

Quality and Accountability during the Cyclone Sidr Response:
Reflections on Agency Approaches and HAP Support

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March 2009

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ii. Summary

1. Overview of HAP's Engagement

The HAP Field Team was in Dhaka in relation to recent floods when, on 15 November 2007, Cyclone Sidr made landfall in southern Bangladesh. On 29 November, the implementation of the [New Emergencies Policy](#), which sets out a commitment by the HAP membership to make a special collective effort to apply the HAP Principles of Accountability from the outset of all new humanitarian emergencies, was discussed during a conference call between the HAP Secretariat and member agencies.

In phase 1 (Jan-March 2008) of the HAP deployment, agencies undertook guided assessments of the extent to which they meet the HAP Principles of Accountability, through a combination of awareness raising, practice reviews and workplan development. After a training and planning workshop attended by key staff from 14 NGOs (HAP members and partners), with guidance from the HAP Field Team, participating agencies undertook accountability self-assessments during field visits in the most severely Sidr-affected areas. The HAP Field Team conducted field visits with Save the Children UK; GUP and Christian Aid (partners in Bangladesh); Concern Worldwide and their partner SPEED Trust; CARE Bangladesh; HEED Bangladesh (Tearfund partner); and Muslim Aid. World Vision Bangladesh undertook an accountability self-assessment with remote support and guidance from the HAP Field Team. The HAP Standard Benchmarks were used as the assessment tool.

This phase provided a snapshot of participating agencies' strengths and weaknesses on humanitarian accountability and quality at that particular site and identified good practices, gaps, and areas for improvement that required immediate or longer-term attention. Overall, the joint teams (HAP and participating agency) undertook more than 38 focus group discussions and over 37 semi-structured individual interviews with disaster-affected communities and with agency staff and have spoken in total with over 420 beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. The key learning points from the self-assessments were highlighted in a workshop in March 2008.

In phase 2 (April-Nov 2008) the HAP team sought to respond to specific requests for support on areas identified in the first phase. Such support was provided from a distance (via email and phone contact) and through in-country activities. The support provided was demand led, responding to specific requests from participating agencies. Rather than being prescriptive, there was a focus on providing information, referring staff to case studies from HAP members, giving feedback on action plans, so that staff develop the most appropriate way forward for their agency and programmes in the Bangladesh context. In August 2008, a HAP team returned to Bangladesh to facilitate an inter-agency workshop on complaint handling systems: 20 staff from 12 agencies attended the workshop, with the majority sending two participants.

This phase concluded with an after action review visit, which examined the appropriateness of HAP's year-long engagement and its impact on changing programme and organisational practice on quality management and accountability. As part of this, the HAP team:

- Conducted three one-day field visits with HEED Bangladesh, Muslim Aid and Save the Children UK. During the field visits, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were held with beneficiaries and staff; site visits allowed for observation of practice.
- Facilitated a review workshop in Dhaka with 35 participants from 14 agencies including six community representatives all with first hand experience of relief and rehabilitation post Sidr.
- Held semi-structured interviews with a range of staff.

2. Agency Approaches to Strengthening Accountability

Participating agencies took different approaches to strengthening their accountability. Some of the more significant differences related to:

- **Management approach:** Some agencies identified staff whose formal role became partially focused on kick-starting processes to improve quality and accountability; in other cases, agencies made changes in their management and operations to improve quality and

accountability; yet in others, responsibility fell between the gaps and was not taken on by any staff. Most common was the approach where responsibility was added on top of staff(s) normal roles.

- **Leadership:** To improve performance, some designated staff received active support from country directors and HAP focal people at head office. Senior management support resulted in greater levels of interest and involvement from other staff. Other staff received very limited support, which led to limited progress.
- **Addressing the gaps:** The majority of participating agencies took a step-by-step approach, preferring to focus on a couple of benchmarks rather than the entire Standard or to pilot implementation of the Standard only at a few sites before deciding how to scale up. Some agencies focused on immediate change in operations, whereas others focused on underlying changes that will guide the way they work in the future. Others used both approaches.
- **Working with partners:** About half of the participating agencies responded to Sidr through partner NGOs. In such instances, there are three main relationships to consider: that between the local partner and the community, that between the international agency and the community, and that between the international agency and the local partner. Among the agencies responding via partners, there was a definite tendency to focus more on the first two rather than the latter relationship. While most attention was given to strengthening information sharing, participation and complaints handling, it was not clear for most what strategies (beyond initial orientation) had been used to support partners in improving their own quality programming and accountability, or to strengthen the accountability of the relationship between the international NGO and the partner and, in doing so, modelling the very principles that they are helping their partners meet. From the perspective of longer-term partners who participated as part of the HAP initiative in Bangladesh, there appeared to be a lack of systematic follow-up from the international agency in relation to strengthening the capacity of local partners to improve performance. In some cases, international agencies assumed that supporting their partner to attend a HAP workshop was sufficient, and little further attention was paid to strengthening the capacity (of longer-term or preferred partners) so that they too can implement the HAP Principles of Accountability depending on interest.

Collectively, agencies initiated a Bangladesh Peer Support Group (PSG) which met three times during this period, hosted in turn by different agencies. Mid-level and senior programme staff that had participated in the self-assessments were part of this group.

3. Emerging Themes

Across the participating agencies, most progress was reported in relation to information sharing, participation and complaints handling, and some innovated practice emerged. In comparison, activities related to strengthening staff competencies, broader agency quality management systems and processes for continuous improvement were more varied, and not all agencies made progress in these areas.

Information sharing (Benchmark 2): most agencies increased the number of media used to disseminate information to affected communities. They diversified the types of information shared, from project plans and deliverables, to beneficiary selection criteria and process, to agency contact details and more. Despite this proliferation, some persistent gaps remained: cost and budget details were less readily available; agencies' quality commitments were generally not shared. Agencies themselves identified a need to ensure key information reaches the wider community (and neighbouring communities) rather than direct beneficiaries alone.

Participation (Benchmark 3) improved via various means. Existing community committees were strengthened or new community committees established with the aim of increasing participation at specific stages in the project cycle. The processes through which committee members were selected was reassessed. An increase in house-to-house visits to verify the needs-assessment information provided by local government was also frequently reported. One agency started the use of community meeting logs to track how discussion points and decisions made were utilised; another one worked with partners to jointly develop a participatory beneficiary selection methodology. Overall, levels of participation tended to be stronger during the programme

implementation phase, compared to the planning, monitoring and evaluation phases. In several cases, participation of vulnerable groups was still a gap.

An area that received the most attention across agencies was **complaints handling** (Benchmark 5), as a new practice of operationalising respect for and dignity of disaster survivors. In line with good practice, most agencies established several different channels for affected-communities to submit complaints. However, there was often a lack of clarity (resulting from the absence of a complaints handling procedure) on what would happen after a complaint was submitted; in particular, how complaints received via different channels would follow the same procedure and receive appropriate response. For example, a number of agencies identified staff or committees to process written complaints received via the complaints box, and these were recorded in a complaints-tracking book. On the other hand, complaints received by the same agency via mobile phones were responded to immediately, and the details not recorded. As several different staff mobile numbers were disseminated, there were risks for the agency to address similar issues inconsistently. And as not all complaints data were captured, it was not possible to determine patterns and more systemic changes required in the programme. Where steps had been taken to establish a complaint-handling system, this was often not accompanied by raising community awareness of its presence, the right to raise a complaint, or the complaints procedure.

4. The Quality Management System and the Accountability Framework

While strengthening **quality management systems** (Benchmark 1) may be a longer process, a few agencies made progress in this area. Some took steps towards integrating the HAP Standard into key country-level policies and procedures, including emergency procedures, and the country-level strategic plan, but for most this remained an area yet to be addressed. For most, implementation of quality and accountability commitments remains informal, with limited guidelines and procedures to follow. For example, despite this area being a common gap identified during self-assessments, no agency produced basic written guidance for staff on information sharing outlining what should be shared with whom, when and how. While much attention was given to complaints handling, overall agencies did not document a complaints handling procedure outlining, among other things, the steps that would be taken in processing complaints. In the absence of shared understanding on how quality and accountability commitments will be managed, it is difficult for practice to become systematic and coherent.

Considering **staff competencies** (Benchmark 4) more attention was given to increasing awareness, and less so on the skills, attitudes and behaviours needed of staff to implement more accountable and better quality programmes. Only a few agencies took the next step by integrating knowledge and skills required into job profiles and performance review frameworks.

A few agencies made steps towards strengthening processes for **continuous improvement** (Benchmark 6). As part of monitoring quality and accountability commitments at programme level, a few agencies piloted feedback surveys as well as on beneficiary satisfaction techniques. For some, this was integrated into standard monitoring formats, for others specific focus group discussions were held periodically. The key for agencies who started to monitor quality and accountability practices is to integrate learning into management systems and improve practice.

