

“What happened next?” – Activities undertaken by agencies to strengthen accountability following the HAP deployment to Sri Lanka

Emily Rogers, Accountability Adviser (Roving Team) – June 2010

Summary – Key findings

Six months after the HAP deployment to Sri Lanka a follow-up visit was undertaken to explore the impact of the deployment, and understand progress made in strengthening accountability with particular focus on the seven agencies who the HAP team had worked most closely with.

The visit found numerous examples of progress made by agencies aimed at strengthening their accountability that can be directly attributed to the HAP deployment in 2009. All seven agencies had conducted activities building on their work with the HAP team, which included progress aimed at strengthening immediate practice in Menik Farm, and longer-term approach through the development of policy and guidelines.

Agency staff felt the HAP deployment acted as a catalyst for speeding-up the rate at which agencies worked to strengthen practice. The learning from this deployment, and the evidence of impact, reinforces the value of HAP’s emergency work and the deployment of a HAP team even in complex emergency settings.

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A) Background

6-months following the deployment of HAP’s Roving Team to Sri Lanka (July-October 2009) a follow-up visit was undertaken 26th April - 4th May 2010 to understand “what happened next” for the agencies HAP worked with, and how activities to strengthen accountability had been taken forward.

In 2009, HAP’s Roving Team worked with HAP members and their partners responding to the humanitarian crisis in Northern Sri Lanka with the aim of improving understanding about, and strengthen performance of, NGO humanitarian accountability and quality management practices. ‘Self-assessments’ were the main activity undertaken with, and more details about the deployment can be found in the [final report](#).

Key contextual points of note: At the time of the deployment more than 250,000 internal displaced people were being held in temporary camps, the largest of which was Menik Farm near Vavunya. Agency access to the camps was limited, and a number of factors hampered 'normal' ways of working. As of April 2010 there was recognition that while the situation had eased somewhat, agencies still faced challenges in relation to how they were able to work. Despite these challenges staff acknowledged the importance of focusing on accountability, as one staff commented, "a sensitive context does not take away responsibility".

Acknowledgements: HAP is pleased to recognise funding support from the European Commission of Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) for the deployment. In addition the following agencies made financial and in-kind contributions: ACTED, CARE Sri Lanka, Christian Aid, DanChurchAid, Habitat for Humanity, Muslim Aid, Save the Children, and World Vision. We would also like to acknowledge the hard work and energy of the staff we worked closely with, who have worked to bring about the progress outlined in this report.

B) Methodology

The focus of this follow-up visit was to understand the impact of HAP's work on agencies' efforts to strengthen accountability. The methodology focused primarily on seeking updates from 'designated' staff and senior managers. This allowed for guidance on continued strengthening of accountability to be given within the timeframe of the visit. Overall the following activities were undertaken to understand progress:

- Agencies were asked to summarise their main progress in writing.
- Face-to-face discussions with staff agencies who HAP worked with: ACTED, CARE, Christian Aid and DanChurchAid, Habitat for Humanity, Muslim Aid, OfERR, Save the Children, and World Vision¹; plus with staff from Oxfam and RedR.
- Discussions via telephone with key staff in Vavunya and Jaffna from CARE, Save the Children and World Vision.
- A ½ day joint agency meeting to enable staff from different agencies to share updates and to discuss areas of common interest.

As part of the above particular reference was given to the actions identified during the previous deployment, and attempts were made during the discussions to understand what had occurred directly as a result of the deployment.

While the visit was not aiming to take a 'scientific' approach a number of limitations to the methodology should be acknowledged:

1. The person conducting the follow-up visit was part of the initial deployment. While this could introduce possible bias, having someone already familiar with the context and work of the agencies, with an established relationship, was felt to be more advantageous.
2. Due to access restrictions in the north and the brevity of the visit, it was not possible to verify or triangulate the reported progress with other sources (such as field staff or beneficiaries), to understand the extent to which this had occurred. As much as possible, in-depth details and examples of impact or learning were sought to understand more about the extent of the practice.

