

# **Humanitarian Accountability Partnership - International**

*"making humanitarian action accountable to beneficiaries"*

**Newsletter**

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## **OP-ED**

The importance of downward accountability within NGOs cannot be overstated; beneficiaries lie at the heart of NGO's existence and purpose. Humanitarian organisations accept and understand this idea probably more than any other type of NGO. Accountability to beneficiaries is recognised in a multitude of humanitarian codes of conducts such as the Sphere Charter, the Red Cross Code of Conduct and HAP-I's accountability principles. Yet, despite this widespread agreement, downward accountability continues to remain elusive in practice. As this year's World Disaster Report (WDR) found, humanitarian NGOs fail to put enough "priority on communicating with people affected by disaster." It seems that a gulf exists between rhetoric and reality.

There are a number of reasons for this. To begin with, NGOs in general lack clarity around what downward accountability actually means and how it can be translated into practice. Although ultimately this is a question that each organisation needs to answer according to the context in which they work, recent research by the One World Trust's Global Accountability Project has identified a set of common factors that need to guide an organisation's approach to accountability. The GAP Framework unpacks accountability into four dimensions: transparency, participation, evaluation, and complaints and response, and details operational guidelines for each. The framework provides organisations with the structure through which the issue of downward accountability can be discussed, providing key points of reference to help organisations think through how they can better involve beneficiaries in the decisions that affect them.

Another impediment to downward accountability is the unbalanced nature of NGO accountability relationships. NGO accountability is often skewed towards those

stakeholders with the most power and influence. As a result, organisational systems and processes are designed to respond to the needs of institutional donors, often offering few incentives to engage more with beneficiaries. Evaluations and reporting for example tend to focus on showing donors that resources are being accounted for and that targets are being met, rather than being used as a tool to enable organisations to engage in an open discussion with beneficiaries as to what is working and what is not, and through this to improve effectiveness.

Clearly the situations and environments in which humanitarian NGOs operate pose additional problems for downward accountability. Addressing the life-threatening problems of vulnerable populations in complex, often unpredictable environments and often under considerable time pressure makes implementing the necessary mechanisms, such as transparency and consultation, tricky. Yet this must not be regarded as a reason for non-engagement, rather as a challenge that needs overcoming.

Ultimately, the sole reason for the presence of humanitarian NGOs in disaster and conflict areas is to provide effective relief to affected populations; achieving downward accountability is thus crucial to fulfilling their mission, and maintaining legitimacy. As Markku Niskala notes in this year's WDR, it is "time to turn rhetoric into reality: to dispel the myth of the helpless victim and the infallible humanitarian, and to put disaster-affected people and their abilities at the centre of our work."

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## CASE STUDY

### *Oxfam approach to Accountability in Aceh*

Oxfam has been a member of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International, since the launch of the organization in 2003. Oxfam has committed itself to strengthen accountability in all spheres of work including the strengthening of mechanisms in field programmes allowing beneficiaries safe access to voice their complaints. Oxfam's humanitarian response programme in Aceh and Nias have made significant advances in this regard.

Accountability in this context refers broadly to the movement and management of information between Oxfam and beneficiaries to ensure that both parties have realistic expectations and understanding of what can and what can't be done in terms of service delivery.

#### Approach taken:

- Information centers were established in Lamno and Lampaya;
- Village information boards and complaints boxes were placed in almost every village in Lamno, Calang, Aceh Besar and Meulaboh. A number of the Oxfam's partners put up information boards and suggestion boxes in a few IDP camps (barracks). KATAHATI, one of Oxfam's partners, is so far working in 23 locations in Aceh. In each location there are four information boards and four suggestion boxes installed;
- Oxfam information officers in Aceh engage beneficiary feedback using the information boards to achieve beneficiary accountability;
- Complaints handling mechanism has been introduced and discussed throughout all general accountability training with the information officers. A complaints committee has been formed in Lamno. A draft complaints dealing mechanism and procedure have been drafted and shared to all the project staff through the information officers.

Treena Wu our HAP-I research officer is carrying out research into how information officers can effectively engage beneficiaries and utilise beneficiary feedback using the information boards to achieve greater accountability. You can read more about it in the next issue.

#### Success:

- Oxfam receives more and more complaints;
- Information Officers better understand what accountability to beneficiaries means;
- People including government and other agencies speak highly about Oxfam when they talk about accountability issues.
- There is an availability of funding for accountability work such as salary for information/accountability Officers, village information boards, suggestion boxes, workshop and training etc...