5. Factors that influenced change

Agencies that undertook an accountability self-assessment (either independently or with HAP support) tended to report considerably more progress compared with those who did not. This may be explained by greater commitment (either pre-existing or generated as a result of doing a self-assessment), or the fact that without a baseline understanding it is difficult for agencies to start identifying a direction for improvement. Other important factors were:

- **Promoting a culture of accountability:** Accountability and quality management is about organisational culture; it is about staff values, attitudes and behaviours, yet often ends up being regarded as an “add on activity”. Agencies that recognised that “being accountable” is not a competitor to “doing the job” but a means of improving performance, identified most appropriate approaches for driving change management processes and improving accountability and quality management.

- Prioritising accountability across the organisation: It is not enough that accountability be a general organisational objective. It needs to be followed through as an objective at regional and country levels, and supported with adequate communication between the three levels.
- Assigning responsibility: Of particular importance was allocation of resources, particularly staff time. Where no one was made responsible for taking this forward, little progress was recorded.
- Leadership: Senior management commitment is the foundation upon which improvements can be made. Staff of HAP members and their partners alike shared their views that, when the leadership of the organisation were not fully supportive, less progress was made.
- Organisational policies and guidance: Staff identified the absence of organisational policy or guidance on accountability between partners as a factor hampering progress.

6. Implications for HAP support in future emergencies

Participating staff indicated that the guided self-assessments assisted their agencies to assess the quality and accountability of their programmes in a systematic way. Working alongside staff through the self-assessment process provided an opportunity for supported learning, and helped staff relate the HAP Standard theory to realities at project-site level.

When the HAP team was in country, there was high demand for direct support, and requests that the team spent more time in Bangladesh to advise on work plans, help staff and partners apply learning, and provide guidance for implementation of workplans. In comparison, uptake of distance support was low. Based on subsequent engagement with the four agencies supported by this means, it appeared that the gaps still persisted. This suggests that it may not be the most effective way of providing support and distance support should be more clearly defined between HAP and the interested agency in the future, preferably before the HAP team leave the programme site.

Throughout the HAP engagement in Bangladesh, there was an expectation that agencies would dedicate the necessary resources to drive the process of strengthening their accountability in light of the findings and recommendations from the self-assessment process. In reality, the internal capacity to provide sustained attention and substantive support was not always there. One of the other stated expectations was that, in selecting which staff member would actively engage with HAP, agencies would choose staff in a position to drive forward change processes. It was also expected that the agencies would mobilise senior management commitment and organisational support to enable this. Some agencies met these expectations and the commitments they have made through the MoUs with HAP, others less so. More attention is required from agencies with regard to their engagement with HAP and how this relates to performance improvement plans.

The fact that participating staff were expected to actively share and disseminate their learning with colleagues and partners also requires HAP to design activities that would enable staff to transfer learning to colleagues. Training materials, where used, need to be better 'packaged' so that they could be passed on to agency staff for further use. Members and the Secretariat need to work collaboratively and share organisational development and knowledge transfer resources.

Many of the HAP team activities in Bangladesh focused increasing staff awareness and understanding of the HAP Standard, and using the Standard as a practical tool to assess the accountability and quality in their programmes. Subsequent HAP activities focused on addressing the gaps identified, albeit the time dedicated to this was insufficient. Longer and more sustained support, and/or exploring other practical approaches for support would have been beneficial.

Participating staff offered their suggestions for other types of support that would be beneficial in a new emergency context. These mainly focused on HAP working with members to raise awareness about accountability with other stakeholders such as donors, inter-agency cluster groups, government departments, chief executives, and partner NGOs. In addition, staff requested support with raising awareness among affected communities about the HAP Standard to increase the demand for accountability and better quality programmes. Other ideas included support to agencies in developing a Humanitarian Accountability Framework for the emergency and rehabilitation response; and checklists for developing project proposals, and for partner monitoring.

1. Background to HAP's Engagement In Bangladesh

The HAP Field Team was in Dhaka in relation to recent floods when, on November 15, Cyclone Sidr made landfall in southern Bangladesh with winds of 155 miles per hour.¹ On November 29th, HAP members took part in a teleconference to discuss the implementation of the [New Emergencies Policy](#), which sets out a commitment by the membership to make a special collective effort to apply the HAP Principles of Accountability from the outset of all new humanitarian emergencies.

Member agencies² requested the HAP Secretariat to provide awareness raising support and guidance in understanding agency's compliance with the Principles of Accountability, and to assist with implementing activities and developing systems that would provide a clear focus on quality and accountability to disaster survivors. The deployment of the HAP Field Team for a period of up to three months, followed by further remote support in response to specific queries, was agreed. The details of HAP's engagement in Bangladesh were outlined in Terms of Reference; agency-specific Memoranda of Understanding clarified commitments with respect to human, logistical and financial contributions³. HAP's engagement can be separated into two main phases:

Phase 1 focused on supporting agencies in reviewing their compliance with the Principles of Accountability as part of their cyclone Sidr response, and developing in-country capacity to start addressing gaps in compliance and to continuously monitor humanitarian accountability. To achieve this, the HAP Field team worked alongside a designated member of staff from participating agencies and, using the HAP 2007 Standard⁴, supported accountability self-assessments of the agency's cyclone response at one field location. This review provided a snapshot of the agency's strengths and weaknesses on humanitarian accountability and quality at that particular site, and identified good practices, gaps, and areas for improvement that required immediate or longer-term attention.

By the end of this first phase, staff working with the HAP team acquired the understanding, knowledge and capacity and confidence to continuously monitor humanitarian accountability, by integrating this into existing monitoring and evaluation or through the use of new tools and processes. This phase concluded with a workshop in Dhaka, which reviewed some of the activities and learning to date. More details about the first phase can be found in Section 2 of this report.

Phase 2 focused on responding to specific requests for support regarding those areas requiring improvement identified in the first phase. Assistance continued through distance support (via email and phone contact), and through in-country activities including follow-up meetings to review progress and a workshop on complaint and response systems held in Dhaka.

This phase concluded with an After Action Review examining the appropriateness and impact of HAP's engagement in Bangladesh over the past twelve months. More details about the second phase can be found in Section 3 of this report.

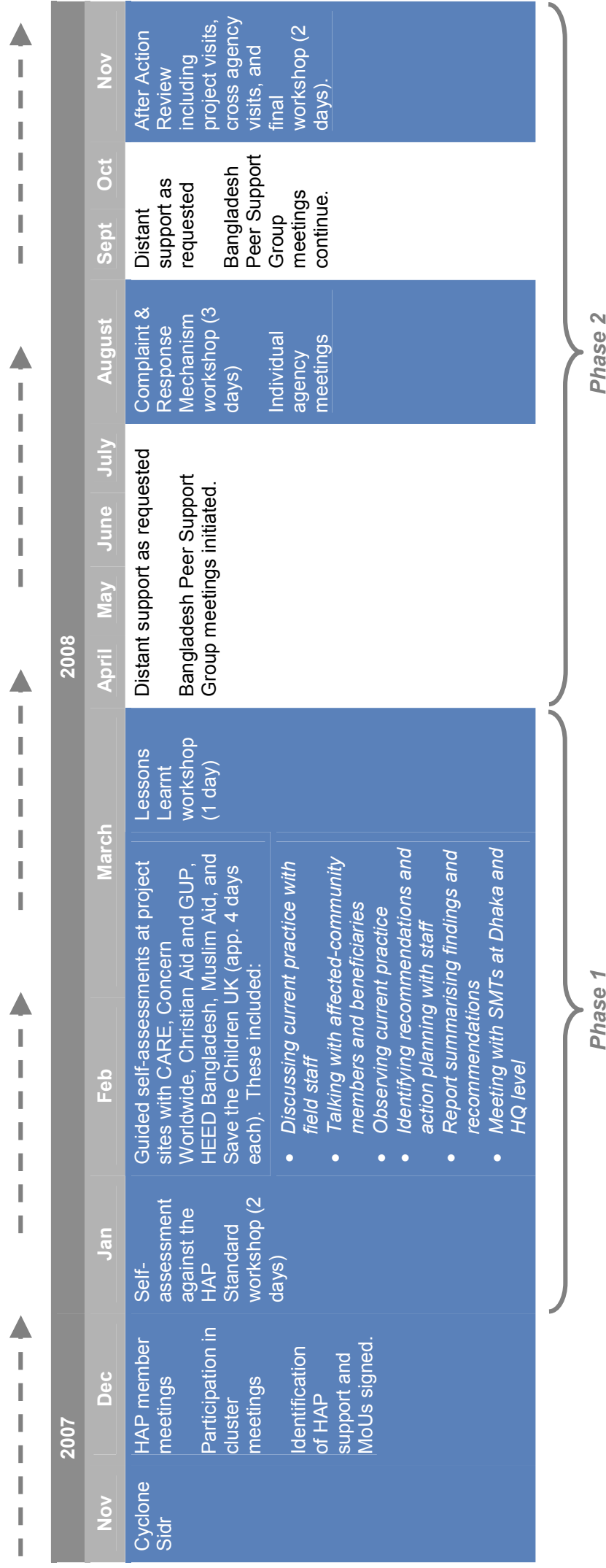
¹ Cyclone Sidr affected more than 8.7 million people, killing around 4,000 and injuring around 50,000. Material damage was severe, with over 1.5 million houses destroyed or partially damaged. In addition crops were damaged and livestock killed, and there was extensive damage to roads and public buildings (Source: OCHA Situation Report 6 December 2007).