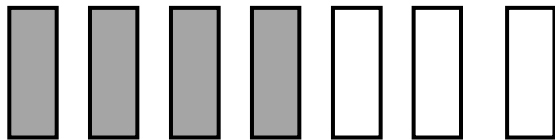
¹While a short self-assessment was undertaken with MERCY Malaysia as part of the 2009 deployment, their staff had left Sri Lanka by the time of this follow-up visit.

- The follow-up visit activities focused mainly on Colombo level, and due to travel restrictions it was not possible to visit Vavunya. As a result it is possible that additional progress at Vavunya level was not captured.

C) Progress reported by seven agencies

The points below highlight a few of the areas of progress reported by different agencies in relation to the benchmarks in the HAP 2007 Standard. Under each heading the set of seven boxes represent the seven agencies the team worked most closely with (general supporting with self-assessments) as part of the 2009 deployment, and are shaded to show the number of agencies who reported *at least one* concrete example of progress².

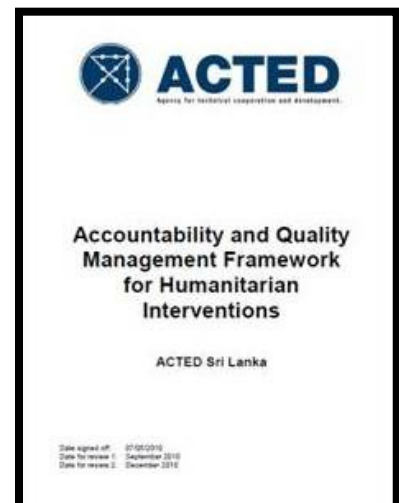
Quality management system (Benchmark 1) and continuous improvement (Benchmark 6)



Four out of the seven agencies reported concrete progress in relation to strengthening their quality management system and process of continuous improvement. In addition, designated staff from two other agencies also reported that, although no indicators have been developed, they now look at accountability as part of monitoring visits.

For example concrete progress was made in:

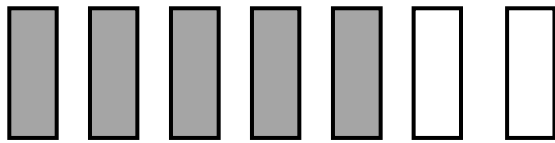
- Using findings to develop an Accountability Framework* - building on the strengths and gaps identified during the self-assessment ACTED developed an Accountability Framework outlining a statement of commitments, quality standards for emergency response, and a quality improvement plan (including activities, responsible staff, timeframe and indicators) (*pictured*). This will be used to guide practice and against which progress will be monitored over the next year.
- Strengthening programme monitoring* – sector questionnaires were developed by CARE for their M&E staff to use during visits to Menik Farm. These were used as part of twice weekly visits to gather programmatic information from beneficiaries, and triangulate information gathered by field staff and volunteers.
- Strengthening how feedback from beneficiaries reaches staff responsible for decision making*. CARE strengthened existing weekly programme review meetings to clarify what information, such as feedback from beneficiaries, should be brought to these meetings. In addition the reporting format for the field staff was revised after the HAP support to include a beneficiary feedback section.



² The seven agencies are: ACTED, CARE, Habitat for Humanity, Muslim Aid, OfERR, Save the Children, and World Vision. Christian Aid and DanChurchAid (joint office), are not included in the seven as most of the work was done with their partner OfERR.

- *Further accountability self assessments* – the staff member seconded from World Vision to the HAP team worked to repeat the self-assessment process for World Vision in two other locations (Jaffna and Batticaloa).