#### Lessons learnt:

Some Information centers that are not yet fully functioning because:

- It is difficult to recruit skilled staff to run the centre;
- There is not enough cooperation from other project staff;
- Villagers prefer to talk directly to managers, who are usually office based rather than center based

Sok Phoeuk, Accountability Advisor, Oxfam  
Treena Wu, HAP-I  
Maximilien Zimmermann, HAP-I

## RESEARCH

The 1994 “Principles of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programs” states “Ways shall be found to involve program beneficiaries in the management of relief aid.

But as I discover over time, it is not easy to find good ways to involve program beneficiaries. There are a myriad of ways that a program can claim to have involved beneficiaries in the management process. But such claims need to be studied carefully in order to qualify as being a good practice.

How does one then methodically study a practice to determine if it is good and therefore becomes an example for others?

(Working Definition) *Good Practice: A practice can be considered to be good and therefore an example for others to draw inspiration from where it successfully manages a concrete thematic issue in respect of prevailing policy or guidelines, leading to a better (thematic) situation for the beneficiaries concerned.*

No matter how many good practices are documented, they are by no means exhaustive, much less, perfect. They may address a piece of the problem but not be comprehensive in scope. They may present the best solution to an issue at a given time in a difficult working environment. Despite all these caveats, they are still tremendously useful in setting an example for others to reflect on and / or follow.

These good practices are like “lessons” that constitute accumulated wisdom – principles of effectiveness – that can be adapted, indeed, must be adapted, to specific programs, or even entire organizations (Wray and Hunter 1996). For example, the Ford Foundation, a HAP-I donor commissioned an evaluation of its Leadership Program for Community Foundations. This study of 27 community foundations over a five year period led to a guide for *Building Community Capacity* (Mayer 1996, 1994) that incorporates lessons learned and generalizable strategies for community foundations – a distinguished and useful example of knowledge generation.

The documentation of good practices as described here can also be related to the *cluster evaluation* approach (Millett 1996; Council on Foundations 1993: 232 – 51) where patterns are identified and lessons drawn from the whole cluster (Campbell 1994; Sanders 1994; Worthen 1994; Barley and Jenness 1993; Kellogg Foundation).

In terms of beneficiary accountability, HAP-I aims to document good practices using the accumulated wisdom mentioned above. We hope to document good practices that involve the following (this list is not exhaustive):

- Involving beneficiaries in design, implementation and monitoring
- Applying a community development approach
- Segmenting beneficiaries by social, gender, age, economic, tribal, cultural, language / dialect, vulnerability characteristics, etc. The segments will then form the basis for planning and analysis
- Implementing a participatory assessment with all beneficiary segments fully represented
- Building a thorough situation analysis with ongoing structured dialogue with the different beneficiary segments
- Building partnerships with local communities and local NGOs to better understand the context of beneficiary need
- Developing innovative methods of engaging the different beneficiary segments e.g. playing games with children, singing songs with them, gaining their trust slowly and persuading them to tell you stories about their difficulties
- Having in place a well resourced team of community facilitators / information officers in project operations

If you have a good practice that incorporates any of these components, please do let me know at [twu@hapinternational.org](mailto:twu@hapinternational.org)

We would really like to learn from you!

Treena Wu, Research Officer

## STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT

### *Ensuring Meaningful Beneficiary Engagement*

Based on the [vision](#), the [mandate](#), and its [definition of Accountability](#), HAP International embodies the collective commitment of its members to ensure the meaningful participation of the people who are so often excluded from the governance of the humanitarian aid system. [The Accountability and Quality Management Standards Project](#) must reflect this commitment, both to ensure the quality of the products of the project and to demonstrate that HAP-International also complies with its own [principles](#).

Many arguments (such as risks of tokenism and charges of political correctness or language barriers and cultural interpretation risks...) are used to question the validity, feasibility or legitimacy of beneficiaries participating in processes such as this. Perhaps it is a risky undertaking, but far better to take the risk than to excuse ourselves yet again for exclusion based on these perceived hurdles. To often stereotypes of silent, disempowered and inarticulate beneficiaries are invoked to block any beneficiary participation. Provided that the beneficiaries who are selected to participate have similar attributes to those required for all other participants in this process, we feel confident that these risks can be minimised, and that the enormous benefit to be gained from the participation of beneficiaries will be achieved.

