

# ACCOUNTING AND AUDITING PRACTICES IN NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS: EVIDENCE FROM FIJI

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the accounting and auditing practices in non-governmental organizations. It seeks to understand accounting processes and reporting practices in non-governmental organizations. Non-governmental organizations have become important institutions in world affairs but accounting research has not developed significant interest in their operations and accounting practices. We use content analysis on the annual reports of 20 non-governmental organizations operating in Fiji. The results show variations in the accounting and auditing practices of the non-governmental organizations. Further analysis indicates that a number of factors influence the accounting and auditing practices of non-governmental organizations. Our analysis shows that financial reporting practices are in part shaped by the requirements of donor agencies and influence of specific stakeholder groups. We also find that the need to legitimize their operations also influences the accounting and auditing practices of non-governmental organizations. This paper contributes to the limited empirical research on the accounting and auditing practices of non-governmental organizations in developing markets.*

**JEL:** M40, M41

**KEYWORDS:** Non-governmental Organizations, Accounting, Auditing

## INTRODUCTION

The institutional structure of free-market societies is defined by the existence of three main sectors, the public sector, the private business sector and the private non-governmental sector (Weisbrod, 1975). The public sector comprises of state-owned companies, government entities and agencies that fall under parliamentary regulation. The private sector on the other hand operates with a capitalist view, their annual accounts are subject to an independent audit and they are controlled by ownership interests. Apart from these two relatively well-defined sectors, there is another more complex and heterogeneous sector. The non-governmental sector includes charities, churches, clubs, credit and trade unions, cultural, educational, disability service, environmental, health support, religious, social welfare service, sporting, women, youth, business, and professional organizations. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are organizations that are not part of government and are not conventional for-profit businesses. The existence of a substantial number of non-governmental organizations can be explained by altruistic motives. Some also arise out of market failure which government does not sufficiently correct for, for example, organizations protecting the environment. These entities have been characterized as exhibiting complexity in their aims, in the way in which they affect society, in the overlapping relationship for which they may be held accountable and in the diffused exchange relationship, which markets, do not capture (Jegers and Lapsley, 1998).

Non-governmental organizations contribute significantly to the development of economies. The growing importance of NGOs and the increasing amount of resources managed by NGOs has increased the demand for financial information. There is, as a result, a two-fold effect on demand for financial information for NGOs. First, NGOs need to obtain funds from donors in competition with other NGOs and private and public entities to carry out their activities. In negotiations about activities and funding

arrangements with sponsors, government agencies, lenders and other entities, financial performance information contributes to showing the efforts and accomplishments of the entity and can help obtain social and financial support. In addition, the growing amount of funds flowing through these types of organizations calls for more accountability to stakeholders including donors and the public. This need for accountability gives rise to the need for a comprehensive and robust regulatory framework upon which the financial reporting systems could be based. This is what is lacking in many economies including developed ones. Research interest in this sector has also grown in the international arena. This can be evidenced by the creation of a special section in the American Accounting Association dedicated to this sector. Given the importance of this sector, financial reporting regulations are underdeveloped for such organizations. The regulators in many developed countries have for long focused on the regulatory requirements of listed public entities, however, only recently did this sector receive attention from researchers. Hence, there is a lacuna, in regulations related to financial reporting as well as research into the financial reporting practices by such organizations.

This paper explores the accounting and auditing practices of NGOs in Fiji. It seeks to provide insights that will provide regulators, legislators, and stakeholders a better understanding of the factors that shape financial reporting practices of NGOs. The rest of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 provides a review of literature and presents the research questions that are explored in this paper. Section 3 presents the methodology employed followed by section 4 that presents the results of this study. Section 5 concludes this paper.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In Fiji, the Charitable Trusts Act (1965) governs the establishment of NGOs. This act, however, provides no requirements or guidance on reporting by entities registering under the act (this can be enforced by the registrar but there are no specific provisions). The law (Fiji's Charitable Trusts Act) also fails to provide for issues related to governance of organizations created under the act (Lakshman, 2004). This indicates apparent lacuna in regulations related to financial reporting by NGOs in Fiji as the accountability functions of the NGOs are not well defined in law. The Value Added Tax Decree 1991 and the Income Tax Act (Cap 201) are some of the other laws that affect the NGO operations in Fiji.