Information sharing with internally displaced people and other stakeholders (Benchmark 2)



A range of activities were undertaken to bring about better information sharing with different stakeholders. Due to the context, more attention was given to improving access to information for staff in particular, as a starting point for strengthening overall practice. Below are examples of progress made with different stakeholders:

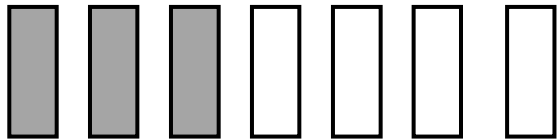
- *Local authorities* - CARE produced a leaflet in English, Singhala and Tamil to explain basics about CARE to local authorities, the Gram Sweka (GA), and CBO leaders (*pictured*). While information had been shared verbally in the past, the leaflet helped ensure consistency of information in recognition of the many new staff. It was felt that information shared in this way contributed to ease accessibility and reduce delays. Based on using the leaflets it was also found there was a need to modify the language used, in particular simplify and explain NGO 'jargon'.
- *Staff* – through a combination of translation into Tamil, and improving availability of soft and hard copies, many agencies improved the accessibility of key internal documents for staff (in particular for those working in the North). This included documents related to: staffing (e.g. Code of Conduct, whistle blowing policy and employee handbook); and programmes (e.g. child friendly spaces guidelines). For example Habitat for Humanity developed and populated an on-line knowledge forum for staff to share key documents.
- *Beneficiaries* – to communicate the contents of a complementary food pack, and how this varied based on family size, Save the Children (SCiSL) developed coloured 'tokens' which outlined what would be distributed (*pictured*). SCiSL made arrangement to meet each beneficiary family in advance of the distribution to explain the relevant process, and hand over the Token, and beneficiaries were given a two week period within which they could collect their package as needed. It was observed that as a result, people knew what to expect, and there was less disappointment and misgiving at the distribution point.



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- *Overall approach to information sharing* – two agencies (OfERR & Muslim Aid Sri Lanka) drafted information policy and guidelines to guide staff on the agency’s approach to information sharing with beneficiaries and affected-communities.

Participation (Benchmark 3) and complaints handling (Benchmark 5)

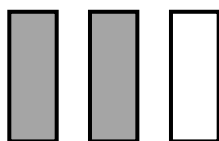


While the context presented a number of challenges with strengthening both participation and complaints handling, a few agencies were able to try new approaches. The concept of ‘feedback’ and ‘complaints’ were often inter-linked, due to sensitivities around being seen to gather complaints within a context such as Menik Farm. Looking forward it is important that agencies work with staff to understand the difference and look at how complaints (which unlike feedback cannot be ignored) are more systematically handled.

Based on conversations with staff, the concept of ‘participation’ was often discussed in terms of ‘information gathering’ from beneficiaries. While contextual challenges may still exist, it is important as programmes move into rehabilitation stages to explore with staff other models of participation which move away from information gathering and shifting the decision making power in favour of the beneficiaries. The points below outline ways in which agencies have strengthened participation (in particular information gathering), and complaints handling:

- *Strengthening collection of feedback and complaints from beneficiaries* - the role of CARE’s IDP health volunteers in collecting feedback and complaints raised by IDPs about CARE’s work in Menik Farm was formalised, through integrating this task into their terms of reference and providing associated training. Feedback and complaints collected by the volunteers is shared with CARE weekly, and findings are also verified by regular monitoring visits. While the volunteers are unpaid, an appreciation event was held to recognise their work, and sustain enthusiasm. To reduce misperceptions, camp management was invited to review the list of selected volunteers, and participate in the volunteer training and appreciation event.
- *Strengthening the role of beneficiaries in monitoring quality* - Habitat for Humanity developed a construction quality checklist for beneficiaries to use with staff to monitor the quality of their house construction.
- *Formalising complaints handling for staff* - an approach for receiving, processing and responding to complaints from staff was developed by OfERR, and procedures were drafted.

Working with partners (Benchmark 6)



Of the three agencies that were working with implementing partners (either as the sole means of responding or in addition to direct programmes), three undertook some activity in relation to their partners, including:

- *Strengthening approach to partners* – in order to look at models of partnership more systematically, capture learning to date on working with partners, and clarify processes for selection and monitoring partners, Muslim Aid drafted a partnership manual which was shared with partners for discussion.
- *Introducing commitment to accountability with partners* – a workshop held by Save the Children with 16 partners and staff focused on highlighting best practices in partnership and addressing gaps, was used to brief all on the HAP Principles of Accountability and self- assessment findings. The inputs and insights were taken back to all districts and partners for further discussion and possible action.