² At the time, there were eleven HAP member agencies responding or planning to respond to Sidr, through direct operations or through local partners: ACTED, CARE, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, DanChurchAid, MERCY Malaysia, Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, Tearfund and World Vision International.

³ The following organisations provided financial support to this initiative in Bangladesh: CAFOD, CARE Bangladesh, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide Bangladesh, DanChurchAid, Muslim Aid UK, Oxfam GB Bangladesh Program, Save the Children UK in Bangladesh, Tearfund UK, and World Vision Bangladesh. In particular we would like to acknowledge the support from Concern Worldwide in hosting the HAP Field Team in Dhaka.

⁴ The HAP 2007 Standard in Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management is available for download via the HAP website.

Summary of HAP activities in response to Cyclone Sidr, Bangladesh; A HAP team was in Bangladesh for periods highlighted in blue



2. Phase 1: Guided Self-Assessments (January to March 2008)

The initiative started on 23rd-24th January with a training and planning workshop attended by key staff from 14 NGOs, both HAP members and partners. Following this, and with guidance from the HAP Field Team, staff undertook accountability self-assessments during field visits in the most severely Sidr-affected areas in Bagerhat, Patuakhali and Barguna Districts. In total, the HAP Field Team conducted six field visits with: Save the Children UK; GUP and Christian Aid (partners in Bangladesh); Concern Worldwide and their partner SPEED Trust; CARE Bangladesh; HEED Bangladesh (a Tearfund partner); and Muslim Aid. World Vision Bangladesh undertook an accountability self-assessment with remote support and guidance from the HAP Field Team.

During the field visits, practices were reviewed against the HAP Standard Benchmarks, in particular information dissemination, participation, and complaints handling processes. Through reviews of existing policies and procedures, semi-structured interviews and facilitated discussions with local staff, and focus group discussions with disaster-affected communities, participating NGOs were able to identify good practices and gaps.

Partners of HAP Members are autonomous entities and have not necessarily themselves made a commitment to HAP's Principles of Accountability. However, as agencies interested to strengthen the accountability and quality of their work, some partners of HAP members expressed interest in understanding where they stand in relation to accountability and quality management as part of the Sidr response and the same framework for analysis was used in this regard.

2.1 Overview of the guided self-assessment process

Each of the assessment teams consisted of the HAP Field Team⁵ and one to four members of staff from the participating agency. Using qualitative and participatory methods, the team asked beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance to share their views on whether principles of accountability, the needs and circumstances of affected communities drive the assessed agency's work at that location. Site-based discussions were combined with observation and random visits, as well as more targeted interviews such as with women's groups and youth groups. To tailor the process to the needs of the individual agency, a planning session took place at each location in order to develop the methodology. Overall, the joint teams undertook more than 38 focus group discussions and over 37 semi-structured interviews with disaster-affected communities and with agency staff and have spoken in total with over 420 beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. Annex 1 provides the generic steps that were taken together with participating agencies.

Upon return to Dhaka, the joint team had a debriefing session with the Senior Management Team of each agency. For guided self-assessments of a HAP member's partner, a joint debrief with staff from the HAP member and the local partner took place. Follow up meetings to share more details on the findings and to consolidate action plans were scheduled upon request. Extensive reports have been prepared for each agency by the joint HAP-agency teams.

2.2 Learning from the accountability self-assessments and ways forward

On March 25th, to conclude the first phase of the HAP support, 17 participants, representatives of HAP Members and their partners, met in Dhaka to analyze findings from the guided self-assessments and to explore short and long-term options for (individually and collectively) promoting humanitarian accountability and quality in the Sidr cyclone response and more widely in humanitarian action in Bangladesh.

⁵ The HAP Field Representative (Monica Blagescu) and the Field Support Officer (Emily Rogers). An independent consultant (Veronika Martin) was deployed alongside the Field Support Officer at the start of the initiative.

Box 1: Key learning points from self-assessments (as of March 2008)⁶

Organisational strategies and staff capacity

- Field staff and volunteers are not always aware of key organizational objectives, values and policies. The importance of staff orientation and effective internal communication of plans and progress reports should not be underestimated even in the midst of an emergency response.
- There is a disconnection between the understanding of staff at programme site and at the Head Office on quality, accountability, challenges and risks associated with not engaging in accountable practices. These can include programming that does not address the priorities of the intended beneficiaries, poor targeting and limited cost-effectiveness. In the absence of an organizational strategy on how to improve quality and accountability, backed up with leadership support and guidelines for staff, this gap could widen.
- Where humanitarian accountability principles have been integrated in Disaster Risk Reduction strategies, more accountable and better quality emergency response is apparent.
- Maintaining good relations with local authorities is desirable, but avoid relying on local authorities as sole community representatives.
- Coordination with other key players such as local government, local NGOs, disaster management committees and international NGOs to seek the best possible use of available resources and to ensure that no affected communities are missed, is possible - if and when there is senior management support and leadership!

Transparency

- Sharing information builds confidence and trust with the community.
- There is room for improvement on meaningfully communicating to beneficiaries information about all aspects of the programme, but also on how they can participate and communicate a concern or complaint. Such information enables them to better engage with aid agencies
- Staff fears of increased transparency are understandable in the absence of organizational guidance and awareness raising on the benefits of better information sharing.
- Different modes of communication are effective for different audiences. Staff need to understand how information flows and who has access to it.
- Transparency about available resources can allow communities and agencies to work out how to maximise the use of limited resources.
- Field staff need to receive coherent guidance on how to decide what information to share with the community, in particular how to mitigate risks of disclosing or not disclosing certain information, such as details on resources.

Participation

- Involvement of a cross-section of the disaster-affected community in project planning and beneficiary selection processes are critical factors that will positively affect the effectiveness of the intervention.
- Development participation practice can work and should be explored in humanitarian contexts.
- Increased participation can reveal that even if an agency has been working in an area for a long time, it did not understand the patterns of vulnerability as well as it may have thought;
- Offering beneficiaries opportunities to provide suggestions not infrequently makes agency staff discover that their perception and interpretation did not match that of the beneficiaries.

Complaint-handling

- Basic rights are undermined when communities are not able to have their voice heard and to raise concerns.
- Complaints handling can help address challenging issues before they escalate.
- Staff reluctance to receive and handle complaints is usually driven by a fear of complaints overload in the absence of clear procedures and definition of valid complaints.

⁶ A full report can be downloaded here <http://www.hapinternational.org/projects/field/current.aspx#january>

Annex 2 lists examples that illustrate steps taken by participating agencies to strengthen humanitarian accountability in the Sidr Response as of March 2008 since the start of their engagement with HAP in November 2007 and through subsequent interaction during the guided self-assessments. These are available alongside key priority areas, identified by agency staff during the planning sessions. At the end of the workshop, participants suggested that, depending on demand and resources, the HAP Field Team should provide advice and support to agencies towards the implementation of these proposed action points in the next phase of the engagement in Bangladesh. The following areas were discussed in detail and collectively agreed:

Ensure leadership support: Endorsement and support from senior management is necessary in order to effectively strengthen humanitarian accountability and have a more positive impact on the lives of disaster-affected communities. In line with this, participants agreed to explore opportunities for heads of agencies to have a working meeting and discuss challenges and options for strengthening humanitarian accountability taking into account findings and recommendations from the self-assessments in the Sidr Response.

Initiate a National Peer Support Group for HAP members, partners and other relevant stakeholders, with the following mandate:

- For “accountability champions” to share regular updates and progress on relevant activities and approaches;
- To capture new learning on humanitarian accountability and quality management and share this with non-HAP members; disseminate new tools and case studies;
- To organize inter-agency exposure visits and joint staff training (inc. orientation sessions);
- Undertake joint evaluations of accountability in future emergency responses;
- Advocacy/lobbying of other policy makers on the importance of and need for support to strengthen accountability (link in to DER and other coordination mechanisms).