Apart from the Charitable Trust Act being the principal legislation, separate laws exist that governs particular NGOs. For example Religious Bodies Registration Act for religious organizations; Friendly Societies Act for 'friendly societies'; Clubs Act for clubs; Trade Union Act for trade unions and Cooperative Act for the cooperatives. Some legislation governing the professional bodies include the Legal Practitioners Act for lawyers and the Fiji Institute of Accountant's Act for accountants. Other NGOs still are registered under specific Acts such as Fiji Disabled Peoples Association, which is registered under the Fiji National Council for Disabled Persons Act (1994), and the children Homes registered under the Juvenile Act. Over 500 NGOs are in existence in Fiji (Mohanty, 2008). These NGOs provide services in various sectors including the environmental sector, the health sector and the education sector. NGOs contribute immensely to the education sector in Fiji. Nearly 90 per cent of secondary and technical vocational schools in Fiji are operated by NGOs (Mohanty, 2008) together with a substantial number of primary schools. Several NGOs participate in the health sector amongst these are the Fiji Disabled People's Association, Fiji Crippled Children Society, Fiji Society for Blind, and JP Bayley Trust. Additionally, AIDS Task Force of Fiji, Fiji Cancer Society, and Kidney Foundation of Fiji are some of the leading agencies for NGO initiatives in their respective fields.

There exist a number of NGOs indulging in environment conservation, for example, South Pacific Action Committee on Human Ecology and the Environment (SPACHEE), Green Peace Pacific, Pacific Concern Resource Centre (PCRC), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Wildlife Conservation Society.

Overall, NGOs contribute significantly to the society and the economy of Fiji and the rest of the world. We now look at issues related to the financial reporting of NGOs.

Bird and Morgan-Jones (1981) conduct a survey of financial reporting by charity organisations in the United Kingdom (U.K.). They found that amongst a sample of 85 NGOs, accounting practices varied widely. Ashford (1991) reviewed the accounts of 56 NGOs and found similar results to Bird and Morgan-Jones (1981). There was a wide variety of accounting practices being employed by charitable organisations 10 years later in the U.K. Goddard and Assad (2006) investigated the phenomena of accounting by NGOs in Tanzania. They report that accounting reports provided by NGOs played the role of navigating organisational legitimacy (in many cases to donors) and that, these reports played minimal role in internal decision-making. Ebrahim (2003) noted the same and stated that “upward” or “external” accountability to donors are well in place while “internal” or downward mechanisms are underdeveloped. A range of other studies also provides evidence on financial reporting practices of NGOs (see for example Bekkers, 2002, Harper and Harper, 1988, Alvey, 1995, Cordery and Bakerville-Morley, 2005). These studies and others recommend that changes are needed in order to improve the financial reporting practices of NGOs. Various studies look at the interplay between donor agencies and their role in the financial reporting practices of NGOs. Gordon and Khumawala (1999) provide evidence that donors to NGOs do use financial reports in making donation decisions.

However, they also note that this is also influenced by the donors’ motivations and circumstances surrounding their giving. Prior studies such as Weisbrod and Dominguez (1986), Posnett and Sandler (1989), Tinkelman (1999), Greenlee and Brown (1999), Okten and Weisbrod (2000), Parsons (2003), Tinkelman (2004), Tinkelman and Mankaney (2007), Parsons (2007) provide evidence that accounting information does influence donor decisions. These studies show that NGOs with higher program ratios get more donations from donors. Program ratio is the ratio of reported program expenses to the total expenses of an NGO. These program ratios are also subject to manipulation by NGOs (Jones and Roberts, 2006, Keating et al., 2008). Apart from manipulating these ratios, Yetman and Yetman (2012) provide evidence that NGOs also manipulate their management and general administrative expenses.

