Accountability Information: A mode of Positive Image Creation for Social Enterprises

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Abstract

More recently, social enterprises are considered sustainable form of social purpose organizations due to financial sustainability goal. However, due to their dual focus and diversity of stakeholder, they face unique communication and governance challenge when compared with other social purpose organization. Given the multiplicity of stakeholders and plural institutional environment, this study offers insight into the tensions associated with the accountability and information management system of these organizations. A mixed research design was employed to study the accountability information reported by social enterprises and their underlying rationalities. The study findings suggest that accountability information are reported & employed with the focus on survival, resource generation, collective welfare, and positive image. Existing social enterprises adopted private arrangement or symbolic compliance for influencing legitimacy perceptions.

Keywords: Social enterprises, accountability information, multiple rationalities

Introduction

Hybrid organizations are contemporary organizational form in present-day society. Generally, hybrid organizations are characterized by three attributes: (1) a variety of stakeholders, (2) pursue multiple, complex and often inconsistent goals and (3) engage in diverse or conflicting activities (Mair et al. 2015). Although, opponents say that these are qualities of most organizations, yet literature on hybrids highlights that these characteristics are more prominent in some

organizations than others. Social enterprises are actually the ideal type of hybrids as they are the readymade laboratories for advancing research on hybrids (Billis, 2010). Social enterprises pursue dual mission of both business and charity (neither prioritizing any one form) as their core, thus considered as the most suitable form to study the hybrid organizing (Battilan & Lee, 2014). Social enterprises, due to their dual aim of addressing social issues in a financially sustainable way may face multiple challenges that are intrinsic to the both social purpose organization and business organization. (Gloria,2014). Managing accountability in social enterprises is among one of those challenges as it raises the concern of being accountable to the multiple stakeholders for both objectives (Connolly & Kelly, 2011).

Accountability for social enterprises is particularly important as they are a relatively new form of organization (Bissola & Imperatori, 2012) and need to establish legitimacy (Cornforth, 2014). Social enterprises are different from the other traditional forms, pursuing multiple goals, thus require a different form of accountability framework. Traditional form of accountability measure may distort these organization from their mission of value creation (Nicholls 2009; Gibbon and Dey 2011; Andreaus and Costa 2014). Connolly & Kelly (2011) mentioned the two models of accountability; user's information needs based model and reporting based on social, economic, and political interests. Both models vary with respect to their focus and priority.

In commercial organization, financial performance dominates over all the performances. On the other hand, not-for- profit organization define their bottom line in term of social performance (Pratten, 2004). However, social enterprises fall between these two extremes, as they are accountable for both of these performances to the multiple stakeholders of the organization. This informs the presence of plural and multiple rationalities in the organizational sphere. A large number of theories were borrowed from various disciplines to explain the co-existence multiple rationalities in organizations. Among those, the most notable ones are institutional pluralism, competing rationalities, and pluralistic contexts, institutional logics and French pragmatic sociology (Julia Brandl, 2014). These theories have focused on the ways organizations gain and maintain legitimacy by employing the formal structures hence conform to the socially constructed norms and beliefs. (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995).

This paper adds to the literature on legitimacy struggle within relatively contemporary form of dual-purpose organizations and helps to have a deeper understanding of the legitimacy dynamics at play to attain legitimacy within these organizations.

Accountability framework encompasses multiple worlds' views so incorporates practices in which multiple rationalities collide. The fundamental element to accountability practices of social enterprises is that they try to establish legitimacy in situations where neither the practices nor the (institutional) environment is fixed.Therefore, these contested arguments over the interpretation and value of accountability framework must be reconciled in order to reach at a legitimate compromise or agreement. Stabilizing and legitimating accountability practices is not just the mere compliance and meeting the audience expectations but it necessitates the societal involvement over public discourses. This advances an argument over what is valued or valuable through accountability framework from the broader perspective.

