and not purely internal, discrete informing”.

According to Mulgan (2000, p. 555), the original or core sense of accountability “is that associated with the process of being called ‘to account’ to some authority for one’s actions”. The author defends that this sense is a consensus because “it is the sense with the longest pedigree in the relevant literature and in the understanding of practitioners”.

Aligned with the four core components of accountability proposed by Ebrahim (2010, p. 2), Mulgan (2000, p. 555) presents what he calls features, to whom accountability is external and implies rights of authority. The two visions are linked because assert that the one called to be accountable is involved in a relation with others, to whom must be transparent.

To the author, accountability is related to responsibility, control, responsiveness, dialogue and is both internal and external. In this case, “external accountability seeks to investigate and assess actions taken (or not taken) by agents or subordinates and to impose sanctions” Mulgan (2000, p. 561). Responsiveness is more related to the public servants “compliance with popular demands” but, in the sense of control, is applied as “coercive role of external pressure” to governments act based on the society preferences.

As dialogue, like posed by Mulgan (2000, p. 569), accountability is a process based on questioning and answering, two key activities for explanation and justification of the actions implemented by the actor called to account. The author defends that in areas like financial accounting, the information under exam only make sense in “an explanatory and justificatory framework assumed by the questioner and accepted, or contested by the respondent”.

According to the kind of relation and environment, different are the perspectives by which accountability need to be understood. In the legal arena Ebrahim (2003a, p. 195) affirms that the construct is focused “on the threat of legal action in cases of failure to meet legal obligations” and is limited in taking “account of organizational behavior not enshrined in law”.

Going deeper in the debate, Dubnick (2002, p. 3) analyzes accountability both as a word as a concept. In this way, the word is less important than the concept in terms of meaningfulness, that is, the second exists “with “frames,” formats, schemes, webs of belief, paradigms, etc.”. The author defends the concept meaningfulness emergence in four contexts: institutional-frame, social transactions, organizing/organizational frame and complex environments.

The aspect Dubnick (2002, p. 6) empathizes in this contexts framework, is the robustness based in the connections between them. For him, there is an idea of governance, “that is, with efforts to stablish and maintain some form of governing order in a social context”. This way of looking accountability is pertinent with the governing reality of third sector organizations, which must deal with diverse and complex stakeholders in diverse and complex relations.

In his study, the author applies the concept in a relativistic way, that is, in any community social relations must occur in a moral and appropriate way. So, the concept is considered “a *form of governance that depends on the dynamic social interactions and mechanisms created within of such a moral community*” Dubnick (2002, p. 7).

Comparing the accountability in public and private sectors, Mulgan (2000, p. 87) examined “the extent to which private organizations are accountable to citizens” and a convergence in this area that may be caused by pressures.

As seen above, the literature highlights the accountability of third sector organizations relevance in its relational context. In the next section, accountability is focused as a framework in the third sector organizations internal and external environments and it’s all determinants are depicted.

## **2.1 Third sector organizations accountability**

Nowadays, third sector organizations face many challenges and accountability is a core one in the way that “Some non-governmental institutions may be said to have primarily an accountability function, for instance watchdog groups set up with the prime purpose of monitoring and scrutinizing particular areas of government activity” Mulgan (2000, p. 565). In the same way, Tacon, Walters and Cornforth (2017, p. 686) emphasize the introduction of what they call “audit culture” due to the rise of “new public management”.

On the other hand, according to Ebrahim (2003b, p. 192), instead of the third sector organizations demand for legitimacy based on effective performance evaluation of their outcomes, they believe more in “value-driven organizations”.

The legal perspective of accountability in this environment was treated by Chisolm (1995, p. 143) who tried to describe “the framework of accountability imposed by existing law”. This framework “offer [...] impressionistic thoughts on important organizing principles that [...] ought to be consistently reflected in the legal rules that regulate charitable organizations, and [...] present “reactions to certain ideas for altering the legal framework that have been put forth as ways to improve the accountability of charitable organizations”.

Trying to contribute to explain “why nonprofits are prone to criticism for failures of accountability.” Hammack (1995, p. 128) developed a historical perspective of the theme showing the nonprofits growth during the nineteenth century and the conditions for it “under the U.S. constitution”.

The ethical perspective of accountability was explored by Lawry (1995, p. 171) which investigated the concept based on the historical challenge to reveal how nonprofit organizations can be made accountable when acting on behalf of society. The author conceptualized accountability, according to him, in a precise way and discussed its link with ethics.

