

# ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

If corruption is the most damaging disease that any organization must confront, as discussed in the preceding section, then accountability and transparency are the major cures.

This subsection explores the dimensions and significance of accountability and transparency concepts and actions , beginning with the very useful introductory quotes below, and then exploring their evolution in the general administrative literature, followed by a compilation of quotes on accountability and transparency issues and problems in the United Nations over the years.

In 2001 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Organization of American States (OAS) organized a forum in Brazil on the common aim of building accountable and transparent public administrations that serve their citizens' needs (as already noted in the introductory material to this section on UN management accountability struggles.) The OECD:

" ... uses the term 'governance' -- and public governance in particular -- to describe how authority is distributed in the governmental system and how those who hold such authority are held to account. When it comes to the notion of good governance, we recognize a number of generally agreed principles, including:

- *Accountability*, meaning that it is possible to identify and hold public officials to account for their actions.
- *Transparency*, meaning that reliable, relevant and timely information about the activities of government is available to the public.
- *Openness*, meaning governments that listen to citizens and businesses, and take their suggestions into account when designing and implementing public policies. ...

To conclude, two key points are worth emphasizing:

- First, the success of public governance will ultimately be judged not by governments or international organizations, but by citizens. It is citizens who are demanding greater transparency and accountability from government as well as greater public participation in shaping policies that affect their lives. ...
- Second, good governance and the fight against corruption should not just be catchwords in international co-operation. They represent the keys for successful reform and for equitable and sustainable development. ..."

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Public sector transparency and accountability: Making it happen, OECD, Paris, 2002, pp. 3, 7, and 10.

A further paper in the OECD volume highlights an important followup point (which is returned to in The International "Right to Know" subsection of this archive):

"Public scrutiny of state affairs and access to information are key phases in the current debate on the development of democracy ... The two concepts are interdependent, since one cannot play its part under the rule of law without the other. There can be no public scrutiny without access to information. ...

... It is even possible to conclude ... that the level of democracy attained by a country should now be measured in terms of the volume and quality of the information in circulation. ...

... it should now be clear that it is not possible to fight corruption in the absence of a culture of transparency. Building such a culture can begin with a legislative commitment to the public that breaks with the many years of concealment and the persecution of those who take an interest in public affairs. ...

Legislation of this type must overcome the huge temptation to control access to information as a means of maintaining the conditions under which an authoritarian state can achieve its objectives. It must also overcome a culture of blatant isolation, behind which administrations have long sheltered in an effort to avoid 'undesirable' interference in their affairs."

Alfredo Chirino Sánchez, "The right of access to information and public scrutiny: Transparency as a democratic control instrument," in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Public sector transparency and accountability: Making it happen, OECD, Paris, 2002, pp. 163-166 [163, 166].

The multiple dimensions of the accountability concept should also be mentioned here:

" ... The fundamental element in improving organizational performance ... is the quality of overall management. Managers are people who get things done by working with other people to obtain organizational objectives. ... They must not only set an example through their own performance, but encourage employees throughout the organization to commit themselves to results, service, and quality work.

'Oversight' is fairly readily understood under the dictionary definitions of ... 'supervision' and 'watchful care' ... 'Accountability' essentially means responsibility to someone for one's actions taken ... to ensure that programmes have maximum impact and results ...

While accountability is primarily concerned with effective performance and results, recent research observes that it also involves systematic efforts to strengthen organizations in at least four different dimensions:

- (a) compliance accountability -- the narrowest aspect, involving enforcement of standards of performance or procedure;
- (b) negotiated accountability -- improvement of management and governance in response to changed conditions and demands from those to whom the organization is accountable;
- (c) professional/discretionary accountability -- voluntary initiatives taken to enhance the professional standards, management systems and technologies, and services of the organization; and

(d) anticipatory accountability -- helping shape and prepare for new accountability standards. "

Joseph G. Jabbra, and O. P. Dwivedi, eds., Public service accountability: A comparative perspective, Kumarian, West Hartford, Conn., USA, **1989**,

Kevin P. Kearns, "The strategic management of accountability in nonprofit organizations: An analytical framework," Public Administration Review (USA), 54, no. 2, **March/April 1994**, pp. 185-192, and

Samuel Paul, Strengthening public service accountability: A conceptual framework, Discussion paper No. 136, World Bank, Washington, D.C., **1991**, all as discussed in

Joint Inspection Unit, "Accountability, management improvement, and oversight in the United Nations System", Parts I and II, UN document A/50/503, 1995, Part I, paras. 9-11.

These accountability and transparency concepts are not unknown in the United Nations. They were succinctly and eloquently stated by the UN's top manager, Patricio Ruedas of Spain, in response to Member States' sharp criticisms of defective UN monitoring, evaluation, and reporting processes far back in 1985:

"Member States have ... stressed the need to be told, more clearly and more extensively .... what has been the programmatic performance of the Secretariat, which outputs have been delivered, and with which result....

Let us strengthen the monitoring and evaluation functions ...

Let us say clearly and dispassionately what has been done and with which result, and equally what has not been done and why....

Let us produce more analytical performance reports ....

I find the essential problem one of better and more transparent information, thus permitting better decisions."

"Statement", in the statement by UN Under-Secretary-General for Management Patricio Ruedas **12 November 1985**, as quoted in the Joint Inspection Unit report, "Reporting on the Performance and Results of United Nations Programmes: Monitoring, evaluation and management review components", UN document A/43/124, **1988**, p. 5.

Unfortunately, and almost two decades later, the United Nations has made little progress toward meeting these clear-cut standards, as discussed throughout the rest of this archive.