Most likely accountability framework in social enterprises is implicated in numerous compromises due to involvement of multiple rationalities but there are very few insights over the limits and fragility of those compromises in hybrid organizations (Bommel,2014)

Despite the fact to report on all aspect of the organizational performance, still focus is on communicating the selected activities that they consider worthy of disclosure. Mostly the focus is on the financial aspects because most of the regulatory controls revolve around the financial aspect only rather than seeing the inclusive stakeholder perspective (Vesty et al., 2018). Given that social enterprise dual purpose where financial aspect is inextricably entwined with the not-for-profit purpose, accountability system must meaningfully link, meet and communicate the both purposes simultaneously.

Firms explicitly or implicitly keep social contracts with broader society and try to achieve "fit" between the firm's strategies and multiple stakeholders' demand mostly of salient stakeholders in order to be legitimate (Deegan, 2007). Now the concern is to study the mechanism of these comprises to know how these compromises are actually negotiated (Vesty et al., 2018). Instead of taking actors as part of process of communicative dialogue, previous studies considered them as evaluators of legitimacy only (Reinecke et al., 2012). This is significantly important especially in the case of multifaceted practices developing in complex environment where multiple

rationalities need to be reconciled in order to reach at stable and legitimate form of agreements or compromises (Van Bommel, 2014).

Financial reports are quite standardized and institutionalized now. However, sustainability reports are still in the process of institutionalizations (Hubbard, 2009). One of the features of Accountability process of social enterprise is that it involves both of these forms of value measurement and communication mechanisms thus navigate between two worlds/rationalities, also handle the multiple stakeholders' participation in decision-making process, which adds to layers of complexity and pluralism. In order to unpack the work around accountability framework and the difficulties involved in bringing multiple worlds together in a legitimate form, following research questions were investigated.

RQ1: What type of information is displayed by Social Enterprises regarding Accountability

RQ1. Which rationalities can be identified to understand the complexity of accountability system?

Literature Review

Why is the world observing an exceptional growth of social enterprises over the past few years? Alex Nicholls from Oxford University assert that world has finally realized that all old forms have failed to deliver impact post financial crises in 2008. Nicholls (2008) believe social enterprises emerge as an innovative solution to address all the problems of old models. However, good intentions are not enough. They must be accountable for their mission and social impact they create in order to be legitimacy. Accountability for social enterprises is much more complex than commercial and non-for-profits as they must incorporate both social and financial accountability aspects into their system (Zadek 2009). Furthermore, social accountability is much more different and difficult to measure because of variation of social objectives, absence of standardized measures for quantifying social impact (Silverstein and Maher 2008). Though, struggles have been made by practitioners and scholars to improve the social enterprise accountability, but still there is much needed to be done (sajda,2014)

Definition of Social enterprise

There is little consensus in previous research regarding definition of social enterprises. This may be due to the potential complexity of the concept itself as its traditional definition is based on the concept of altruism- a social responsibility with no intention to make financial benefits (Sajda,

2014). That is why few people still believe that these both aspects social welfare and commercial activities cannot co-exist. However, after financial crises of 2008 majority supports the concept of financially sustainable social purpose organization. so the concept of social enterprises is based on the self-sufficiency which leads towards achievement of core purpose (social motives). In UK, the Department of Trade and Industry defined social enterprises as the "businesses with primarily social purposes whose surpluses are principally reinvested for the given social purposes, rather than being driven by motive of profit maximization". While this concept acknowledges the presence of business case along with social motive but aim may not be the profit maximization but to maintain breakeven in order to fulfill social goals (Social Enterprise Coalition, 2008).

Accounting and accountability

Accountability was traditionally defined as the purpose activity directed towards meeting the user'information need only (Accounting Standards Board (ASB), 1999; Accounting Standards Steering Committee, 1975; American Accounting Association, 1966; Connolly. 2011). These publications were about the corporate accounting, which stimulated debate in NFPOS as well. It is also evident in NFPOs literature that multiplicity of stakeholders makes it difficult to meet every stakeholder's demand and sometimes decision in NFPOs are based on non-accounting information. Secondly, measuring social impact is much more difficult than measuring profits. Second strand of literature considers the accountability paradigm as base of organizational reporting. This paradigm includes social, political reporting along with economic and focus on all stakeholders other than just investors (Coy et al., 2001). Accountability is about being responsible for one's action or justifying one's action (Edwards and Hulme, 1995). It is based on the relationships of variety of stakeholders, few of them are giving accounts of their actions/ behavior and other are judging it. in NFPOS including social enterprises, this paradigm takes precedence over the use-needs model. Social enterprises are not only responsible for their financial aspect but to variety of stakeholders in order to gain the public support for their mission. Edwards and Hulme (1995) highlighted the complexity of meeting the multiple demands and referred it as the issue of "over accounting" and "under accounting".

