

PART IV

ADAPTING TO ACCOUNTABILITY

As promising and attractive as accountability mechanisms seem to those seeking to resolve the problems of governance, the reality of our political and organizational worlds inevitably frustrates even the most dedicated reformers. The situated nature of accountability begs for a more informed and nuanced approach to applying accountability where sectoral, temporal, or even spatial factors can make or break such efforts. It is evident that we need to pay greater attention to the process of adapting to the circumstances and pressures generated by accountability expectations.

Christopher Hood takes note of the existence of a stream of writing in political science that is relevant to these issues. He shows that study of “blame avoidance” in all its forms provides a potentially rich source of ideas about the strategic responses emerging from the circumstances that characterize governance and political life. His essay only touches the surface, but it furthers the general discussion of how the analytic treatment of accountability can be enhanced by thinking both more broadly and in-depth about its place in political studies.

The context of accountability is evident as well in the chapter by Margaret Karns, Timothy Shaffer, and Richard Ghere, who offer a study of PROSHIKA, an NGO dedicated to improving the economic opportunities and well-being of the poor of Bangladesh through microcredit programs. The complex circumstances shaping the work of PROSHIKA go well beyond the organization’s task of dealing with multiple, diverse, and often conflicting expectations. Working within the context of the modern state, NGOs such as PROSHIKA that are dedicated to bringing about social change form a special challenge to the legitimacy of the regime within which they operate. To succeed in light of the inherent state-NGO tensions requires adaptations that often constrain and frustrate—and such strategic choices impact NGO priorities and operations and may require the organization to fall short of expectations in the eyes of other stakeholders.

But surrendering to dysfunction and frustration may not be inevitable or the only option for NGOs. Building on years of study and direct observation of accountability in the nonprofit sector, Kevin Kearns posits a life-cycle framework for comprehending—and dealing with—the different challenges that accountability poses over time for third-sector organizations.