In addition to the three Christian Aid also used an existing partners' planning meeting to have a session on HAP and the benchmarks. Christian Aid and DanChurchAid will work closely with one partner on strengthening accountability with particular focus on information sharing and complaints handling. Practice and learning from this will then be shared with other partners.

Other activities and wider impacts

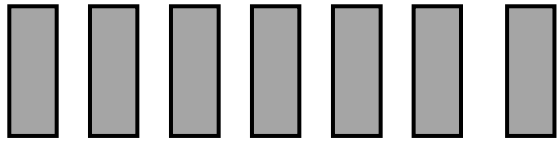
In addition to the activities outlined above, a number of agencies also took the opportunity to discuss the findings of the self-assessment with staff, for example Save the Children presented the findings and action points to a wide range of staff in Colombo and Vavunya as part of a ½ day session. This led to discussions on how accountability could be better integrated into existing work, and assigning elements to different staff to take forward. In addition all agencies distributed hard copies of the HAP 2007 Standard (in English, Sinhala and Tamil) that were printed and made available by the HAP team to staff in the regions and partners.

During discussions with staff a few wider impacts were noted. For example designated staff who had changed agencies since October 2009, continued to use the knowledge and skills acquired as a result of the self-assessments in their new role, and this was seen by at least one agency to be an asset. One designated staff member has since gone on to initiate piloting of an accountability framework as part of a six-country programme focused on fishing communities.

Another agency was building on learning by trying to influence the government on the importance of community design as part of shelter construction in the north, and exploring what aspects of design communities could influence while working within current government restrictions.

D) Reflections based on reported progress

In summary, following the deployment, all seven agencies undertook some activities focused on strengthening accountability.



This progress varied in focus, scope and potential long-lasting effects. Below are some reflections based on the discussions with agencies:

Immediate and longer-term progress - some activities focused on immediate improvements (such as developing distribution cards), and others gave more focus on developing an approach that would guide future work (such as information sharing policy and guidelines). On one hand, activities focused on the immediate will affect the delivery of aid to the internally displaced people, but unless learning is captured and integrated may not influence agency approach longer-term. On the other hand, activities aimed at strengthening the overall approach, and focused on systematising good practice, take longer to develop and roll out, so while they may not take effect immediately they could potentially have a great more far reaching impact. The risk with this latter type is that momentum and drive may be lost before results are achieved.

Compared to other deployments (for example, Bangladesh following Cyclone Sidr), there was a greater emphasis on developing more systematic approaches, rather than immediate localised changes. This was strongly influenced by the context, both at the time of the deployment and subsequently. The context influenced what agencies felt able to do in terms of strengthening accountability, and the HAP team's focus of discussions on accountability with agencies.

In addition, at least two other agencies faced challenges of programme closure due to lack of funds, and thus did not feel that this represented the right time to start activities aimed at strengthening accountability at programme level. As a result these agencies focused on developing internal approaches that would help to strengthen future programmes. Other challenges faced by agencies included staff turnover in the six months following the deployment, with changes in at least 4 agencies of the staff who the HAP team had worked most closely with, which affected the progress made.

For HAP this raises a number of questions to be considered, alongside members, during the review of our approach in 'new emergencies': What is considered by different parties as optimal outcome from a three month deployment? How can we (the HAP membership) sustain the momentum at country-level generated by a three month deployment? How should we work with agencies, and what types of activities can we do, or order to minimise the effect of staff turnover on progress?

Variation in drive for progress – comparing the seven agencies, there was variation in where the drive and oversight for bringing about progress in accountability came from. On the whole, the designated staff who the HAP team worked closely with were key drivers, as well as a number of staff who had been involved in the self-assessment process at Vavunya level. For some agencies progress was driven from Colombo, and for others, progress seemed to be driven from Vavunya level, with less drive and awareness of activities at Colombo level. The gap between Colombo and Vavunya level, which was highlighted as a

challenge in 2009, was apparent for some agencies when looking at progress made in different areas of focus.

There was also variation in the extent to which focal people from Headquarters level engaged with the findings from the deployment, and the work done with their agency staff in Sri Lanka.