Given the non-availability of any precise definition of social enterprise and complexity surrounding dual mission, it appeals for a dedicated accountability framework for this type of

organization (Connolly, 2011). It is imperative to study what drives the accountability system of these organizations.

Data and Method

Our empirical setting is social enterprise of Pakistan. Though pluralism is concern of all kinds of organization, social enterprise constitutes an interesting object to study the multiple rationalities present in organizations (Battilana & Lee, 2014). Social enterprise's identity draws on multiple rationalities so they strive to balance these pluralistic logics. This characteristic makes them amenable to study the individual response to organizational pluralism because actors in these organization often face the situation where they require justifying their actions (Jagd, 2011).

In Pakistan, social enterprise sector is comparatively new. Currently, there is no legislation for regulating social enterprise. Social enterprises are being regulated through existing legislation in Pakistan. A Social Entrepreneurship in Planning Commission of Pakistan was set up to formulate policies and procedures for governing and promoting social enterprises in Pakistan, which is working on policies formulation for this sector. This study focuses on the accountability framework of social enterprises of Pakistan. This is appropriate not only because social enterprise sector is still at its initial phase and free from legislation. To study the accountability framework of Pakistani social enterprises, mixed research design based on 29 in-depth interviews and content analysis of evidences available in form of annual reports and documents on social media, websites etc. Several data sources were used for the purpose of this study. As triangulating data, sources enhance reliability and trustworthiness. Primary data collection was managed in two phases. In first phase, we randomly contacted with mangers of social enterprises in order to request participation in the study. After that, snowball sampling was used based on the recommendation of the interviewees. This approach has helped us in identifying the actors with characteristics fit for the study. Table 1 provides the overview of the interviewees and table 2 provides the overview of data sources. Semi-structured interviews (average 60 minutes per interview) were conducted, tape recorded and transcribed afterwards. In some cases, extensive written notes were taken where interviewees did not allow us to record. The focus of interviews was on following main areas. First, understanding the term accountability in social enterprise and stakeholder involved. Second,

the role of accountability and third, understanding the existing accounting practices (how they are performed actually). Fourth, the existing conflicts and mechanisms to reconcile these conflicts.

In second phase, interview data was combined with the secondary data (reports, websites, and social media). We did not observe any major contradiction in secondary data. This helped us to make deeper understanding of the field.

Table 1: Overview of the interviewees

Actor Group	Number of Interviews
Microfinance	10
Health sector	6
Development sector	9
Education sector	4

Table 2: Overview of the data sources

Type of data	Detail of Sources	Amount of data	Data analysis
Interview with field informants	Interviews with founder members, CEOs, Manger Audit, Manager Finance, Business development Head	29 interviews with average duration of approx. 45 minutes per interview	Transcribing, analyzing and coding of interviews.
Secondary data	Social media Accounts, Annual reports, Websites	Data relevant to accountability process	Contextual reading and content analysis for identifying the actual practices in order to enhance the credibility of interview data

Data Analysis

Content analysis was performed on secondary data. Data which was available on social media platforms, annual reports and websites, analyzed. It gave rise to ten different themes related to accountability information. Whereas Primary data was analyzed in two phases. In first phase, we did extensive reading of the transcribed interviews along with data collected through secondary sources. Initial codes were developed based on multiple systemic reading of the empirical data. In 2nd phase, we identified the rationalities present in the accountability framework of social enterprises. This involved the reading the empirical material again for coding and identifying the themes according the multiple rationalities present in the system of accountability.