On the economic perspective, Ebrahim (2003a, p. 195) explains that decision-making behavior of organizations is a new insight, particularly in the case of third sector organizations, which to attend the demands of their activities addressees, raise funds from governments, foundations and private donors. The relationship between these organizations, their clients, donors and regulators involve interests which roles in influencing nonprofit behavior is a central accountability issue.

Still in the economic arena, Bogart (1995, p. 157) considered accountability based in three questions related to managers attitude. The questions studied were the way groups create conditions to hold managers accountable, the receiver of this posture and if is it possible to “a person or group make it important to a manager to act in the best interests of the person or group”.

To whom the third sector organizations and managers are accountable and the way they can be made accountable by different interests, are points to be clarified. Another aspect is that, according to Ebrahim (2003a, p. 196), accountability is challenged to establish an equilibrium in “relationships of power among organizational actors”.

The above assertive is related to the research developed by Fry (1995, p. 182) which investigated the role managers play in the alignment between accountability and responsibility. The author questions if accountability effectively contributes “the life-giving properties of a social system, or is it merely an issue [...] that requires attention only when a problem arises that threatens the organization or social system?”.

Another perspective of accountability is given by the principal-agent theory by which the principal of the organization, business owners for example, seeks to keep an alignment with the agents, workers and managers for example. Some restrictions of this view, as asserted by Ebrahim (2003a, p. 197) appear when there is incongruence of interests, when third sector organizations in the condition of agents, are controlled and monitored than empowered by their principals and, lack of performance assessment of the principals acting.

These range of perspectives called by Ebrahim (2003a, p. 199) “Integrated Perspective on Accountability” have relevant points to third sector organizations reality. The author points that the laws, codes and reporting requirements are external mechanisms that do not improve

accountability in the internal environment as “self-evaluation and performance assessment, self-regulation, and participatory decision processes.

The author calls attention to the fact that the conventional principal-agent perspectives are not enough to explain the third sector accountability, considering that mission and values influence they're actions as multiple principals and interests. It's a question of taking collective responsibility for the organization, giving voice to the agent and stablishing interactions of the organization with donors, funders, clients and communities Ebrahim (2003a, p. 200).

An experiment was developed by Tetlock (1985, p. 227) which explored “whether accountability-pressures to justify one's causal interpretations of behavior to others-reduces or eliminates this bias”. In another research, Lerner & Tetlock (1999, p. 255) made a literature review “addressing the impact of accountability on a wide range of social judgements and choices”.

Interviewing CEOs of Australian public-sector organizations, Sinclair (1995, p. 219) identified five forms of accountability in her study. Were explored political, public, managerial, professional and personal accountabilities and concluded that all kinds suffer changes, what else occur in the interviews respondents point of view.

A literature review conducted by Coule (2015, p. 80), which evoked concepts about governance and accountability in the third sector context, unitary and pluralist logics were confronted. First, the author presents the unitary logic, with the theoretical perspective based on agency and stewardship theories, where the organization is best achieved through a systems-control approach, the scope of accountability is the principal-agent and, the nature of accountability is instrumental, based on objectified and explicit rules or standards and expressed by adherence to law, auditing, accounting and monitoring.

Otherwise, Coule (2015, p. 80) also presents the pluralistic logic, with the theoretical perspective based on stakeholder and democratic theories, where the organization is best achieved through a process-relational approach, the scope of accountability is the societal members and stakeholders/organizational, the nature of accountability is instrumental and expressive, based on subjective and implicit standards, objectified and explicit rules, involving adherence to law, accounting/auditing and monitoring and negotiation based on self-perception of community roles and mission.

The study developed by Najam (1996, p. 341) aimed to make more comprehensible and meaningful the debate about third sector accountability. The author proposed a conceptual organization of the theme and broader conception, based on the relationship between these institutions and two kinds of actors, the “patrons” and the clients, that is, who provide them with goods or services and to whom they provide these items.

The multiple sources of accountability in third sector organizations, according to Knutsen and Brower (2010, p. 589) are object of investigations by scholars but the descriptive analyses offered by them are lack of practical consequences. They explored the instrumental and expressive dimensions of accountability based on its theoretical significance.

The assertive that accountability is vital to third sector organizations governance, was made by Tacon *et al.* (2017, p. 686), due to some factors as multiple stakeholders, multiple organizational objectives and a varied range of professional and voluntary staffs. The authors

also stress the importance of understanding how these “organizations deal with accountability issues”.

