

## **NGOs and relief agencies sign accountability charter**

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The leaders of 11 major international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) last week decided to practice what they preach to governments and business by endorsing an "Accountability Charter" for themselves. The six-page charter commits its signatories to, among other things, comply with the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ensure "good governance" and transparency, and maintain high ethical standards in their fund-raising and advocacy activities.

The charter's debut, which came at the London headquarters of Amnesty International Tuesday, came on the eve of the Jun 21-25 summit of the CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation in Glasgow, Scotland, a meeting that is expected to draw representatives of NGOs from 100 countries to discuss issues relating to development, and civic and economic justice.

"This is a true landmark initiative for the international NGO community," said Kumi Naidoo, CIVICUS's secretary-general. "An amazing diversity of organizations have united around this charter, which is being developed, at a time when public trust in NGOs is already an all-time high and significantly higher than the ratings for government and business."

Besides Amnesty and CIVICUS themselves, other signers included ActionAid International, Consumers International, Greenpeace International, Oxfam International, International Save the Children Alliance, Survival International Federation Terre des Hommes, Transparency International, and the World YWCA.

A series of global surveys stretching back several years has shown that international NGOs enjoy greater trust among the general public in western countries and elsewhere than do governments, business, the media, or other major social and political institutions.

At the same time, the influence and visibility of these groups have grown significantly, particularly in multilateral forums where, among other activities, they have pressed for the adoption of new international treaties and legal norms binding national governments to more rigorous standards on human rights, environmental protection, arms, and international justice, among other issues.

They have also campaigned for the adoption of binding codes of conduct for multinational corporations (MNCs) covering such issues as human rights, environmental protection, corruption, transparency, and economic equity in their overseas operations.

These efforts have spurred something of a backlash on the part of some right-wing groups and governments which have questioned, among other things, whether NGOs were themselves as transparent and accountable as many of the corporations and governments whose behavior they tried to regulate.

In 2003, for example, the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the right-wing Federalist Society joined with the like-minded Australian think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs, in sponsoring an all-day conference here entitled "NGOs: the Growing Power of an Unelected Few" at which they also launched a new website, [www.ngowatch.org](http://www.ngowatch.org), dedicated to "bring accountability to the NGO sector".

"NGOs use their growing influence inside international organizations to push for the establishment of globalized standards and international legal norms," the site states. "Yet this growing local and global role has in large part been unchecked and unregulated."

To some extent, the new Charter can be seen as a response to this critique.

"NGOs are playing an increasingly prominent role in setting the agenda in today's globalised world," said Amnesty's secretary general, Irene Khan. "This places a clear responsibility on us to act with transparency and accountability."

"The Accountability Charter clearly shows that NGOs are willing to adhere to a code of conduct, lead by example, and encourage others to follow," she added.

David Nussbaum, the chief executive of Transparency International, echoed that view, noting that "International NGOs have an essential role to play in global governance. This charter sets out specific ways in which we demonstrate that our accountability means in practice. Transparency International advocates for open disclosure of relevant information to maintain trust and credibility -- for NGOs as well as for companies and governments."

The charter, which is voluntary, is designed for international NGOs in particular, and lays out basic principles to which all signatories subscribe, including basic freedoms of speech, assembly, and association, non-discrimination, and the advancement of international and national laws that "promote human rights, ecosystem protection, sustainable development and other public goods".

It calls for signatories to adhere to financial accounting and reporting requirements in the countries where they are based and operate and to issue detailed annual reports on their mission, operations, funding, and compliance with the charter and to ensure that its governance structure is transparent and responsive to its membership and stakeholders.

It similarly advocates principles of "ethical fundraising", including the rights of donors to be informed how their donation is used and how it furthers the organization's mission, and "professional management," including the use of best practices in financial management and defined evaluation procedures for boards, staff, programmes and projects.

It requires that any public criticism of individuals or organizations by signatory NGOs be "responsible" and be guided by principles of "fair public comment".

Signatories should conform to all international and national labor regulations, and compensation for staff "should strike a balance between public expectations of voluntary-based, not-for-profit organizations and the need to attract and retain the staff (needed) to fulfill their mission".

The Charter forbids acts of bribery or corruption, gender harassment, sexual exploitation and discrimination; and calls for protection of whistle-blowers. It requires signatories to break links with partner organizations or individuals involved in illegal or unethical practices.

Source: <http://www.asiantribune.com/>