Findings

RQ1: Type of Accountability Information

The secondary data which was present on websites of organizations in the form of annual reports and data which was available on different platforms of social media was collected and analyzed. Total 29 organizations were selected, which comprised of 10 small/medium sized whereas 19 were considered large. Ten common themes were observed among twenty-nine organizations. Independent t-Test was performed to observe difference among small/ medium and large organizations regarding accountability themes reflected on different media such as reports, websites and social media.

Table 3: Statistical analysis

Themes	type	N	M	SD	t(df)	t-statistics	p-value
Activities, objectives and nature of work	Small	10	1	.000	27	1.576	.051
	Large	19	0.79	.419			
Key members of the organization	Small	10	1	.000		1.576	.051
	Large	19	0.79	0.419			
Governance	Small	10	0.40	0.516		2.649	.000
	Large	19	0.84	0.376			
Trustee selection and appointment	Small	10	0.60	0.56		2.525	.000

	Large	19	0.229	0.053		
Investment policy	Small	10	0.50	0.527	3.205	.000
	Large	19	0.79	0.419		
Approach to risk management	Small	10	0.50	0.421	1.961	.000
	Large	19	0.90	0.527		
Identification of risks	Small	10	0.90	0.316	2.231	.001
	Large	19	1	0.000		
social auditing	Small	10	0.20	0.422	3.106	.000
	Large	19	0.74	0.452		
key stakeholders	Small	10	0.60	0.516	2.525	.000
	Large	19	0.95	0.229		
Stakeholders' involvement in decision	Small	10	0.70	0.483	2.313	.000
	Large	19	0.89	0.315		

The result shows that there is no difference between small/medium and large organizations regarding activities, objectives and nature of work, and identification of key members of organizations whereas both these type of organizations show significant difference regarding other themes of accountability reporting. It was also observed that small/medium organizations are less inclined towards social audits showing mean value M= 0.20

From the in-depth analysis of interviews this study finds the three themes accountability for building trust and resource generation, accountability for efficient and effective operation, accountability for collective welfare and better society. Here the elements of economic, social rational are visible.
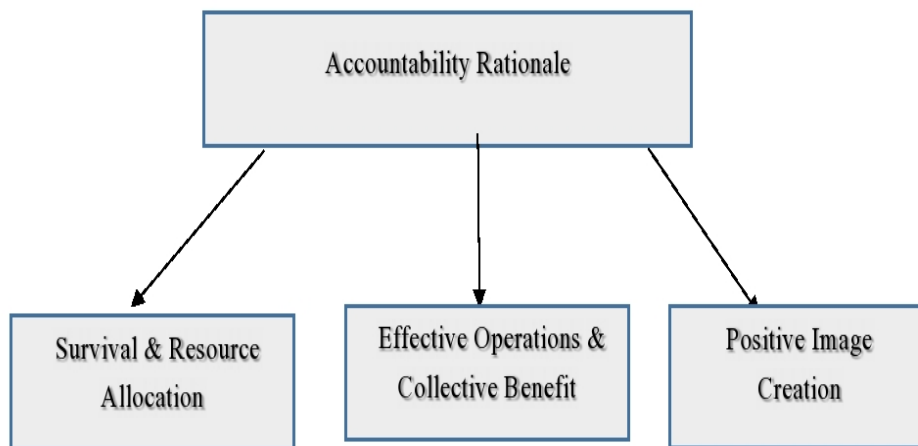
RQ2: Rationale behind Accountability information

Three broader themes were identified as base for the accountability system in these organizations. Accountability mechanisms were mostly motivated by the survival and resource acquisition, effective operations, collective benefits and the positive image.

A social enterprise accountability system must be developed to report on the core values of the enterprise rather than only taking firm's financial value in consideration, from a social

mission perspective the function of the accountability system must be broadened in order to include data related to the impact on society as a whole. However, donors are still the dominant stakeholders in social enterprises just like NGOs. The whole system of accountability revolves around them.

The below remarks by various respondent of social enterprises completely validate the above argument.