A need to unpack terms and clarify steps for strengthening practice – discussions with staff highlighted that participation (benchmark 3) was more often interpreted as information gathering alone, and so potentially confused with information sharing (benchmark 2). Similarly, complaints handling (benchmark 5) was frequently linked to concepts of feedback (more benchmark 3), and due to the context, closely linked to the idea of complaints about the wider context as opposed to complaints about the agency's work. While this overlap in understanding was closely linked to the context within which agencies were working at the time, it is important that agencies continually unpack terms with staff and clarify what is considered good practice in other contexts. This will help staff understand the level of practice that should be aimed for.

In addition the seven agencies varied considerably in size and structure, and there was variation in designated staff's experience of organisational change, and awareness of steps that could be taken in rolling out a new approach. When working with agencies, actions for strengthening accountability should be broken down into smaller steps, and time should be dedicated to exploring how new approaches can be rolled out (at programme or organisational level) with an emphasis on exploring how buy-in from other staff can be sought.

E) Feedback on HAP's work in Sri Lanka - 6 months after the deployment

Overwhelmingly staff reported that the HAP deployment and work with agencies had helped them to focus on accountability as a topic. It was felt that the self-assessments acted as an "eye-opener" for agencies in terms of identifying where they currently stood, and having an understanding of the gaps (in particular between where staff felt they were good and practice) added value and was a good basis for strengthening practice. The process had encouraged staff to "dig into their cupboards" to see what existed already, had helped staff at field level to become committed, and acted as a "jolt [*for the agency*] that they should be doing this". One agency in particular commented that the work had helped them to remember the purpose at beneficiary-level behind existing activities, and so to review these with this in mind. In addition it was also expressed that it was important for HAP to see the situation in Sri Lanka during the acute emergency phase, and the extent to which principles could be applied in that context, in order for this to feed into overall learning.

In terms of strengthening accountability, staff reported that the deployment acted as a "catalyst", speeding up the rate at which agencies worked to achieve this. Staff felt in the absence of the deployment progress would have taken longer, or may not have happened at all. A number of agencies expressed a need for periodic review and follow-up ("HAP should return every six months"), and felt the follow-up visit was: "encouraging to know that others are looking at work done and helps to know that Colombo may look too".

An implementing partner of a HAP member felt the process, and so the speed of progress, could have been improved by holding an initial briefing with their senior managers to introduce, in particular, the terms used in the Standard. It was felt this would have helped

staff to make connections with existing practice, which were referred to within the agency using a different term.

The agency specific reports were a good “aid memoire” and served as a record of status. One agency mentioned this had been used during a visit by HQ staff who had not been able to visit the north due to access restrictions. Another agency commented that the action plan that had been developed based on findings was simple on how to move forward, and helped bring understanding of what the benchmarks mean in practice (in particular for staff who were not part of the assessment). A new country director found the Accountability Framework, which included a detailed action plan building on findings, a more valuable tool for him than the summary report.

Based on responses, the final deployment report was felt to be less useful (staff mentioned they had glanced at this, or saved it to read at a later point), although it had sparked the HQ of one member to contact their country office to find out how they had engaged in the deployment. Based on this in future it is worth considering separating the final report into two stand alone sections:

- a) What was done (aimed at donors, HAP members and others to update activities conducted against those planned);
- b) Accountability learning (aimed at wider audience including overall findings on application of the HAP Standard and learning from this).

F) Concluding comments

The follow-up visit found numerous examples of progress made by agencies aimed at strengthening their accountability that can be directly attributed to the HAP deployment in 2009. This included progress aimed at strengthening immediate practice in Menik Farm, and progress aimed at strengthening the agencies longer-term approach through development of policy and guidelines.

The challenge of maintaining momentum following a deployment remains, and while this recent follow-up visit was seen as a positive influence on this, there is still work to do on identifying the best way to ensure this role is taken on by agencies, and potentially the agency focal points. Learning from this follow-up visit will feed into the review of the New Emergencies Policy and Protocol (that guide HAP’s work in response to new or escalating emergencies worldwide), planned for the end of 2010.