

Developing a country-level accountability work plan - the process

Muslim Aid is a UK-based international relief and development agency established in 1985 working in over 70 countries for all who are in need regardless of religion, nationality, race and gender. Muslim Aid's focus is on emergency response to human and natural disasters, education, water and sanitation, healthcare, skills training, income generation through livelihood support and microfinance, and also has programmes to support orphan and marginalised children.

The partnership of Muslim Aid Bangladesh Field Office with different international and UN agencies commenced in Bangladesh during the emergency response after the devastating Sidr cyclone (which made landfall in November 2007) and the rehabilitation that followed. This partnership with international agencies and organisations was not only viewed as an indicator of confidence in the work of Muslim Aid but also stimulated management to strive for continuous improvement in service quality and beneficiary satisfaction. The partnership was helped by good interpersonal relationships among the staff members and quick decision making in ensuring timely and effective delivery of services, but it was felt that participation of stakeholders from all levels needed to be integrated into the whole organizational planning, monitoring and evaluation process.

Muslim Aid is committed to the humanitarian code of conduct and accountability system being a signatory to the IFRC Code of Conduct of NGOs in Disaster Relief, a member of British NGOs for Overseas Development (BOND), and since January 2008 a member of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) (and so committed to implementing the HAP Principles of Accountability). In addition as an implementing partner of ECHO, Muslim Aid adheres to ECHO's principles of accountability and partnership in the 'Framework Partnership Agreement'.

After becoming a member of HAP Muslim Aid's office in Bangladesh was one of the first country offices to take steps towards institutionalising quality service and humanitarian accountability practices during the emergency response to Sidr cyclone. The following case study outlines the country-level approach to achieving this.

Understanding current accountable practice

In response to Sidr cyclone a HAP team was in Bangladesh to work with HAP members and their partners, and as part of this Muslim Aid received support in capacity development through hands-on training of two of its staff members: Obaid Rahman (Head of Emergency Response) and Iqbal Ahmed (Programme Executive).

An initial two-day workshop introduced the benchmarks in the HAP 2007 Standard, and started the process of reviewing current practice through a desk-based activity. This was followed by a joint HAP-Muslim Aid field visit, to one of the areas affected by Sidr, to understand current practice at project level through discussions with field-level staff, volunteers, beneficiaries and affected community members.

During the initial workshop and subsequent field visit it was found that, as well as a number of strengths, there were some aspects of humanitarian accountability in the emergency response that Muslim Aid Bangladesh Field Office (MABFO) needed to improve, and that this needed changes at both the field and country level.

The HAP team, along with Obaid and Iqbal from MABFO, discussed the six benchmarks from the HAP Standard and findings from the field visit, with the Senior Management Team (SMT) in Dhaka. The SMT agreed that it was important to implement the benchmarks concerning a humanitarian quality management system, and the HR policies, antifraud policy and procurement policies and long-term strategy were adjusted to take into account the HAP Principles of Accountability. At project level we gave orientation to the project staff to provide understanding of the benchmarks and we also took steps to ensure full dissemination of the project and the budget to all project beneficiaries and stakeholders through many different channels including notice boards; leaflets; posters; beneficiary group meetings; beneficiary pass books and files (with full details of their entitlement, instalments the funds and materials received signed by the beneficiary); and complaint handling mechanism.

It was therefore decided that MABFO should take steps to improve its accountability to its beneficiaries especially in emergency situations through a country-level accountability work plan based on the HAP Principles of Accountability. Even though since being established Muslim Aid has invested its resources in humanitarian

services it was not always clear at all levels that staff are accountable not only to the donors and their superiors, but also to beneficiaries. The accountability work plan would aim to address this.

Developing an accountability work plan

It was decided that at the annual strategic planning workshop (held in August 2008) Muslim Aid would develop its country-specific vision and mission statements based on its core values, and start the process of developing an accountability work plan with staff. This five-day workshop was attended by more than 50 staff including all senior staff at Dhaka and field level. This included all heads of department and all field level managers as well as representatives for all levels of staff from the guards, drivers and administrative staff.

The core values, vision and mission of Muslim Aid in Bangladesh were reviewed and clarified at the strategic planning workshop where staff were exposed to tools and techniques such as those for analysing organizational strengths and weakness and participatory organizational strategic analysis.

Values:

- Commitment and Excellence
- Social and Economic justice
- Accountability and Transparency
- Empowerment and Collaboration
- Compassion and Empathy
- Innovation and Sustainability

One full day at the five-day planning workshop was allocated for sessions on HAP compliance. Iqbal and Obaid introduced HAP and some of the key concepts, and the HAP Principles of Accountability to all before leading staff through a process of reflecting where Muslim Aid Bangladesh stands in relation to the six benchmarks in the HAP Standard (see Box 1). Emily Rogers (Field Support Officer) and Smruti Patel (Training Coordinator) from HAP then introduced the key elements of an accountability work plan and facilitated staff in identifying key goals to strengthen compliance with each benchmark and activities to achieve these, in order to help start the process of developing a more systematic approach to accountability and quality management.