Figure 1: *Themes regarding rationale behind accountability information*

CEO of one social enterprise said

"See, there are three to four main stakeholders. Out of which one is the who is funding, who is basically investing. Second the management, and the people for whom we are working for; the beneficiaries. Government is an indirect stakeholder. As the Regularity authority is with them, we are supposed to share some information with them"

One regional finance officer of (Social enterprise-7G) said

"Donors are one of the stakeholders and the other one…………………are the donors and few regulatory bodies like SECPs. Obviously, we are public limited company by guarantee that is why the SECP regulates our organization. As we own the license of non-banking microfinance, so we report to SECP as well. Along with this, we also report to our donors"

He further added that

"We are bound to comply with multiple regulatory requirements due to its legal status and they have to meet the donors multiple demands like they are interested in organizational health and its formal structure for funding purpose. There are number of NGO's, some are based on partnership, others worked as company just like ours. So, enterprise works according to its legal status"

One participant from microfinance sector mentioned that

"As mentioned earlier, our biggest stakeholder is the one who is funding us and hence we are answerable and accountable to them. Since they are providing funds, it's their sheer right to be well-informed about all that's left, expenses, and investments being made. We generate a report and share it with our stakeholder periodically. We do not have any other options than this. Neither we are scared while sharing information with them. Bearing in mind the fact that they are the donors and it's their right to know all about it".

So, here the economic rational dominates over social. Social enterprises are mostly interested towards retaining their donors and source of revenue rather than considering stakeholder inclusiveness. Though, Social enterprise must include analysis of financial risk associated with social impact/performance but that should not be limited to the report on non-financial issues only to those who are perceived to be relevant to company's financial performance (vanbommel,2014). In the above statement, values lies in societal justness rather than mere focus on financial concerns. So, this rightly refers to the need to include the other stakeholders along with beneficiaries among the impactful and influential stakeholders.

Upon inquiring the role and influence of others stakeholder in developing accountability system, respondents acknowledge the role of government as regulatory body in setting the system but majority of them consider it as a impediment to their social enterprise performance.

One of the CEO of NGO that later turned into Social enterprise explained the role of government as stakeholder

"Government is an indirect stakeholder. As the Regularity authority, we are supposed to share some information with them. Like, discussion over how and where the funds are being provided and in what ways these funds are being spent, so in this regard, they become our stakeholders too."

Advancing the above debate, he further said

"But when it comes to Government, we do confront some sort of reluctance. As it's our personal experience and other colleagues from different NGO`s also share their incidents; that once they are informed about the funding amount and if it's in a big number, they begin to make personal demands and requests; like kindly get out rug changed for us, maintenance of furniture and a few directly demands cash. This problem is typically associated with NFGOs."

One CEO of social enterprise (12L) mentioned that

"let's suppose if we fail or do not fulfill their demands; we will have to face the consequences of this by having trouble in getting a NOC. This is where we encounter a bit of difficulty. So, we try to inform with the least"

"Officially we do state it as it is, let's say if it's Rs. 100 then it would be stated the same way. On an unofficial level, we try to inform less in order to face lesser demands from them. Else the more the amount is shown to them the higher their demands would get".

Another participant stated

"The government can be considered as stakeholders, like they have issued an act which implies the registration of the organization with the charity council. Government is probably a stakeholder given that they keep a check and balance. The law and other considerations are from the government whether they are not providing any help, So is FBR"

Respondent from social enterprise serving the disabled said

"Whenever you are registered with any organization, let's say FBR, Society act, social Welfare lawfully, these all are governmental organization. Consequently, all the documentation is executed and all the compliances are followed up"

Manager from microfinance sector added that

"Punjab Govt does not have much involvement except the three boards of directors, the provincial government secretaries. Because they are not the majority, that's why they cannot influence the decisions much"

When we probed on the importance of the involvement and participation of beneficiaries, respondents confirmed the little involvement. On answering the question whether they involve beneficiaries in decision-making, the CEO responded

"Very rare. Their involvement is of just ceremonial nature. Actually it does not happen"

Accountability of social enterprises also involves an attempt to protect the social mission of the organization along with financial mission. So a social enterprise is considered worthy if its mechanisms for discharging social mission accountability are as strong as of financial performance. This point is particularly salient in hybrid organizations than NGOs. So, it must include voice of all stakeholders instead of just few.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we tried to empirically study the accountability process of social enterprises in the context of Pakistan. We have studied the accountability process with respect to pluralism/multiple rationalities associated with it and the possibilities of hindrance to or reconciliation of multiple rationalities in the enterprises combining two inconsistent themes of commercial and social mission. Sociology of worth perspective helped us to understand the accountability process of social enterprises on one hand and the legitimacy struggle of these organizations in heterogeneous and complex environment.