Beneficiary engagement should take place at all stages and levels of the process (e.g. planning, implementing, evaluation and improvement stages). The methods of engagement and who best to target will vary according to the stages and the context. We do not expect "beneficiaries" to be selected by a scientific sampling method, or by a democratic process. This does not occur in the selection of our member or donor representatives! Rather, we are seeking to identify and invite beneficiaries (those who have been on the receiving end of aid) who have a combination of the following suggested criteria:

- Professional background. For example:
  - Teachers/Academics
  - Lawyers/Jurists
  - Journalists (...)
- Literate
- Articulate
- Analytical
- Able to converse in English or French.

A broader involvement of beneficiaries (through field site focus groups, interviews etc.), would be undertaken where standards and indicators are drafted and evaluated both at field and head office level.

Once the first draft of the [manual](#) has been completed we see an ongoing and dynamic process of improvement through consultation with all key stakeholders. To this end engagement through information and complaints-handling mechanisms should be fully utilised.

### Conclusion

Engagement with beneficiaries at all levels is key. It will require real commitment to overcome the perceived blockages that so often frustrate our good intentions.

Our aim is to encourage our members to ensure engagement of beneficiaries for the full cycle of the development of standards and indicators.

[Click here for full text.](#)

Sheryl Haw  
Standards Development Manager

## UPDATE ON HAP-I ACTIVITIES

- [Zia Choudhury's visit to Pakistan, October 2005](#)
- The Quality and Accountability Initiatives met on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2005. [Click here for the minutes!](#)
- 10<sup>th</sup> November Planning Meeting on Accountability and Quality Standards Development. [Click here!](#)

## MORE ON ACCOUNTABILITY...

On 22 & 23 September, 2005, Noria Mezlef, the HAP-I Co-ordinator took part in the third Autumn School for Humanitarian Aid - organised by Group [URD](#). About 50 participants coming from about 20 organizations discussed on the issue: *Labelling & Certification: a threat or an opportunity for NGOs?* The 4 axes of work during this meeting were:

- To better explain and define the concept of certification;
- The existing mechanisms of control, rating and selection;
- The new mechanisms for the certification of NGOs;
- The Identification of specific stake of the NGOs certification.

Some of the interesting comments reported by Noria were the following ones:

- This meeting enabled participants to get a better view on the issue;
- Necessity to question the pros and the cons of the certification approach;
- Necessity of clarification and demystification of the terminology;
- A certification approach which will destroy the diversity of the humanitarian system won't be acceptable;
- External Approaches (SGS, ECHO...) can not be a substitute to the NGO approach
- Quality does not have a price, but a cost

For more information about this meeting please contact:  
Domitille Kauffmann, [dkauffmann@urd.org](mailto:dkauffmann@urd.org)  
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### Useful Links include:

Key initiatives to promote quality and accountability in the humanitarian community:

[ALNAP](#)  
[HAP-I](#)  
[People In Aid](#)  
[Projet Qualité](#)  
[One World Trust](#)  
[Sphere](#)  
[URD](#)

### DATES AND EVENTS:

- The [ALNAP](#) coming 18th Biannual meeting will be hosted by ECHO on 8th and 9th December 2005 in Brussels;

### HAP-I WEBSITE UPDATES...

Please check out the newly updated and exciting [Capacity Building](#) section, which was recently reorganised!

Feedbacks to HAP-I website are very welcome and should be sent to:

[webmaster@hapinternational.org](mailto:webmaster@hapinternational.org)

### End of the Reach Out Project:

The Reach Out Project based in Geneva is phasing out by the end of 2005. The reviewed and updated training materials on Refugee Protection in Arabic, English, French and Spanish are available on the web sites of some of its partners such as [ICVA](#), [ReliefWeb](#) and [UNHCR](#).

Those training materials are intended for humanitarian actors working with refugees and aim at providing practical/ useful tools and guidance to better secure refugee protection in a given context.

If you wish to obtain hard copies or CD-ROMs of the Reach Out Training Kit, please contact ICVA's secretariat <mailto:secretariat@icva.ch>

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We welcome any feedback, questions, or useful links, articles, events and more. Please send all correspondence to:

[newsletter@hapinternational.org](mailto:newsletter@hapinternational.org)

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**Thanks and good reading,  
HAP-I Secretariat**

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