



GLOBAL: Auditing aid providers - how do they fare?



Photo: Shabbir Hussain Imam/IRIN

Aid agencies are more accountable but still too "top down" says the latest Humanitarian Accountability Report (file photo)

DAKAR, 21 May 2009 (IRIN) - Aid agencies are far more accountable to disaster affected people than they were a decade ago, says the latest [Humanitarian Accountability Report](#), but problems remain in transparency about interventions, communication with aid recipients, monitoring and reporting on sexual abuse and eliminating corruption.

"More and more agencies are getting better at accountability to beneficiaries through establishing complaints procedures and designating staff to be accessible to aid recipients, but such accountability cannot yet be described as the norm," Tearfund disaster management director David Bainbridge told IRIN.

Progress

Aid practitioners say there has been a change in mindset. "Recognition of the importance of accountability is the biggest system-wide shift," said Meri Ghorkmazyan, Emergencies Monitoring and Evaluation Adviser at Save the Children. "And the understanding that it goes beyond one person or department to take a commitment at all levels, including leaders, to champion it."

Numerous aid agencies have developed tools to improve their accountability to beneficiaries, say agency staff. More and more agencies have set up complaints-handling systems, and are putting accountability at the heart of project evaluations, which they increasingly [make publicly available](#).

“accountability cannot yet be described as the norm”

Particularly pertinent, said Ghorkmazyan, are country or emergency-led accountability drives, such as the Myanmar Accountability and Learning Working Group (ALWG), or schemes in Pakistan, India and the Philippines to certify accountable NGOs.

"The overall impression gained is of a widening and deepening of accountability within the humanitarian system during 2008," John Borton, author of the annual report, produced by the [Humanitarian Accountability Project](#) (HAP-I).

For Nick Stockton, HAP-I director, the clearest measure of commitment to better programming is an agency's joining the "HAP-I certification scheme", by which an agency agrees to be audited by HAP-I and meet accountability standards, such as strong beneficiary participation.

In 2008 nine agencies became HAP-I members, bringing the total to 28; two became certified making five in all; and a further 14 enrolled in the certification scheme.

"Agencies that are working towards certification are genuinely ensuring that their quality systems are robust and are thereby assuring [targeted beneficiaries] that their concerns and complaints...will influence the way [the agency's] operations are run," said Stockton.

Donors are also championing the scheme. UK Under-Secretary for International Development Gareth Thomas has suggested that the HAP-I certification could become a condition for DFID aid in future.

But this is risky, according to Stockton. "This would be coercive...accountability will work only if organisations make a commitment to high-level programming, and to the dignity of their stakeholders because they believe it is the proper thing to do."

Still top-down

While many agencies are attempting to be more transparent about their operations, information often flows more freely upwards to donors, than downwards to beneficiaries, noted the report.

Accountability and high-quality programming still does not necessarily determine an agency's financial success, said Stockton. "Instead, high quality professional marketing capacities play a huge part in the fortunes of major humanitarian agencies."



"And If they are from an OECD [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development] country, the prospects of income success are far more likely than if they are from a non-OECD country."

"The Listening Project", an extensive consultation, with aid beneficiaries in 13 countries revealed confusion over who is responsible for what in aid delivery, particularly with international non-profits increasingly sub-contracting to local organisations.



Photo: M. Baiwong/UNHCR

Refugees from the Central African Republic in southeastern Chad (file photo)

"People in recipient communities find this confusing and distancing – they often do not know who is really behind the assistance...and do not therefore know who to hold accountable or how to do so," the consultation said.

Despite aid agencies stressing participatory language in their project documents and communication materials, many stakeholders said they were still not consulted on programme design and feedback opportunities were limited.

Monitoring abuse

Separate reports by HAP-I and Save the Children revealed that much of the sexual exploitation and abuse of beneficiaries – by aid workers, security forces, community members and others – goes unreported because of lack of information about where to report and fear of aid being cut.

Though progress on joint monitoring has been slow, HAP-I member agencies are now discussing how to set up shared monitoring and reporting mechanisms on sexual exploitation and abuse, Ghorkmazyan said.

On the whole, communities are speaking out more, said Tearfund's Bainbridge. "Good participation is the backbone of relief....Communities are requesting more information from aid agencies, and are learning to manage the international community better and keep them accountable for the commitments they make." In all field sites Tearfund now sets up signboards in the local language stating who they are, what they are doing and how to give feedback.

Save the Children increasingly charts beneficiary feedback, but acting on it can take time and it costs – factors that donors must take into account, Ghorkmazyan said. "We need to create more flexible communication systems [among] agencies, beneficiaries and donors to aid this process."

Champions needed

HAP-I's message is spreading, partly evidenced by the number of accountability initiatives. Competition around accountability is a good thing, said Stockton. "I have no doubts about healthy competition. That's the way the market, when it's working with a degree of regulation around it, will be good for beneficiaries."

The UN Refugee agency, UNHCR, has just undergone its first HAP-I accountability audit; and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) set up its own accountability drive in 2007.

Three donors – Sweden, Denmark and the United Kingdom – are now associate members of HAP-I.

Increasingly accountability-evaluators are teaming up: Sphere, which outlines minimum standards in humanitarian programming, and People in Aid, which pushes accountability in human resources, are discussing ways to collaborate with HAP-I to create one-stop-shop accountability tools.

Ghorkmazyan said that in future agencies need to set up more concrete accountability measures. "Staff need to know they will be rated against criteria such as transparency or beneficiary feedback, and that the system will be triggered at an early stage if misbehavior occurs," she told IRIN.

But ultimately accountability will improve only if leaders across all organisations champion it, Bainbridge said. "We need a fundamental culture change from one where we have the resources and "do help to" [impose help on] people to one where we exist to serve and support those affected by disasters on their terms...this [change] needs to come from the top of an organisation and be shared by all serving individuals."

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