3. Phase 2: Practical Support (April to November 2008)

3.1 HAP’s approach to support the agencies

Following the self-assessments, HAP offered both distant support (via phone and email) and in-country support. The support provided was demand led, responding to specific requests from participating agencies. Rather than being prescriptive, there was a focus on providing information, referring staff to case studies from HAP Members, giving feedback on action plans, and guiding staff so that they may develop the most appropriate way forward for their agency, project and cultural context. Throughout this period, agency-specific distant support was given via email a dozen times – with the majority of requests related to developing complaint handling systems and a humanitarian accountability framework. General support in the form of case studies and tools, and workshop summaries, were also provided via the HAP website.

One area identified by agencies where they needed assistance was on complaints handling. In August 2008, a HAP team⁷ returned to Bangladesh to provide in country support in the form of an inter-agency 3-day complaints and response workshop, to respond to agency specific requests, and conduct agency follow-up meetings; 20 staff from 12 agencies attended the workshop, with the majority of agencies sending two participants.

Over the course of HAP’s engagement in Bangladesh a couple of agency requests could not be met. These related in particular to partner training including training support and development of materials for agencies to use themselves with partner staff.

This phase concluded towards the end of November 2008 when a HAP team returned to Bangladesh for the final time to conduct an After Action Review (AAR) to review the

⁷ The HAP Field Support Officer (Emily Rogers) and the Training Coordinator (Smruti Patel) provided in-county support in August and November.

appropriateness and impact of HAP's support following Cyclone Sidr. As part of the AAR a HAP team:

- Conducted three one-day field visits to Sidr-affected areas in Bagerhat District with HEED Bangladesh, Muslim Aid and Save the Children UK, two of which were to the same location as during the guided self-assessments. During the field visits focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were held with beneficiaries and agency staff, and office and project site visits allowed for observations to be made.
- Facilitated an AAR workshop held in Dhaka (3rd-4th December) with 35 participants from 14 agencies including six community representatives all of whom had first hand experience of the Sidr relief and rehabilitation work.
- Held semi-structured interviews with a range of staff who had been involved in different roles.

3.2 Agency approaches to strengthening accountability

Participating agencies took different approaches to strengthening their accountability. This section highlights a few of these differences.

Management approach: Particularly noticeable was the difference in the resources that agencies dedicated to the process. At one end of the spectrum, a specific member of staff or a team were identified to take part in this initiative and take forward the implementation of recommendations; at the other end, responsibility fell between the gaps and was not taken on by any staff. Most common was a mixed approach where responsibility was added to staff(s) normal roles. Irrespective of whether this responsibility was delegated or assumed, it tended to remain an informal addition.

Leadership: Linked to patterns of resourcing was the level of support and follow-up from senior managers within country and, for international NGOs, from regional and headquarters level. This varied between agencies. While some staff operated alone, others were given active support from country directors, HAP focal people at head office and others. Higher levels of senior manager support were also linked to greater levels of interest and involvement from other staff.

Addressing the gaps: Agencies took varying approaches to address the identified gaps. The majority took a step-by-step approach, preferring to focus more on a couple of benchmarks rather than the entire Standard, or to pilot implementation of all benchmarks in a few areas before scaling up. Some focused more on bringing about immediate change in field practice, whereas others focused on making underlying changes that will guide the way they work in the future. Others preferred a combination of both approaches. A few agencies were able to take advantage of existing internal processes that were already underway and built on these. For example, one agency was reviewing and revising staff job profiles as part of a restructuring process and was able to integrate in this process the competencies and attitudes necessary for more accountable and better quality programming.

Working with partners: Roughly half the participating agencies were responding through partner NGOs, and so faced challenges in terms of strengthening accountability and quality of programming. When working with partners there are three main relationships to consider⁸: that between the partner and the community, that between the international agency and the community, and that between the international agency and the partner. Among the agencies responding via partners, there was a definite tendency to focus more on the first two rather than the latter relationship. An overall approach was to start building the awareness, and to some degree follow that with identifying areas for building the capacity, of agency and partner staff to share information with the affected populations. The quality of communication between the partnering agencies did not typically figure in reflective learning. Common approaches included using existing meetings or arranging orientation session to raise awareness of concepts of accountability. In a few cases, more focused sessions were held to sensitise staff on specific topics such as complaints handling, and one agency facilitated joint partner-agency training and planning sessions in order to design improved participatory practice.

⁸ In addition to the relationships with other specified stakeholders.

3.3 Collective approaches

Collectively, agencies initiated a Bangladesh Peer Support Group (PSG) which met three times during this period, hosted in turn by different agencies. It gathered the mid-level and senior programme staff that typically had participated in the self-assessments. Meetings focused on sharing progress in strengthening accountability and examples of practice, as well as developing a TOR for the group.

4. Emerging themes and identified gaps

Overall, progress was made in strengthening accountability and quality management, although at an individual agency level there was diversity in the progress made and the lifespan of changes put in place. Across the participating agencies most progress was reported in relation to information sharing, participation and complaints handling. In comparison, activities related to strengthening staff competencies, quality management systems, and continuous improvement were more varied, and not all agencies made progress in these areas. Annex 2 summarises a few highlights shared by agencies during the After Action Review workshop showing the depth and breath of activities undertaken to strengthen their accountability, and remaining gaps as identified by the agencies themselves.

4.1 Information Sharing

In relation to information sharing (Benchmark 2) most agencies increased the number of media and formats used to disseminate relevant information to affected communities. There was diversification in the types of information shared, from project plans and deliverables, to beneficiary selection criteria and process, to agency contact details and more. For example, one agency redesigned their beneficiary "chit" cards to ensure they included basic information about the agency and its programmes, another agency developed leaflets in both English and Bangla to communicate with a range of stakeholders. Despite this proliferation, some persistent gaps remained: details about budget and cost were less readily available; agencies' quality commitments were generally not shared. Agencies themselves identified the need to ensure key information reaches the wider community (and neighbouring communities) rather than only direct beneficiaries.

Beneficiaries attending the After Action Review workshop also echoed these gaps: *"If the people know the standards NGOs need to follow then the NGOs will be bound by that"*

There was a tendency among agencies to first opt for 'hardware' rather than 'software' approaches, for example to establish a signboard or poster as the primary means of sharing information rather than exploring the most appropriate channels with the communities. While this approach makes it easier for others (such as donors, agency staff etc) to see the project is considering accountability (and, depending on the context, this may be the most appropriate way of sharing information) written information in the context of rural Bangladesh needs to be complemented with audio/visual approaches. Staff received positive feedback from most consistently sharing information verbally, for example at community meetings. This highlights the importance of working with vulnerable groups to identify preferred means of receiving information from the beginning, enabling agencies to plan and adapt their methods accordingly (see 4.2 Participation).

One staff member commented: *"If we only fix a bill board it is not effective, there needs to be other forms [of communication] too so people remember and understand"*.

In terms of the written media developed for sharing information, there was apparent increasing pressure to produce ‘glossy’ products (for example colour stickers, expensive signboards etc). Such materials may have their place, yet consulting with the main audience will help agencies to identify not only preferred methods but community priorities in terms of approach. The tendency to focus on producing materials as the preferred means of sharing information leads to misperceptions that improved accountability to beneficiaries requires considerable resources to produce accountability ‘products’. In Bangladesh, this was seen most strongly among smaller NGOs who felt this pressure when working alongside larger NGOs.

Box 2: Information sharing to increase programme ownership and reach a variety of stakeholders. Muslim Aid Bangladesh

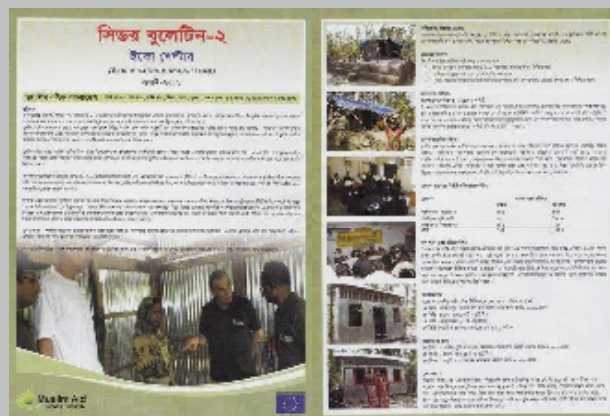
Throughout their permanent shelter project Muslim Aid adopted a community managed programme approach. Key to this approach was transparency of process and good understanding among beneficiaries about the project and their entitlements. To achieve this Muslim Aid used a combination of verbal and written means, to inform both their beneficiaries and other stakeholders:

- Orientations were given to beneficiaries, staff and masons at the beginning of the project to explain the shelter construction procedure, payment procedure, and quality control system. Additional meetings were then scheduled as needed based on findings from monitoring visits by Muslim Aid staff.
- Individual beneficiary files with key documentation (including the survey report, legal documents, the agreement between the beneficiary and Muslim Aid, the passbook, and more) were maintained in Muslim Aid’s project office and also given to each shelter beneficiary to increase ownership.
- Leaflets were used to complement community meetings, and share information with other stakeholders. The leaflets outlined the objectives of project, implementation strategy, beneficiary selection process and criteria, area of operations and number of beneficiaries covered in each, how cooperative construction groups will be formed and orientated, details of the cash instalments and what each is for, and Muslim Aid contact details.
- Signboards were also used to share basic information (included information on project deliverables, number of beneficiaries, timeframe and location) with the wider community.