According to Alexander, Brundney and Yang (2010, p. 565), the growing demand for third sector organizations accountability is driven also by what they call “hollowing of the administrative state”, considered a metaphor to describe the state dependence on the third sector to implement public policies as education and health, what is confirmed by Tacon *et al.* (2017, p. 686).

Based on the challenge of accountability improvement for the third sector organizations, Benjamin (2008, p. 201) proposed a framework as a way of verifying consequences of accountability systems to the practice of such entities. The framework is composed by to processes, a verification and an explanatory, which relationship the article aimed to distinguish and clarify.

As a process accountability depends equally on its all stages to be effective, in this sense, the disclosure plays a special role in the relation between the third sector organization and the stakeholders. Searching the motivations by which the institutions decide to disclosure, Saxton, Kuo and Ho (2012, p. 1051) developed and tested a model to reveal “the determinants of voluntary disclosure decision making”.

Using principles, templates and examples of public reporting theory, Lee (2004, p. 169) suggested in his article “that nonprofits should consider the citizenry as a stakeholder, if only due to the substantial taxpayer subsidy of the sector”. The research was based on the premise that it is a way of improving citizens confidence in the activities developed by these institutions.

Based on the agency theory, Miller (2002, p. 429) developed an analysis of the monitoring behavior of twelve nonprofit board of directors”. The author aimed to address what he called a gap in the literature in the study of “nonprofit board monitoring behaviors”.

Developing a theoretical foundation related to external reporting in accounting theory, Coy, Fischer and Gordon (2001, p. 1) posed arguments showing that decision usefulness paradigm is not an adequate basis for the subject. They searched to go beyond what called “older ideas of stewardship” and “recent notions of public accountability and social responsibility”.

Exploring the contributions of sociology and economics theoretical perspectives to third sector organizations management, Helming, Jegers and Lapsley (2004, p. 101) investigated the subject trying to go ahead of the existing understanding. Despite their contributions, there are limitations to overcome.

In the next subsection are presented complementary structures of accountability that shape what is called in this essay “the accountability profile of third sector organizations” which is based on the relational nature of the interactions maintained with all actors involved in this complex process.

## **2.2 Third sector organizations accountability profile**

To compose the framework called “the accountability profile of third sector organizations”, in this section is unified and described what was proposed by Kearns (1994), Ebrahim (2003a) and Ebrahim (2010).

Investigating which notions of accountability are relevant for third sector organizations management, Kearns (1994, p. 185) proposed an analytical framework to salient the tactical and strategic choices with which these institutions deal, discussing its management and policy consequences. The framework is exhibited in Figure 1.

The framework is composed by two dimensions, one corresponds to a group of performance standards that can be implicit or explicit and is generated by the strategic environment of the organization. The second dimension, called “response”, is internal to the organization and may be proactive or reactive Kearns (1994, p. 187).

In terms of external control, assumptions, beliefs and societal values define the implicit standards which “involve general notions of acceptable administrative action and organizational behavior”. The codes as contractual obligations administrative regulations and law, which codify the explicit standards Kearns (1994, p. 187).

<b>Internal Response System</b>	<b>Mandate for External Control</b>	
	Implicit (De Facto)	Explicit (De Jure)
	Reactive (tactical)	Compliance Accountability
	Proactive (strategic)	Anticipatory/positioning Accountability
	Negotiated Accountability	Professional/discretionary Accountability

**Figure 1.** Dimensions of Accountability.

Source: Kearns (1994, p. 188).

As Kearns (1994, p. 187) explains, the four cells matrix exhibited in Figure 1 reveal an accountability system containing four dimensions that are inter related and distinct. The matrix provides a framework that can be used to the analysis of “alternative tactical or strategic responses to external forces” and “a classification scheme for different definitions of accountability”.

Understand the range of accountability relationships maintained by the third sector organizations is a challenge while is a complex process. To clarify it, Ebrahim (2003a, p. 200) translates “The relational nature of accountability” in a framework exhibited in Figure 2, where the first group, called funders, may be composed by “agencies, foundations, individual donors, corporate sponsors, international organizations” and Northern third sector organizations that, according to the author, support Southern third sector organizations.

The second group, called sector regulators, is composed by “government agencies” and “self-regulatory groups”. The last group, called clients and communities, is composed by people that are beneficiaries of projects implemented by the organization, persons indirectly affected by these projects and not directly involved with it and the ones that may pay or not for the organizations’ services, which Ebrahim (2003a, p. 200) calls “clients”.