Kitching (2009) investigates the value of auditing on donations to NGOs. He reports that auditing has a positive impact on donations. Yetman and Yetman (2013) provide further evidence to suggest that donors do discount low-quality financial reports in their decision-making. Dellaportas et al. (2008) argued that, as it is, the donors to NGOs experience a great deal of difficulty in understanding the allocation of their funding through the financial reports prepared by NGOs. He attributed this to the lack of regulation and guidelines on financial reporting by NGOs. The issues related to financial reporting are not only important to NGOs and the public in developing countries where majority of the studies have been conducted but also in small developing island countries such as Fiji. However, to recommend and apply changes to the financial reporting practices of NGOs in Fiji would require that we have a good understanding of the status of the financial reporting practices of NGOs first.

In Fiji, there are 500 active NGOs (Mohanty, 2008). These NGOs are operating under the Charitable Trusts Act (1965). An analysis of the Charitable Trusts Act reveals that it does not provide guidelines on financial reporting. It does not even require organisations registered under it to prepare and file reports with the registrar of charitable organisations. This gives us a unique opportunity to investigate financial reporting by NGOs in a potentially unregulated market. It also gives us an opportunity to understand the factors that motivate NGOs to prepare financial reports in a seemingly unregulated market. Therefore, the following research questions are developed:

RQ1: What is the current state of NGO financial reporting in Fiji?

RQ2: What factors motivate NGOs to prepare and provide financial reports in an unregulated market?

**DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

We analyse the content of annual reports of a sample of NGOs to understand the current state of financial reporting by such organisations. In order to understand the factors motivating NGOs in preparing financial reports, in-depth interviews were conducted with the executives and accountants of the respective organisations. NGOs operating in Fiji are chosen as the sample in this study. The sample is drawn from a list of NGOs compiled by Mohanty (2008). This list is an exhaustive list of all NGOs registered and operating in Fiji and their contact details. A random sample of 20 NGOs were picked from the list. The sample consists of NGOs operating in a range of sectors including education, health, environment, and sports. Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample. There are 3 labor unions, 5 educational institutions, 2 religious bodies, 2 health sector related organizations, 3 sports related organizations, 3 professional membership organizations and 2 regional associations in the sample.

Table 1: Distribution of the NGOS by Sector

	N = 20	Percent
Labour Unions	3	15%
Education	5	25%
Religious	2	10%
Health	2	10%
Sports	3	15%
Professional Membership Associations	3	15%
Regional Associations	2	10%
		100%

*This table presents the distribution of the sample by the sector in which the organizations operate. There are 20 organizations in the sample.*

Two methods of data collection are employed in this paper. The first method involves the use of content analysis on archival data from the annual reports for the year 2011. The annual reports were collected from offices of the organizations selected as our sample. The accounting and auditing practices were analyzed with reference to several variables related to financial reporting. Descriptive statistics is used to analyze the current state of NGO financial reporting. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the financial reporting practices and choices, in-depth interviews were conducted with the executives from the selected NGOs. The purpose of the interviews was to complement the content analysis. The interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and were later transcribed and analyzed.

**RESULTS**

Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics of the financial reporting practices amongst NGOs. The table shows that almost all the organisations prepare and present a statement of receipts and payments and a balance sheet (95% and 90% respectively). However, only 50% of the organisations present a statement of cash flow. NGOs in Fiji are not required to prepare and present financial reports under the Charitable Trusts Act (1965). Regardless of the absence of any regulation requiring the preparation of financial reports majority of the sampled organizations do prepare and present the basic financial statements. In the interviews with the executives of the large regional NGOs and local NGOs that seek international sources of finances, it was revealed that donor requirements shape their financial reporting practices. In most cases, international donor agencies require that recipient organisations report on a regular basis and that a reputable auditing firm (preferably an international audit firm) audit the annual financial statements.