Through using a combination of verbal and written means for sharing information Muslim Aid was able to build awareness about the project that enabled a successful community managed approach to be used. As one project staff commented: *“When we do cross-checking the wife or daughter also has the ability to answer questions, they all know the information”*.



A beneficiary file used to keep key documentation related to shelter construction.



A leaflet designed to communicate key information about the shelter project to a range of stakeholders including beneficiaries and wider community, local government, journalists, donors and other NGO staff.



An example signboard used to inform the wider community about Muslim Aid projects.

4.2 Participation

Participation (Benchmark 3) was increased via various means. Commonly, existing community committees were strengthened or new community committees established with the aim of increasing participation at specific stages in the project cycle (for example via Project Implementation Committees, or Community Monitoring Committees). In several instances, the composition of these committees – with specific focus on representativeness – was reassessed. An increase in house-to-house visits to verify the needs-assessment information provided by local government was also frequently reported. One agency started to use a community meeting log book to track how discussion points and decisions made were utilised; another worked with partners to jointly develop a participatory beneficiary selection methodology (see Box 2).

A staff member noted: “We place our programme plan in the centre and [beneficiaries] say what we add and cut, and then we both make decisions”.

A beneficiary man from the same shelter project noted “Participation is good as we can give our views about the quality and decide the design”.

Overall, levels of participation tended to be stronger during programme implementation compared to planning, monitoring and evaluation. Consistency of engagement with communities throughout the project cycle and with different vulnerable groups requires further attention.

Box 2: Working with partners to develop a participatory beneficiary selection methodology. Concern Worldwide Bangladesh

From April-May 2008, Concern organised two sets of training for Partner and Concern project staff exploring the Principles of Accountability, and humanitarian accountability benchmarks that form part of the HAP Standard. Additional trainings were organized before starting a new project phase to orient Partner field staff as well as management staff. In total these trainings covered more than 200 staff.

As part of this training Partner and Concern project staff jointly developed a participatory beneficiary selection process. The process involves community identification of the beneficiary selection criteria followed by Pair-Wise Preference / Priority Ranking or Matrix Ranking to identify the eligible beneficiaries. This procedure, along with supporting tools for implementation, was documented to guide partner staff and was used from October 2008. Between October and November 2008, 6,372 beneficiaries were selected using this approach as part of both Sidr and flood response programmes.

A number of benefits as a result of this participatory practice have been observed among different stakeholders. At the community-level, engagement in the process increased over time; there was greater satisfaction in the beneficiary list and greater acceptance of the partners. In addition, the ability of other stakeholders to influence the selection process in their favour decreased. At the partner-level, staff were more aware of the Principles of Accountability and the HAP Standard, more open to humanitarian accountability practices and setting standards of attitude and behaviour required as part of this. Due to increased transparency, partner staff received fewer complaints related to beneficiary selection. At an organisational-level, the progress made in strengthening accountability was favourably noted as part of a recent donor visit report.



Concern and partner staff develop the beneficiary selection methodology as part of training on accountability.



The community presents the beneficiary list developed using priority ranking.

The full version of this case study (compiled by Abu Hanif) is available on the HAP website.

4.3 Complaints Handling

An area that received the most attention across agencies was complaints handling (Benchmark 5). While some agencies in Bangladesh already had an informal approach, the concept of a formal and consistent system was relatively new. A combination of the self-assessment findings, interest from participants and subsequent support from HAP, resulted in an emphasis on this area. Many different approaches for receiving complaints were tried, including (in order of frequency) complaints boxes, mobile phone numbers of staff, agency point persons, and community level committees.

In line with good practice, most agencies established several channels for affected-communities to submit complaints. However, there was often a lack of clarity (resulting from the absence of a complaints handling procedure) on what would happen after a complaint was received; in particular, how complaints received via different channels would follow the same procedure. For example, a number of agencies identified staff or committees to process written complaints received via the complaints box, and these were recorded in a complaints-tracking book. On the other hand, complaints received by the same agency via mobile phones were responded to immediately, and the details not recorded. As several different staff mobile numbers were disseminated, this risked the agency giving an inconsistent response to complaints received via different means. And as not all complaints data were captured, it was not possible to determine complaints trends to improve projects. A balance between consistency of approach and flexibility needs to be maintained.

Where steps had been taken to establish a complaints handling procedure, this was often not accompanied by raising community awareness of its presence or of the right to raise a complaint. As a result of low awareness, levels of use varied and often agencies found these channels were used for other means (including job applications, donations of money, and suggestions). In addition, staff whose mobile phone numbers had been disseminated as a channel for submitting complaints found they received calls in the middle of the night and on public holidays.

Box 3: Accountability is a process not a pre-determined mechanism

Despite steps by agencies to improve accountability, there was a noticeable lack of community consultation in identifying, for example, preferred mediums for receiving information, preferred approaches for community participation, and preferred modes for submitting complaints. The methods adopted were in many instances selected by agency or partner staff, rather than in consultation with the intended end users. While staff may argue they work closely with communities and so are able to identify effective methods, learning based on experience is now emerging that could have been pre-empted by proper consultation from the beginning.

For example, in terms of complaints handling most agencies established a complaints box, and mechanism for opening, recording and responding to complaints received via this means. In practice, however, they found that people prefer to raise complaints verbally (including community meetings, via mobile phone or face-to-face), and those who could not write were often paying 10 Taka (about \$0.15) for someone to pen their complaint. Although agencies rarely reported only one option for complaints submission, having several options does not automatically make the complaint mechanism accessible to vulnerable groups, and while boxes can provide a means for people to raise more sensitive complaints, in practice they were clearly not the preferred means of raising less sensitive complaints. Identifying this from the outset via consultation would have allowed agencies to further develop options for receiving and responding to verbal complaints, and could have facilitated greater use of the complaint and response system.

4.4 Staff Competencies

Considering staff competencies (Benchmark 4) more focus was given to increasing awareness, than to developing the skills needed to implement more accountable programmes. While on paper

the number of orientations may look impressive, the impact of these will depend greatly on their content and the time dedicated to explore both concepts and practice in sufficient depth. The ability of project and management level staff to apply their learning will also depend on the support and guidance from the agency, including clarity on approach, procedures and guidelines, and job descriptions that specify staff roles and responsibility with regard to this.

When changes and new approaches for strengthening accountability are introduced, staff need to understand their purpose. Where a shared understanding was lacking, there was a tendency for staff to carry out activities without thought of the end result; for example setting up complaint boxes in awkward locations, without consideration of the purpose that they ought to achieve; or community feedback collected via focus group discussions, then documented and filed rather than used to improve practice.

4.5 Quality Management System and Accountability Framework

While strengthening quality management systems (Benchmark 1) may be a longer process, a few agencies made progress in this area. Some took steps towards integrating the HAP Standard into country-level policies and procedures, including emergency procedures, and the strategic plan, but for most this remained a gap to be addressed. One agency in particular set a specific objective of promoting accountability for their Programme Quality Unit, and allocated funds as part of their 2009 budget for developing staff capacity. This type of high-level commitment sends strong messages to staff and ensures it is given focus and attention.

A few agencies took steps to formalise commitments and ways of working, for example by initiating the process of developing a staff Code of Conduct; finalised manuals (for example HR Policy, Anti-Fraud and Corruption Framework, and Procurement manual). Others took steps to strengthen the implementation of existing procedures, for example by clarifying staff reporting lines, and sharing existing policies and procedures with staff. However, to systematically manage and strengthen compliance with quality commitments, agencies need to develop a Humanitarian Accountability Framework, which clarifies all commitments, their status and implementation plan including progress indicators.

Staff reflection: "Reputation depends on acceptance, acceptance depends on commitment and quality".

For most agencies, practical changes were not documented or thoroughly integrated into existing management systems. For example, no agency produced basic guidance for staff on information sharing outlining what should be shared with whom, when and how, despite this being a common gap identified during self-assessment. While much attention was given to complaints handling, no agency documented a complaints handling procedure outlining, among other things⁹, the steps that would be taken in processing complaints. Practice, however good, is likely to remain short-term and piece-meal (linked to a specific project or group of staff), rather than reaching across all programmes from their inception if a shared understanding of process and procedures is missing. A lack of documentation poses challenges when it comes to reviewing practice in the light of experience, and using this as a basis for improvement.