In this range of relationships, as proposed by Ebrahim (2003a, p. 201), the organization may be principal or agent depending on the circumstances, that is, the “strong relationship” is represented by solid arrows and “weaker relationship” by the dashed ones. The accountability



enforcement is made by the use and presence of mechanisms and establish the “dominant direction of the relationship”.

The accountability profile of third sector organizations also is shaped, by the characteristics of accountability mechanisms proposed by Ebrahim (2010). The framework involves the challenges management of third sector organizations face in the everyday activities of such entities.

The author affirms the organizations deals with the challenge of prioritizing among diverse “competing accountability demands” and their efforts involve paying attention to some key questions. These questions are about the way accountability is accomplished “Accountability How”, the addressees “Accountability to Whom” and the purposes of its implementation “Accountability for What”.

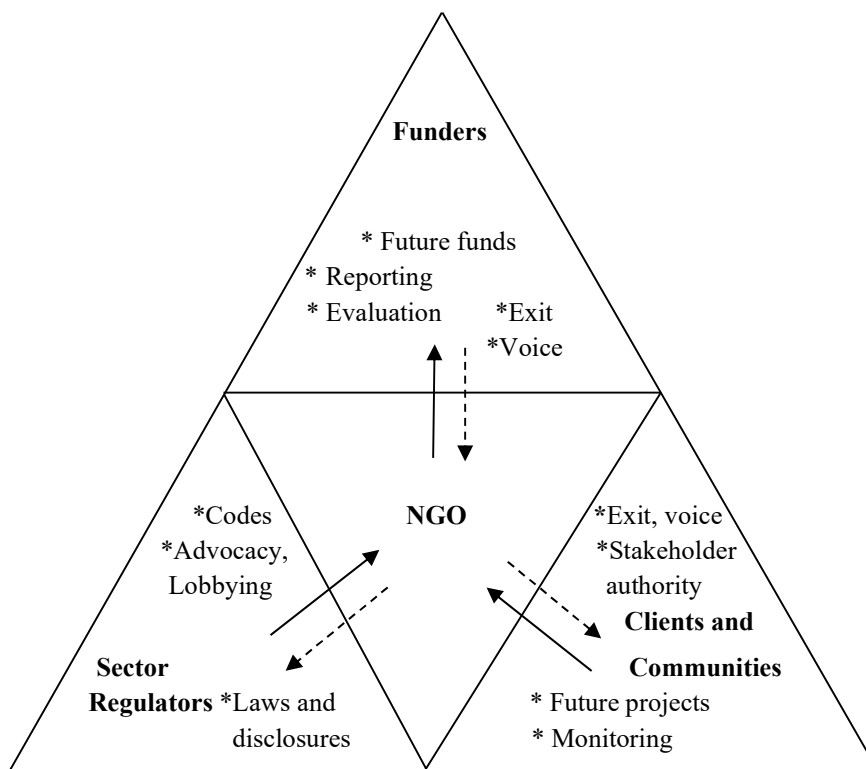


Figure 2. Principal-Agent Relations of Accountability.

Source: Ebrahim (2003a, p. 201).

In its practice the third sector organizations use five accountability mechanisms: reports and disclosure statements, evaluations and performance assessments, industry self-regulation, participation and adaptive learning. In his study the author analyses the comparative weaknesses and strengths of such mechanisms, differentiates “processes” and “tools”. Ebrahim (2010, p. 11) explains that accountability tools are technics and devices used by the institutions to achieve accountability. Processes mechanisms are “broad and multifaceted than tools”, they use a “set of tools for achieving accountability”.

The question “Accountability to Whom?” includes upward, downward and internal accountability to funders, oversight agencies, clients, members, communities, themselves as a sector, donors and other stakeholders.

The question “Accountability for What?” is about the disclosure of finances and performance for multiple publics, describing the performance in terms of increasing emphasis on impacts of short-term outputs. In this area governance and finance are also treated depending in what is emphasized by standards or codes. In the sense of participation purpose, the organization deals with influence (governance) or implementation (performance) agendas Ebrahim (2010).

There are external and internal inducements with which the third sector organizations must face acting in a complex context of accountability relations. According to Ebrahim (2010) influences are exerted by funding (risk of loss of funding or tax status), tax and legal requirements where the performance evaluation may be a potential learning tool.

The self-regulation in this arena may prevent “Erosion of public confidence due to scandals and exaggeration of accomplishments”. It involves organizational values and the adaptive learning may “improve performance to achieve mission”.