The ground for this process had already been laid by:

- a) An organizational shift from regarding beneficiaries as objects for intervention to subjects who were put at the pinnacle of the organization chart and regarded as the customers of the organization, with every person in the organization existing only to serve them;
- b) The previous introduction by senior management of the concept of upward evaluation;
- c) The formulation of country-level policies through consultation with staff via meetings, workshops, discussions and feedback. This included policies related to human resource management (including the staff manual, and staff orientation), complaints mechanisms, and the prevention of fraud and corruption.

Abdur Razzak (Security Guard) commented in a phone call to the CEO of Muslim Aid during the annual strategic planning workshop 2008: *“Br. Saif, I’m in Cox’s Bazar, taking part in an organizational strategic planning meeting. I just instructed all the participants to maintain discipline during the entire programme. I’m very happy to come to Cox’s Bazar for the first time in my life and also I am very enthusiastic in participating in this meeting which shows me that the most important people in our organization are our beneficiaries”.*

The ideas from the workshop were shared in discussions with our field staff who discussed them in group meetings with beneficiaries. The ideas generated by the beneficiaries have been incorporated in our procedures. In all orientation of staff for new projects the idea of beneficiary accountability has been stressed and is part of the monitoring and evaluation process. There has been an effort to ensure indicators and measures of beneficiary satisfaction are included in the log frames of projects. All staff have received orientation on gender sensitivity, FGDs and community participation. Adherence to HAP principles is now included in all Job Descriptions. This effort has been shared with other Muslim Aid country offices.

Box 1: Developing an Accountability Work plan - working with staff to reflect on strengths and gaps, and goals to address these.

Participating staff were spilt into 6 groups. The benchmarks were introduced one by one, and after each the groups were asked to discuss a series of questions based on the benchmark. Each benchmark had 10-15 questions which could each be answered as 'yes', 'somewhat yes', 'no' or 'don't know'.

In plenary the answers to each question were tallied, and staff discussed why there was variation, or explained the reason for their choice. This provided valuable insight, and allowed different perspectives to be gathered. In addition the patterns from the tallied results clearly showed areas where the groups agreed there were strengths or gaps in current practice, and areas where there was more variation between groups.

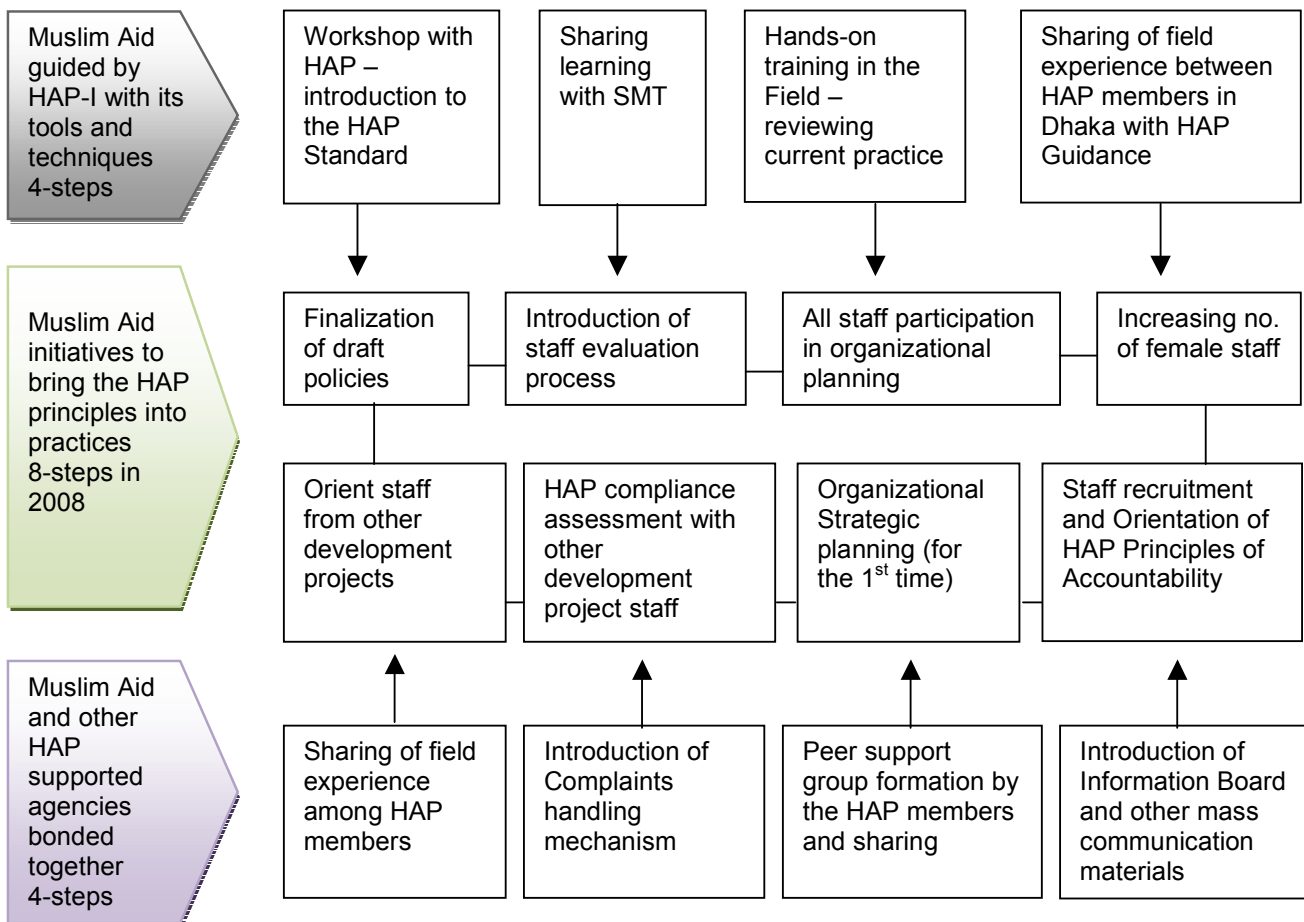
The results from this process were then used to develop goals and activities to address existing gaps, with each group working on one benchmark. The groups presented their thinking in plenary for further discussion. These formed the basis for the accountability work plan.