4.6 Continuous Learning

A few agencies improved processes of continuous improvement (Benchmark 6) in relation to the HAP Standard. As part of project monitoring, some piloted questions on complaints handling, participation and information sharing, as well as on beneficiary satisfaction. In a few cases all this was integrated into standard monitoring formats; for others feedback focus group discussions were held periodically. Questions focused on whether beneficiaries knew about the selection criteria and process, had opportunities to affect project decisions, and were aware of how to raise complaints or how past concerns have been dealt with. Other agencies acknowledged a need to

⁹ For more details about the minimum that should be included as part of complaints handling procedures see requirement 5.2 under Benchmark 5 in the HAP Standard.

improve how they review the success of different approaches, for example by monitoring if key messages disseminated actually reach, and have been understood by, the target audience.

A key area that requires further attention is integrating learning into practice. Despite agencies monitoring the accountability and quality of programmes at field sites, key staff at Dhaka level did not know the findings or the implications to programme management. Although the self-assessments and the resulting recommendations sparked many activities mentioned above, there appeared to be a lack of progress tracking (at country, regional and headquarters level) against these recommendations. In the absence of this it is unlikely that findings will be incorporated into practice systematically, risking that lessons learnt may soon be forgotten.

Staff themselves identified a need for agencies to strengthen how they methodically and systematically monitor compliance with not only the HAP Standard but also other quality commitments as part of this.

4.7 Working with partners

About half of the agencies engaged in the HAP initiative in Bangladesh worked through partners as part of their emergency response. Thus, for these agencies, steps taken to inform partners of accountability commitments, and to work with the partner to strengthen the quality of the partnership itself and the partner's ability to apply the Principles of Accountability and Principles of Humanitarian Action are key to improving accountability towards affected-communities.

In terms of clarifying commitments and expectations with regard to accountability, most agencies used existing partner meetings or specific orientations to build awareness. One agency took the step to ensure this will continue to be done more formally by integrating the Principles of Accountability into partner MoUs, and in doing so also integrated them into the partner selection and audit processes.

While most attention was given to strengthening information sharing, participation and complaints handling it was not clear for most what strategies beyond orientations had been used to support partners. While there appeared to be an expectation for partners to improve their accountability, the agencies themselves were not necessary modelling this by improving the accountability between them and the partners.

From the perspective of partners who participated as part of the HAP initiative in Bangladesh, there appeared to be a lack of follow-up from the HAP member agencies in supporting the local partners to take forward learning and make changes in their practice as result of engagement with the HAP Field Team. In some cases, international agencies assumed that supporting their partner to attend a HAP workshop was sufficient, and little further attention was paid to strengthening the capacity (of longer-term or preferred partners) so that they too can implement the HAP Principles of Accountability depending on interest. From the community, one message for agencies working with partners was clear: for them it is important for both partners to be present at project level.

5. Factors that influenced change

Comparing agency approaches with progress made, a number of patterns emerge relating to the nature and pace of field and organisational-level change. Agencies that undertook a self-assessment (either independently or with HAP support) tended to report considerably more progress compared with those who did not. This may be explained by greater commitment (either pre-existing or generated as a result of the self-assessment), or the fact that without a baseline understanding it is difficult for agencies to start identifying a direction for improvement. Other factors were identified with staff.

- While levels of enthusiasm among staff were high, their ability to translate this into action was linked to senior management commitment. Of particular importance was allocation of resources and delegation of responsibility. Where no one was really made responsible for taking this forward little progress was made, whereas when people were reallocated part of their worktime much progress was reported. When responsibility added to a staff's normal role the levels of progress tended to vary, depending on individual willingness and/or capacity to take on the extra work.
- Given heavy workloads staff may not always adapt their approach, unless accountability is seen as an organisational value and a means of improving performance.
- Similarly when improving accountability does not form part of work plans (individual or wider) staff often prioritise those activities that they will need to report on, and will be assessed against.
- While improved accountability may be an organisational goal, this is not always mirrored at regional or country-level (for example in Bangladesh staff of HAP Members noted its absence from regional and country-level strategic plans, and the agendas of meetings). Thus the drive from headquarters is diluted by lack of support at regional and country level or vice versa.

In short, substantial progress correlated closely with leadership, delegation of responsibility, and levels of support across different levels in the organisation. In the absence of senior management commitment, staff became frustrated and considerably less progress was made. For agencies working with partners, seeking partner senior management commitment and clarifying expectations are the foundation upon which improvements can be made. A few partner staff in Bangladesh expressed frustration that, as improving accountability was not linked to resource incentives, their senior management was not giving it importance and they were not able to move forward.

The absence of organisational policies, guidance for staff regarding accountability and (for those working through partners) prior agreement regarding accountability in partnerships were identified by staff as hampering progress. For smaller or medium-sized agencies, which were in the process of developing or formalising policies and procedures, it was easier to incorporate quality and accountability compared to larger agencies with more developed policy and procedural frameworks.

6. Implications for HAP support in future emergencies

In light of the progress made by participating agencies, it is important to review the appropriateness of HAP's approach and identify ways in which it could be strengthened.

Feedback on HAP's engagement, particularly the in-country support, was positive. It was felt that the guided self-assessments had assisted agencies to assess their quality and accountability in a more systematic way. Working alongside the HAP Field Team through the self-assessment process provided an opportunity for supported learning, and helped staff relate the HAP Standard theory to realities at project level. Over time, there was a noticeable increase in understanding of the HAP Standard among participating staff, who became able to discuss pertinent issues related to accountability and quality management.

The guided self-assessments and subsequent activities was credited with increased organisational commitment (at least at country level), improved community involvement, and inspiring the Bangladesh Peer Support Group. When the HAP team was in the country, there was a high demand for support, and some expressed a wish that the team had spent more time in Bangladesh to strengthen staff capacity, advise on changes needed to work plans, help staff and partners integrate learning into programme management, and provide hands-on guidance at project level.

In comparison, uptake of distance support was low: while on a number of occasions staff indicated that they were going to seek HAP input, commonly this did not happen. It is possible that staff felt competent themselves, or that they found sufficient support from within their agency. Alternatively, for the staff we were working with, phone and email in English may not have been the most appropriate medium to facilitate communication. Due to the low demand of remote assistance, it is difficult to gauge the impact of the distance support provided. Based on subsequent engagement with the four agencies supported by this means, it appeared that the gaps still persisted. In the future, distance support should be more clearly defined before the team leave the country.

6.1 The right balance

Throughout HAP's engagement in Bangladesh, there was an expectation that agencies would dedicate the necessary resources to drive the process of strengthening their accountability in light of the findings and recommendations from the self-assessment process (as summarised for many in the joint report). HAP would complement this by offering specialised technical support as requested, based on an agency-led approach with the view that agency-led action is more meaningful (and likely to have more ownership and a longer-term impact).

The translation of the HAP Standard (17 pages) into Bangla was left to the agencies but that effort was not undertaken until late in the cyclone response. The Peer Support Group discussed how to take this forward jointly, albeit questions on how translation and availability of key HAP materials in the local language is managed remain. Suggestions were made that the responsibility lies with members, with the HAP Secretariat providing quality control.

For newer areas such as complaints handling, where staff tend to have less experience, the challenge is how to encourage ownership of the process while at the same time ensuring learning from others. There is a tendency for staff to need to 'discover' for themselves first hand before they are prepared to learn from others, even if learning is well documented. In the spirit of the partnership, both the Secretariat and member agencies need to make better use of existing learning. The responsibility to share learning lies with each of the member agencies; the Secretariat can provide support and facilitate dissemination of lessons learnt.

While the Bangladesh Peer Support Group was initiated by staff, it suffered from a number of challenges that threaten its continuation. Firstly, despite attempts to draw up Terms of Reference to give clarity on purpose and ways of working of the group, this has not been finalised. Participating staff expressed frustration that the composition of the group seemed to change (with agencies sending staff who lacked the foundation of knowledge needed to discuss relevant issues), and the group often faced challenges with identifying suitable times to meet. Irregular meetings and attendance, as well as a lack of clarity over what the group wanted to achieve, risks this group becoming a missed opportunity for collective support and sharing of expertise. Again this poses the question of how much support the Secretariat should provide while ensuring initiatives remain agency led.

Different agencies have different ways of working and different capacities. Some need more direct support, whereas others have internal processes that will govern the uptake and speed of change. Given the varying nature of agencies, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect that similar support will suit all. While this is another reason why agencies themselves should be identifying and providing support for their country offices, it also suggests that HAP support will only be beneficial if it builds on and strengthens existing strategies and plans for improving accountability and quality management. Agencies need to communicate with the Secretariat on a regular basis to ensure that support offered at field level is aligned with broader strategies and plans.