The organizational response (compliance or strategic), like exposed by Ebrahim (2010), involves following law for short-term outcomes and the performance assessment permits the compliance for longer-term evaluations. Self-regulation in this sense deals with standards to improve the relationship with diverse stakeholders, involving participation and adaptive learning.

Also, is considered the practice of third sector organizations accountability studied by Tacon *et al.* (2017, p. 687) which gathered what they called “typologies of accountabilities”, as presented by Christensen and Ebrahim (2006), Knutsen and Brower (2010) and Coule (2015):

- Upward accountability: to funders, donors and oversight agencies,
- Downward and lateral accountability: to communities and staff,
- Instrumental accountability: based on principal-agent relationships, mutual benefits, resource dependence and measurable outcomes,
- Expressive accountability: value-oriented / resource-consuming dimension. To the community, to the organizational mission, and to clients and members,
- Unitary logic: basis to the agency and stewardship theory and emphasizes a systems-control focused on instrumental accountability,
- Pluralist logic: basis to the stakeholder and democratic theory and emphasizes a process-relational approach focused on expressive accountability.

To understand the third sector organizations accountability profile as a framework, it is presented in a systemic way. First, the environment according to the stakeholders of these organizations are exhibited in Figure 3 and, second, the structure by kinds of accountability relations are shown in Figure 4.