In plenary Iqbal tallies the answers from the groups – allowing patterns to be seen and discussed.

Summary of achievements and challenges moving forward

In order to implement best practice, Muslim Aid decided to commit its human and financial resources to the operationalisation of the concept of humanitarian accountability. MABFO has therefore taken the following steps:

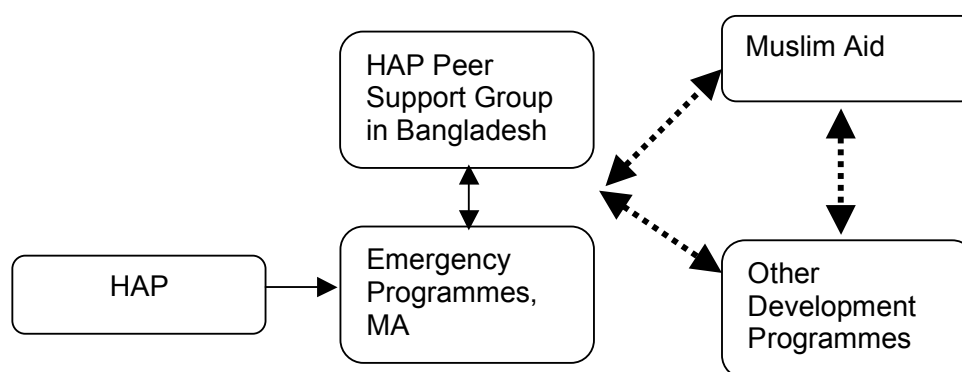


The diagram above indicates the three different levels of initiatives taken to ensure HAP Principles are incorporated in MABFO's work and practices. The first level indicates that Muslim Aid accepted the concept and the necessary tools and techniques through the direct guidance of HAP experts. With direct involvement several times in workshop, sharing with Senior Management Team and hands-on training, MABFO staff have received a good orientation and understanding of HAP principles.

The second level consists of the eight different steps followed by Muslim Aid to operationalise HAP principles. MA had many essential policies in draft form like HR policy, anti fraud and corruption policy, which were finalised incorporating HAP principles. MABFO has implemented a more formal staff evaluation process. It has also encouraged staff participation into organisational planning and tried to increase the number of women staff. The emergency programme staff participated along with other stakeholders in organisational long term strategic planning for the first time in Bangladesh. MABFO has also organized several orientations and induction sessions for field level project staff. The eight steps in this level are interlinked with each other which was possible due to the commitment of the management to ensure compliance with HAP principles, facilitated by HAP trained staff members and has been included as part of its regular planning and development initiatives.

The four steps in the third level of initiatives designed to ensure continuous improvement of practices in field operations including sharing of field experiences among HAP member organizations, introduction of a Complaints Handling Mechanism in the field and Dhaka office levels. A peer support group has been formed that arranges sharing of tools and techniques among the members. Finally for regular communication with beneficiaries as well as the community, other agencies and stakeholders information networks have been introduced.

Our main problem in moving forward is the difficulty in ensuring the field experiences are shared with staff in the different project offices and with other departments in MABFO. These experiences need to be documented as many of the staff are contract staff who are recruited at short notice and have to be deployed quickly so the learning and HAP Principles of Accountability need to be recorded and incorporated into staff orientation. Without this the continuous improvement of the organization through field learning will be limited. However this is not always easy due to the speed needed to deploy staff. MABFO needs to ensure that staff performance reviews and monitoring and evaluation reports include the monitoring of Principles of Accountability. Muslim Aid has been implementing projects like core shelter construction for the Sidr affected communities that is unique and has been implemented for the first time in Bangladesh's history.



The above diagram shows that communication of good and bad practices within and between programmes needs to be improved. There is still scope to improve the organisational culture so that staff and departments respond more positively to feedback and are willing to share problems and difficulties.

One of the challenges is to institutionalise the beneficiary managed system for projects other than the shelter project. Another is to ensure the challenges and success factors are documented and shared through. MABFO will implement a half yearly review of programmes, which will include stories that might be shared with others.