6.2 The role of the agency

The role of agencies to support their own staff and teams responsible for taking forward new approaches to improving accountability and quality management varied. While HAP focal people at the head office of member agencies were updated by HAP on progress via email, linkages between country-office and organisational-wide approaches were not always drawn.

A common challenge faced by participating staff was how to translate learning from their engagement with HAP into practice. One of the assumptions was that, in selecting which staff member would engage with HAP, agencies would choose someone in a position to influence change management processes. As already mentioned, it was also assumed that agencies would mobilise senior management commitment and organisational support to enable this to happen. Some agencies met these expectations, others did not.

The need for staff awareness raising of quality and accountability standards was also reflected in the fact that a number of agencies requested to send multiple staff (sometimes up to eight) to HAP workshops. This suggests that agencies need to review their approaches to raising awareness of staff of HAP, their commitments and obligations as HAP members, as well as other quality and accountability commitments. More attention is required from agencies with regard to deciding who will be participating in external capacity building activities aimed at improving accountability and quality management and why.

The fact that participating staff were expected to actively share and disseminate their learning with colleagues and partners also requires HAP to design activities that would enable staff to transfer learning to colleagues. Training materials, where used, need to be better 'packaged' so that they could be easier passed onto agency staff. Member agencies and HAP need to pool their organisational development and knowledge transfer resources together and review them in light of this criterion.

6.3 Identifying and/or addressing the gaps

Many of the HAP team activities in Bangladesh focused on helping staff gain an understanding of the HAP Standard and assessing levels of compliance with it at project level. Staff capacity was also strengthened to continue monitoring compliance. Subsequent HAP activities focused on addressing the gaps identified but the time allocated to this was limited. While the self-assessments provided a baseline against which progress could be measured, more extensive support from the HAP Field Team – without creating over-reliance on external assistance – may have been beneficial.

6.4 Reflection on a way ahead – agency ideas for HAP support in new emergencies

Participating staff offered suggestions for other types of support that would be beneficial in a new emergency context. These mainly focused on HAP working with member agencies to raise awareness about accountability for other stakeholders that influence both emergency responses and NGOs' ability to be accountable to affected-communities. These stakeholders included: donors, inter-agency cluster groups, government-level departments, chief executives, and partner NGOs. Staff requested support with raising awareness of affected communities about the HAP Standard, to increase the demand for accountability.

A male beneficiary at the After Action Review workshop reflected that: "the HAP Standard should not be known only to the NGOs but also to beneficiaries".

Other ideas included supporting agencies to develop a Humanitarian Accountability Framework for the emergency and rehabilitation response; and develop tools such as a HAP Standard checklist to use when developing project proposals, and for partner monitoring.

7. Next steps

HAP follow-up and support activities as well as the Bangladesh Peer Support Group facilitated the documentation of progress to date. The important task remaining for agencies is to incorporate learning based on the Bangladesh experience into ways of working across the organisation so as to bring about longer-term change, and raise the bar on levels of accountability from the onset of future disaster responses. The three key recommendations below focus on this:

- Participating agencies should review learning from their teams in Bangladesh to analyse:
 - The *process* of strengthening accountability and quality management;
 - How learning from Bangladesh can be applied in other programmes;
 - How changes tried in Bangladesh can feed into overall organisational strategies to strengthen accountability and quality management.
- Identify ways to seek senior management commitment at regional and country level, integrating accountability and quality management into work-plans, job profiles and other key documents that are used to measure performance.
- As part of preparedness planning ensure that there is sufficient guidance for staff on accountability and quality management. For example, this may include developing guidance on the minimum information to be shared, when, with whom and how; clarifying the process through which community representatives are selected to ensure that they represent the diversity of groups in society; securing ongoing feedback on the quality of projects delivered.

ANNEX 1 – Guided Self-Assessments (the process)

The schedule below reflects the generic steps undertaken with each agency.

DAY 1:

- Staff introductory meeting – meeting with staff from the field site to introduce and agree on the key objectives, identify most appropriate activities that will be undertaken over the next few days and the role of other staff.
- Preliminary identification of current practice related to accountability and quality, with focus on the quality of the relationship between staff and communities. This took place through one-to-one interviews or group discussions with key staff using open-ended questions (what, why, how, risks and benefits in the respective context).

DAY 2:

- Planning with the field team of the scope for the following days; focus group discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews (SSIs) and indicators for field observation:
- Site visit: Parallel teams conducted FGDs or SSIs to understand the point of view and experience of beneficiaries and other stakeholder groups.
- Debrief findings to date – at the end of the day, the teams had a debriefing to share site findings, reflect on progress to date and discuss focus of day 3. Particular attention was given to discrepancies between data collected from different sites and different sources. Staff were asked to reflect and challenge their pre-existing perceptions.

DAY 3:

- *Continued with site visits and/or interviews with key programme staff as needed.*
- Action planning based on findings – based on findings, staff engaged in an honest discussion on where there are gaps, where the organisation is performing well, and identified areas for improvement with specific and realistic action points.

DAY 4:

- *Action planning based on findings continued, as needed*
- Staff debrief – shared main findings with all field staff including current status against the Benchmarks, recommendations and actions, and encouraged further discussion.

ANNEX 2 – Agency priorities and progress

The table below summarises existing activities and priority steps identified to strengthen accountability as of March 2008, and main progress made and remaining gaps as of December 2008. All points are as identified by agencies themselves and shared during workshops, and are already publicly available via the HAP website.

Steps taken in strengthening humanitarian accountability (as of March '08)	Priority next steps (as identified March '08)	Progress made in strengthening accountability (as of November '08)	Gaps remaining (as of November '08)
CARE Bangladesh			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducting focus group discussions with Sidr affected people to understand: their level of satisfaction with the humanitarian response implemented by CARE or its partners; the level of participation in response activities; and awareness about CARE, its response activities and future plan. Introduction of complaints boxes at distribution point led to community driven rectification of beneficiary lists. Conducted a survey just after initial response to better capture gender perspectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consolidate Accountability Framework After Action Review with partners from an accountability perspective Continue monitoring of humanitarian accountability through focus group discussions with communities Integrate learning on piloted processes in strategic planning EPR plan review will incorporate accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring framework for Sidr response continued to include questions on beneficiary accountability (such as participation and complaints handling). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turning policy into practice especially when working via partner NGOs.
Caritas Bangladesh			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participatory approaches like transect walk, focus group discussions and interviews have been conducted to identify emergency needs of affected people and draft the response strategy. Distribution of leaflets detailing project-related information and contact persons, e.g. a leaflet was circulated during the housing project about how to raise concerns or complaints if needed. Complaints were received, including over the telephone directly to senior management. Discussions and displaying of project signboards with project related information. Ensured representation from beneficiaries in the project implementation committee with a view of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review disaster management manual and code of conduct to reflect HAP Principles of Accountability Monitor accountability in the field and project management committees Share learning from this workshop with SMT and other policy makers during monthly meeting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed the process to develop an organisational Code of Conduct. Continued the revision of the Disaster Management Manual – identifying sections that need to detail the approach to beneficiary accountability. Included two beneficiaries in each Project Implementation Committee Organized public meeting with various stakeholders on Caritas Cyclone 2007 Response program on the occasion of Sidr anniversary. Focus group discussions and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanitarian Accountability Framework – enabling the systematic management of quality commitments and monitoring of status against these. Information sharing beyond the Project Implementation Committees. Operational Complaints and Response Mechanisms with procedure.

Steps taken in strengthening humanitarian accountability (as of March '08)	Priority next steps (as identified March '08)	Progress made in strengthening accountability (as of November '08)	Gaps remaining (as of November '08)
<p>enabling them to make recommendations for improvement and strengthen their capacity to engage.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meetings with beneficiaries are organized at the start of new activities to share details about the project and ensure that they contribute accordingly to its implementation. 		<p>interviews have been conducted to further assess the needs of the cyclone Sidr response program and implementing additional livelihood and shelter support projects.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared the HAP benchmarks in annual disaster management workshop. As a result the disaster management staff agreed to identify ways to strengthen beneficiary accountability in future emergency response program, and the development of a CRM is planned. 	
Christian Aid			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through dissemination of information as much as possible, e.g. information on relief materials through posters. Involving beneficiaries in project decisions through community consultation and alongside UP discussions. Supporting implementing partners to respond to complaints and recommendations from the disaster-affected community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include humanitarian accountability in MoU with partners, and focus on supporting partners with implementation of this. Include humanitarian accountability in the country emergency plan. Conduct training for partners on humanitarian accountability and identify ways to better support their capacity to comply with principles of humanitarian accountability. 	Not shared	Not shared
GUP (partner of Christian Aid)			
Not shared	Not shared	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Started the process of developing a code of conduct outlining the principles that will guide staff conduct. Taken steps to recruit female staff and volunteers at Dhaka and project level. Worked with the community to develop beneficiary selection criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insufficient resource identification and allocation for taking this forward. Staff development to address these issues. Levels of awareness among staff and affected-communities.