As we see the multiplicity of rationalities are explicit in the accountability system of social enterprises, so this necessitates the need to analyze the complexity involved in the system. Accountability system in social enterprise has important implication as it has to oversee both the social and financial performance and manage the voices of multiple stakeholders. The presence of multiple rationales is evident in the above discussion that necessitates the need for some legitimate and durable compromise.

Multiplicity of rationales create situations of perceived injustice where natural order promoting common good cannot emerge on its own, so it requires efforts to restore natural order through institutional work either by preventing those situations where relative worth is challenged or resolving injustice within situation itself through compromise. Disputes can be settled through various ways. It can be settled by reaching a common interest, or avoiding clarification and maintaining ambiguity

In compromise, people agree to come to common terms without settling it to just one justification/rationale. The situation remains composite but clash is avoided. All themes associated with accountability system whether it is economic or social have material effects/ consequences.

Therefore, the accountability system must absorb the tensions of both economic and social world in order to make this world more transparent and accountable. In doing so, accountability system must devise mechanisms that pursue both of them equally rather than giving preference to any particular worth.

Following these concerns, forging a legitimate comprise sharing common interest is essential and difficult to achieve in these organizations. Common interest signifies what is the purpose of accountability system and who should it address that seems lost in most of the organizations. The NGOs in the process of converting into social enterprises privilege financial side of accountability system more than social. They use social measurement and other social accountability practices only as smokescreen. However, the larger and well-established social enterprises were found to be comparatively transparent and more genuine. As argued in previous studies, accountant, donors and audit firms who mobilize evidences, establish tests, and try to control the interpretation of evidences provided by others are blamed to capture the dialogues and pursue private interest by privileging only economic rational rather than searching for common interest for all (Ramirez, 2013; Kaplan and Murray, 2010).

In fact, the dialogues between the actors, who can actually provide useful insight to understand the accountability system, are strongly influenced by the professionals, investors, donors, regulators, auditors. These actors mostly advance their commercial position by propagating their market and industrial agenda. So, instead of general form of accountability, managerial focus on social or non- financial aspect must also be considered as valued as other forms of accountability. On that basis, it has been observed that durable legitimate compromises are difficult to achieve in accountability process since most of the compromises pursue private interest of dominant actor hence violate the principle mechanism of finding common good (Huault and Rainelli-Weiss, 2011). Mostly, managers, accountants, and donors are often accused of pursuing private interest through capturing the dialogue instead of searching for a common interest (Bommel, 2014).

Most of the managers of social enterprises consider themselves accountable to donors at first priority. On answering the practices used for discharging accountability, they mostly mentioned the audited statements based on the fact the desire/preference of audit industry to come with quantifiable indicators/ statistics. As in the contest of Pakistan where this field is still

evolving, donors and regulatory bodies mostly count on the audited financial statements/quantifiable indicators for decision-making purpose.

So, the findings highlight not only the complexities surrounding this comparatively novel organizational form and its benefits associated with it but also the problems and limitations of its accountability mechanisms. The empirical analysis suggests accountability practices run the risk of privileging the powerful discourse of the economic at the expense of civic duty.

As discussed above, in accountability framework of social purpose organizations there is always a risk of favoring the local/private agreement among the few rather pursuing the legitimate interests of many. This refers to the mission drift in social purpose organization. However, that is particularly associated with nature and complexity of hybrid form itself. This calls for innovative solution to emerge. This study contributes to emerging accounting research following calls in the literature (Annisette and Richardson, 2011; Ramirez, 2013, Bommel, 2013). In particular, it provides a deeper insight of the dynamic process through which complex accountability practices attempt to gain legitimacy. Finally, this study illustrates the how compromises are constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated to achieve conformity with audiences' expectations.

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