The analysis also indicates that not all of the entities prepare financial reports in accordance with accounting standards or GAAP. Only 11 (55%) out of the 20 organisations follow the Fiji Accounting Standards. The rest prepare their financial reports using no applicable accounting standards. However, they do prepare the financial statements under accrual accounting. All the organisations employed historical cost accounting. It was interesting to note that one organisation which purports to apply only

historical cost accounting in the preparation of its financial reports had revalued its properties. This presents an inconsistency in the application of accounting policies.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Accounting and Auditing Practices

	N= 20	Percent
<b>Financial Statement Presentation</b>		
Statement of Receipts and Payments	19	95%
Balance Sheet	18	90%
Statement of Cash Flow	10	50%
<b>Accounting Policies and Standards</b>		
Fiji Accounting Standards	11	55%
Other Accounting Standards/GAAP	0	0%
No Accounting Standards or GAAP	9	45%
<b>Auditing</b>		
Audited Financial Statements	18	90%
<i>Audited by:</i>		
International Accounting Firm	6	30%
Local National Accounting firm	10	50%
Individuals	2	10%

This table presents the descriptive statistics on the accounting and auditing practices of non-governmental organisations for the entire sample.

Table 3 presents the results by the different sectors in which the NGOs operate. The results indicate that NGOs operating as regional associations produce all the three common financial statements, follow the applicable accounting standards and have the accounting statements audited by reputable accounting firms. This may be because regional NGOs receive significant amounts of international donor funding and have greater motivation to apply accounting standards and produce quality reports to satisfy donor agency requirements. Educational organisations, on the other hand, hardly comply with applicable accounting standards or get their financial statements audited by reputable audit firms. This may be because most of these educational institutions are small organisations operated by small community based committees and rely very little on international donor funding. They do produce audited financial statements because this is required to be furnished to the Ministry of Education in Fiji, which provides grants to these educational institutes.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on Accounting and Auditing Practices by Organization Type

	Labor Unions	Education	Religious	Health	Sports	Professional Associations	Regional Associations
	N = 3	N = 5	N = 2	N = 2	N = 3	N = 3	N = 2
<b>Financial Statement Presentation</b>							
Statement of Receipts and Payments	3	5	2	2	2	3	2
Balance Sheet	3	3	2	2	3	3	2
Statement of Cash Flow	1	0	1	1	2	3	2
<b>Accounting Policies and Standards</b>							
Fiji Accounting Standards	2	1	1	1	2	2	2
Other Accounting Standards/GAAP	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
No Accounting Standards or GAAP	1	4	1	1	1	1	0
<b>Auditing</b>							
Audited Financial Statements	3	5	1	2	2	3	2
<i>Audited by:</i>							
International Accounting Firm	0	0	0	1	1	2	2
Local National Accounting firm	3	4	1	1	1	0	0
Individuals	0	1	0	0	0	1	0

This table presents descriptive statistics on the accounting and auditing practices of non-governmental organisations segregated by organisation type.

Our analysis also shows that not all organisations had their financial statements audited. Table 2 shows that only 18 out of the 20 organisations presented an auditor's report in their annual report. All the

organisations that had an audit had engaged an external party to audit their financial reports. Table 2 indicates that 6 of the 20 organisations (30%) engaged a Big 4 international auditing firm as their auditor while 10 (50%) employed a local accounting firm as their auditor. Two (10%) of the organisations had their financial statements audited by individuals who were not on the roll of public accountants/auditors in Fiji. The larger local and regional NGOs mostly engaged the Big 4 international auditing firms as auditor. This is partially due to the requirement laid down by their fund donors to get their financial reports audited by credible auditors (preferably, international auditing firms). These NGOs are also in a position to afford the services of international audit firms.

The smaller local NGOs engaged local accounting firms or individuals as their auditors. It was also interesting to note that an organisation within our sample was audited by an individual who was not on the roll of accountants in Fiji. The individual, however, claimed to be an “accredited auditor” in the audit report. In the in-depth interviews with the executives of a number of small NGOs, it was revealed that the cost of auditing and the availability of auditors in their locality are factors affecting the appointment of registered auditors and accountants. Another factor that is important to small local NGOs in the selection of auditors is the benefits of appointing a qualified auditor against the cost of such an auditor. In most cases, small NGOs operating a primary or secondary school simply do not see the benefit of hiring a qualified auditor. The audit fees paid by the organisations to their auditors ranged from \$FJ 150 to \$FJ 8,750. A number of the organisations also purchased significant amounts of non-audit services from their auditors. The non-audit fees for a number of these organisations exceeded the audit fees.