Steps taken in strengthening humanitarian accountability (as of March '08)	Priority next steps (as identified March '08)	Progress made in strengthening accountability (as of November '08)	Gaps remaining (as of November '08)
<p>COAST Trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The beneficiary list was published and announced via mikes to enable verification of names. • Community members were involved in selecting the location for tube wells to be built so they are accessible for the more vulnerable people. • During rehabilitation, loan support was provided to 1400 families; information was shared with the community on the loan and criteria used to select recipient families. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct baseline analysis against the HAP Standard • Conduct staff training on humanitarian accountability • Integrate principles of accountability into existing policies • Link humanitarian work with other programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertook a baseline analysis to review status against the HAP Standard. • Orientated all staff on the Principles of Accountability. • Documented the informal complaint and response mechanism as the first step to formalising this, and as part of the process to systemise informal guidelines and policies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidelines on communication with beneficiaries and other stakeholders to guide staff on what information should be shared when and how. • Complaints handling procedure. • Other gaps as identified in the baseline (these will be incorporated into COAST's existing accountability work plan).
<p>Concern Worldwide Bangladesh</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information made available at distribution point to both literate and illiterate people through banner and microphone announcement; display table with items and quality to expect in the relief kit. • Staff direct engagement with disaster-affected communities during beneficiary selection, including consultation to explore the needs and areas of improvement. • Female staff involved in relief distribution; as a result, women beneficiaries feel reassured and protected. • Staff treat beneficiaries, especially in the distribution centres, as their "guest" by engaging in respectful and informative conversations. • Introducing the Programme Participant Protection policies, sharing these with partners and including them in the MoUs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on partners • Conduct orientations on HAP for partners • Hold regular meetings with partners to assess the quality of the partnership beyond individual projects • Identify approaches for integrating humanitarian accountability in M&E activities • Support partners in piloting complaint-handling mechanisms • Integrate this work into wider organizational strategies and in relation to Concern Worldwide staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oriented 200 agency and partner staff on the HAP Standard • Incorporated accountability into discussions during meetings, including it as part of the agenda and meeting minutes. • Revised all staff job descriptions and included an objective on accountability. • Specific objective on establishing and promoting accountability to affected-communities incorporated into Programme Quality unit. • Chit card revised to include type, quantity and quality of deliverables, alongside agency address and important mobile numbers. • Participatory beneficiary selection guidelines and tools jointly developed by Concern and Partners. • Community Monitoring Committees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updated Emergency Response Operating Procedures that is aligned with the HAP Standard. • Organisational level policy guidelines and tools on the HAP Standard, for example develop a checklist for reviewing if project proposals have incorporated the HAP Standard. • Levels of awareness at community level about the complaint and response mechanism. • Levels of community participation in project design. • Involvement of context-level M&E staff in strengthening accountability and quality management.

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<p>DanChurchAid and partner DSK</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Budget Sharing: the project budget is shared with the community and other stakeholders. Social audit: programme quality checks by the community and others (e.g. local school teachers, community leaders) Complaint-handling mechanisms piloted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish complaint-handling mechanisms for and with partners Integrate humanitarian accountability into DRR activities. Build partner capacity to improve humanitarian accountability. DSK: Integrate humanitarian accountability into emergency response strategic plan. 	<p>formed to monitor service quality, and receive complaints.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff and partners sensitised on importance and benefits of complaint handling mechanisms for communities, and different channels for receiving complaints established by each implementing partner. <p>DCA: Not shared</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> DSK: Used community meetings to conduct budget analysis / participatory budgeting. DSK: Worked with community representatives to review and revise beneficiary list. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment of partner staff with the appropriate skills needed for strengthening accountability. <p>Not shared.</p>
<p>HEED Bangladesh (partner of Tearfund)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involvement of community (e.g. community Disaster Management Committees) in preparing list, assessment and distribution of relief items. Discussion with community in deciding housing model and materials. Priority is given to the choice of beneficiaries. Before distributing house materials, focus group discussions with the community are organized for gathering feedback. Presenting selection criteria to community; community assisted in selection process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand on piloted complaint-handling mechanisms Post signboards and notice boards at new sites / other programmes and explore other options for more effectively sharing information with the communities Integrate humanitarian accountability into other programmes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Piloted complaint/suggestion boxes in three locations and signboards as a means to share information in five locations. Initiated general meetings with beneficiaries and community members as part of the needs assessment and to finalise action plans and implementation strategies. Conducted regular focus group discussions to continue the accountability self-assessment process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insufficient levels of understanding at community level on complaints handling, and lack of expertise within HEED on how to handle complaints related to sexual abuse. Participatory system/mechanisms are still informal, and focus needs to be given to ensure community participation in project monitoring and supervision. Information and communication system between HEED central office

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Muslim Aid Bangladesh			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project planning with participation of community people for the shelter project. During a community planning meeting people were asked what specific design and components they expect in shelter provided by Muslim Aid. They sketched the design with the components and, as a result, in order to better address their expectations, the total budget dedicated to this work was increased beyond initial Muslim Aid estimate. Information boards, bulletins and posters complement verbal dissemination of information among community; this helps increase trust and confidence level. For example, before the sanitation project the components / items for each latrine were published in a News Bulletin, which provides written reassurance to community. Piloting complaint boxes, and tracking concerns raised and how they are addressed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align emerging policies with Principles of Accountability Integrate beneficiary accountability assessments into non-humanitarian programmes Strengthen and institutionalise piloted mechanisms (complaint-handling, information sharing, etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finalised the country-level HR Manual including formalising staff evaluation process. Developed different mediums for sharing information with key stakeholders including beneficiaries and affected-communities (methods used include signboards, leaflets, meetings). Identified beneficiary groups and committees to input into decision-making, participate in beneficiary selection process, and implement the project. Introduced a complaints receiving and feedback system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeking feedback from community on different mediums used to share information, and adapt accordingly. Levels of beneficiary participation in project planning, monitoring and evaluation Numbers of female staff at field-level. Limited analysis and use of complaints received to feed into process of continual improvement. <p>and the field offices needs to be developed.</p>
SPEED Trust (partner of Concern Worldwide Bangladesh)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participatory beneficiary selection process for relief distribution. Ensured quality and quantity of relief items through visualization of posters, using mikes and complaint boxes Community participation as volunteers in relief food distribution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinate internal workshop to develop guidelines on participation Hold staff workshop to assess humanitarian accountability Engage with Concern and other HAP members on how to better integrate HAP Principles across the organisation. 	<p>Not shared</p>	<p>Not shared</p>
Save the Children UK			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All relevant staff have been orientated on SCUK's Child Protection Policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on partners Assess partners' existing practice of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrated Principles of Accountability into partner MoUs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child-friendly version of the HAP Standard and guidelines

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children and teachers have been consulted before the establishment of Safe Spaces for children. Facilitators from the community were recruited to take care of the children coming to the Safe Spaces. 	<p>handling complaints</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In upcoming meeting with partners, plan how to pilot complaint-handling mechanisms Incorporate accountability principles in review of MoUs with partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encouraged social monitoring at community level by providing clear information about level of cash support and intended usage. As a result of an internal lessons learnt workshop Save revised approach to selecting community representatives to participate in implementation of child Safe Spaces. 	<p>for staff.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dissemination of key information to whole community, rather than only to direct beneficiaries.
World Vision Bangladesh			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusion of a cross-section of beneficiaries, CBOs, people's representatives and local governments in assessing relief needs. Declaration/display of materials before distribution. Beneficiary satisfaction interviews after relief distribution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formalize existing practice into organizational operating procedure. Integrate development participatory practice into emergency work Share lessons from this process with other programmes Review existing CRM practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independently conducted an accountability self-assessment to identify strengths and gaps, developed a plan to pilot the roll out of the HAP Standard in three areas, and formed a three-person to lead on this. Documented complaints received in a complaints register enabling trend analysis of the types/frequency/number of complaints. Beneficiary selection criteria, as well as name, address and contact information now publicly displayed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accountability Framework (currently being finalised), and strategic / methodical way for monitoring compliance. Written guidelines on information dissemination (development under process) Child participation (this is lower than expected). Staff development plan needs reviewing to ensure it considers the skills and competences needed to meet quality commitments. Documented complaints handling process.