Comments on Bruno-van Vijfeijken and Schmitz

The important issues raised by Bruno-van Vijfeijken and Schmitz largely pertain to the US-based international development NGOs. I would agree with the main thrust of the essay—that it is important for these particular NGOs and their Southern partners to give more attention to their own governance and accountability mechanisms. I do not agree, however, that this lacuna is precipitating an ‘endemic problem’ of fragmentation within the sector. As discussed above (and other authors in this issue assert more strongly), the emergence of differing strands of civil society is only to be expected and divergence is not in itself a problem. What is a problem—or at least a vulnerability—is the lack of clear accountability structures of publicly prominent NGOs, particularly when those NGOs are in receipt of public funds or are challenging the governance of state bodies and mechanisms.

The authors assert that weak governance mechanisms make CSOs ‘vulnerable to the whims of donors and boards’ and that this ‘fosters civil society fragmentation’. I am not sure what is meant here. A CSO that derives most of its income from its members or supporters and which has a board comprising its most prominent activists should be led by the views of its donors and boards; a greater problem is when the CSO’s management loses sight of its base. When an NGO (and it never is another form of CSO) is overwhelmingly funded by the government and the government nominates members of its board, this is a state-captured NGO that can hardly expect to escape from the ‘whims’ of its board and donors. In between these poles there are many NGOs, particularly development NGOs, that have a weak support base and that depend on and are largely accountable to a narrow group of institutional donors (official, corporate, foundations, etc.). For these, ensuring that they are accountable for their effectiveness is a priority.

The article also refers to accountability to ‘beneficiaries’, which is important for service-delivery NGOs, but the large majority of CSOs are not service providers but, typically, membership bodies. For them the challenge is to be led by, and accountable to, their support base. Associations can be well represented by boards, provided they are drawn from their members. When their executives increasingly bring in board members to represent their big donors or for other reasons, a growing disconnect with the membership is possible. While modern communication technology eases communications with members, it does not necessarily resolve this challenge.

While I agree with most of the essay I also contest a couple of other points. Bruno-van Vijfeijken and Schmitz point to the emergence of a new breed of NGO watchdogs as evidence that the NGO sector as a whole has not given enough attention to outcome accountability. I doubt this. Having looked at a number of them, it is clear that the issues probed by
these watchdogs tend overwhelmingly to the very basic issues of effectiveness and governance (what percentage of revenues goes to overheads, salaries of top executives, whether accounts and annual reports are published, primary purposes, etc.). They rarely get to deeper issues of outcomes, and exist largely to offer a service to the increasing number of people and small institutions who want to make donations and seek a basic level of assurance of the bona fides of the causes they may support. There are also a few right-wing groups who are probing NGOs because they are suspicious of them—such as ‘NGO Watch’ (at the American Enterprise Unit) which provides profiles of NGOs that may be useful to conservative critics of NGOs.

The authors suggest that advocacy groups have particular problems acting collectively. The inherent bias towards competition exists in all schools of NGO—in particular, I would argue, in operational (rather than advocacy) NGOs, since they are most assiduous in marketing their unique strengths as part of their thirst for funds. Advocacy groups are less focused on raising funds and actually see more advantage in cooperating, since a ‘swarm’ of NGOs is more likely to appear convincing and win media coverage, etc. than an isolated group.

Finally, the authors state that working for a ‘civil society consensus [is] necessary to get more access to intergovernmental organizations and state-dominated negotiations’. For reasons other authors have set out, fostering consensus within civil society is neither feasible nor desirable. I would emphasize instead the need for grander, better connected CSO coalitions, but even getting like-minded CSOs to speak together is problematic.