Auditors are independent persons and the provision of other services by the auditors may have an impact on their independence (at least in perception). In this regards, in many jurisdictions the joint provision of audit and non-audit services is restricted for for-profit entities. In Fiji, there are no such restrictions for for-profit entities. Our interview with the executives of the NGOs revealed that they do not have adequate staff to prepare their accounts or conduct internal audits; therefore, they engage their auditors to provide such services. The issue of lack of staff is not isolated to any specific type or size of NGO. One of the reasons NGOs face this issue according to them is because accounting employees do not see a career in not-for-profit entities and as a result, employee turnover is high. It is also very difficult to attract good accounting staff. On a related issue, the executives of the smaller local NGOs reveal that they have very limited knowledge of accounting and financial reporting and that they keep their receipts and invoices, which they forward, to their accountant. The accountant then prepares the financial reports and provides an audit report. The accountant in most cases is a tax agent (as opposed to a qualified auditor) in the locality. This raises issues of independence of the auditor and the credibility of the audit report.

The auditor in these cases prepares the financial reports and provides an independent audit report on the financial reports. This may lead to a conflict of interest for the auditor and a loss of independent judgement. Another major issue raised in our in-depth interviews was lack of facilities and proper systems of accounting. A contributing factor to this problem was the lack of qualified accounting staff. Another issue related to this is the fact that most systems and processes are manual for many of the selected NGOs. Even in NGOs where they had computing power and accounting software’s, the staffs were not well trained in using them. These issues pose challenges for NGOs in relation to financial reporting. It is recommended that guidelines in relation to accounting by NGOs be made available. It is also recommended that minimum reporting requirements be incorporated into the Charitable Trusts Act (1965) to improve accountability by such organisations.

It is also recommended that minimum reporting requirement take in to account the needs of the users of financial reports of very small NGOs as well. The smaller NGOs do play a critical role in the education and sports sector in Fiji. It is also recommended that Fiji Institute of Accountants (the accounting standard setter in Fiji) consider the issuance of some form of financial reporting guidance for NGOs. This will lead

to consistencies in the presentation of financial information and definitely improve accountability and transparency.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

The purpose of this paper was to analyse the accounting and auditing practices of NGOs in Fiji and to investigate the motivations behind NGO financial reporting in a seemingly unregulated environment. In order to analyse the current state of NGO financial reporting, we conducted a content analysis of a sample of NGO annual reports. In-depth interviews were also conducted to understand the motivations behind the financial reporting practices. The sample consisted of 20 NGOs operating in Fiji. The analysis reveals that even in the absence of regulations, NGOs do produce financial reports. It is also revealed that a wide range of accounting practices is employed by these organisations. There are inconsistencies in the application of accounting conventions identified in this paper. Auditing practices are also questionable in certain cases. In the absence of regulations, auditors are providing a range of non-audit services to their audit clients. This may have implications for their independence.

Our interviews with the executives of the NGOs reveals that they are short staffed in the accounting area. It is also noted that many of the regional NGOs and NGOs that seek international sources of funding are more concerned about their financial reporting processes. These NGOs employ international auditing firms to improve the credibility of their financial reports. These NGOs also seek to apply the applicable accounting standards and GAAP in the preparation of their financial reports. The results of our study indicate that there is a need to regularise financial reporting and auditing for NGOs in Fiji. The establishment of guidelines of financial reporting and auditing will improve the transparency and accountability by such organisations. This is particularly important given the importance of such organisations to the society and the economy of Fiji.

There are a number of limitations in this paper. First, we selected a sample of 20 NGOs from a population of 500. While there are different types of NGOs in the sample, a larger sample may provide better insights to the issues at hand. Second, the sample consists of NGOs operating in a single geographical location. Future research may extend the geographical coverage to include more developing countries. Future studies may also want to compare the financial reporting and auditing practices of NGOs in developing and developed countries to provide some insights how these practices differ amongst countries at different levels of development and different regulatory environments.

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