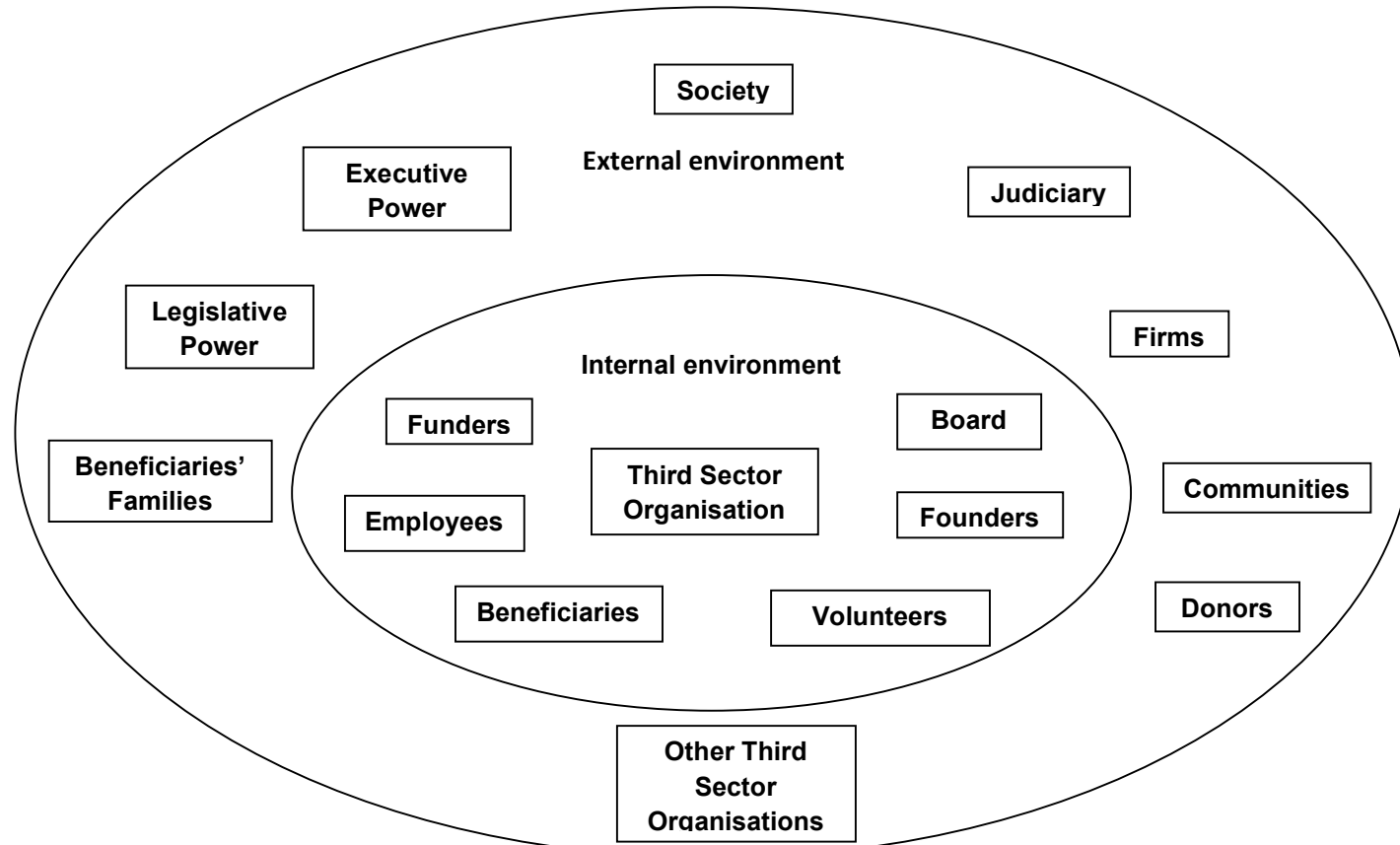


Figure 3. Third Sector Organizations Stakeholders and Environments.

Accountability	Stakeholder
Upward	Donors, Funders, Executive power, Legislative power, Judiciary, Society, Founders.
Lateral	Employees, Board, Mission, Volunteers, Communities, Beneficiaries, Beneficiaries' families, Society.
Downward	Beneficiaries, Beneficiaries' families, Society.
Expressive	Communities, Other Third Sector Organizations, Society, Beneficiaries, Beneficiaries' families.
Instrumental	Donors, Beneficiaries, Beneficiaries' families, Employees, Board, Volunteers, Society.
Unitary logic	Founders, Board, Funders.
Pluralist logic	Board.

Figure 4. Accountability relations.

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The essay is grounded on the proposition that the accountability profile of third sector organizations is based on the relational nature of the interactions maintained with all actors involved in this complex process. The contextualization treated the construct origins and contemporary aspects to introduce the reader in the theme.

To depict this reality, a literature review is used to confront accountability approaches proposed by multiple authors in contexts that are diverse. The theoretical origins involved the conceptualization structures proposed by different scholars like Bovens (2006) who defines accountability and emphasizes it as relationship and a broad process. In a complementary way adds relevant insights about this relational aspect of accountability, specially between the organizations and the actors present in their reality.

The propositions of Ebrahim (2003a), Ebrahim (2010) are aligned with Mulgan (2000) in the sense of accountability as transparent connection. The contribution of Dubnick (2002) to the debate resides in the analyses of accountability as a word and as a concept. Also different perspectives of accountability are explored, that is, the historical, ethical, legal, economic and principal-agent ones.

The discussion continues presenting the contributions of Mulgan (1995), Chisolm (1995), Tetlock (1985), Sinclair (1995), Hammack (1995), Lawry (1995), Ebrahim (2003a), Bogart (1995), Fry (1995), Coule (2015), Najam (1996), Knutsen and Brower (2010), about more specifics aspects about the accountability relations with the third sector organizations with actors of this very complex reality.

The complementary frameworks proposed by Kearns (1994) and Ebrahim (2010) are described as the main basis that shape the accountability profile of the third sector organizations. Kearns (1994) proposed an analytical framework to salient the tactical and strategic choices with which these institutions deal, discussing its management and policy consequences. The author explains the internal and external features of the framework.

Ebrahim (2003a) presents a structure of relationships, in the principal-agent perspective where the organization may be principal or agent depending on the circumstances, that is, the “strong relationship” or “weaker relationship”. In these diverse circumstances accountability

enforcement is made by the use and presence of mechanisms and establish the “dominant direction of the relationship”.

In the sequence, Ebrahim (2010) affirms the organizations deals with the challenge of prioritizing among diverse “competing accountability demands” and their efforts involve paying attention to some key questions. These questions are about the way accountability is accomplished “Accountability How”, the addressees “Accountability to Whom” and the purposes of its implementation “Accountability for What”. The author explains that in its practice, the third sector organizations use five accountability mechanisms: reports and disclosure statements, evaluations and performance assessments, industry self-regulation, participation and adaptive learning.

In addition, was considered the practice of third sector organizations accountability studied by Tacon *et al.* (2017, p. 687) which gathered what they called “typologies of accountabilities”, as presented by Christensen and Ebrahim (2006), Knutsen and Brower (2010) and Coule (2015).

For future research a deeper theoretical reflection may be developed considering more specifics social, economic, legal and political realities of the third sector organizations in different countries. Complementarily, empirical relevant studies may be implemented based on these deeper theoretical debate, giving these institutions new instruments to make accountability effective.

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