

Workshop Report

Improving Accountability to Beneficiaries: what evidence is needed?

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Co-hosted by:



THE GRADUATE INSTITUTE | GENEVA
CENTRE ON CONFLICT,
DEVELOPMENT AND PEACEBUILDING

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The workshop was jointly organised by the [Humanitarian Accountability Partnership \(HAP\) International](#) and the [Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding \(CCDP\)](#) of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

Opening remarks: Keith Krause, Director CCDP and Nicholas Stockton, Executive Director, HAP International

The Workshop was opened by **Professor Keith Krause**, who welcomed the participants to the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) and to the Graduate Institute. Professor Krause noted that this Workshop is the first joint venture CCDP has undertaken with HAP International and expressed his hopes that the two organisations will continue to build upon the day's experience with future collaborations.

The main objective of the Workshop was to bring together policy-makers, practitioners and researchers with the view to scope their knowledge of humanitarian accountability and to identify areas that require further study; the expectation was that possible research questions would be explored alongside opportunities for addressing knowledge deficits on the linkage between accountability, programme management and humanitarian outcomes.

Nicholas Stockton provided a brief context of the issues to be explored throughout the day, making particular reference to the volume of data, both in academic research and research by agencies, with respect to humanitarian accountability. He noted that, although there was a clear increase in the number of studies, evaluations and other data collections highlighting the concept of accountability to beneficiaries and the issues of linking programme quality assurance, accountability and management structures, little has been produced which unites these areas in order to provide a strong, clear causal relationship between them.

He expressed thanks to all the presenters and participants for taking time out of their busy schedules to take part in the day and hoped that all involved would find the discussions stimulating and fruitful.

Discussion 1: Preliminary findings on humanitarian accountability in 2009

Click [here](#) for *John Borton's presentation*

John Borton presented the draft "overview of the principal developments and apparent trends during 2009 in relation to accountability within the humanitarian system". The purpose of the presentation was to seek further suggestions from participants before consolidating this work into a chapter for HAP's *2009 Humanitarian Accountability Report* to be launched in May 2010. The presentation was divided into 3 main parts: an overview of the principal developments and

noticeable differences between accountability efforts in 2008 and 2009, a preliminary review of main activities in 2009, and tentative conclusions on the current trends and themes.

The presentation sketched out a number of conclusions for the year, including: the apparent themes of consolidation and reflection, a perceived proliferation of multi-agency initiatives, recognition of the need for the '*professionalisation of the aid worker*'. While 2009 saw several challenges (in relation to the clusters system, limited progress from some UN agencies, and how accountability to communities features in evaluations), the year also offered some examples of good practice that can serve as a model for others (such as efforts undertaken by UNHCR, and the Save the Children in Myanmar evaluation).

Main discussion points

A number of comments raised from the audience addressed the effect of different parties' interpretations of the role of accountability in performance evaluations and the direction that evaluation TORs set for the methods and content of evaluations.

Jock Baker, *Care International*, noted that 'accountability' is not necessarily a word that translated easily; while the concept may be part of evaluations and other key documentation, the word is actually interpreted in many different ways. John Borton clarified that, in his review of evaluations on the ALNAP database, he did not simply focus on a word search for "accountability" but analysed in depth the available evaluations, investigating whether humanitarian accountability (and its different elements) was systematically assessed during the evaluation and the extent to which the evaluation methods sought the views of different stakeholders, including disaster-affected communities. Based on the draft overview, John Borton suggested that 2009 was a year of '*consolidation and reflection*'; several participants suggested that the increased number of multi-agency initiatives (predominantly but not all UK-based) could also be interpreted as positive steps by agencies working closer together to strengthen accountability and advocate for sector-wide support in this direction.

Beris Gwyn, *World Vision International*, noted that, within some multi-mandated agencies, humanitarian and development departments often engage in improvements on accountability and programme management within the respective department, instead of developing a 'corporate' approach; this situation limits the potential of learning and improving based on experience of colleagues within the same organisation. This was noted as a possible area for future discussion.

Panel Session: The contribution of research-based evidence to improving policies and practice on accountability

Click [here](#) for *Paul Harvey's presentation*

Click [here](#) for *José Riera's presentation*

Click [here](#) for *Marian Casey-Maslen's presentation*

Paul Harvey, *Humanitarian Outcomes*, discussed the relationship between state accountability to its citizens and the effect of this on accountability to communities. Paul presented the key findings from a recent [HPG report](#), concluding that an objective of humanitarian aid should be to move the host state to a position where it is able to respond better in times of disaster.

José Riera, *UNHCR*, provided an overview of UNHCR's Global Accountability framework and the lessons learnt from the engagement with the SCHR Peer Review process. The presentation highlighted that accountability is a process and not a "state of grace". The key themes included:

- *Accountability is a way of working*, not a 'menu of activities'. Institutional and individual dimensions of accountability rely on staff attitudes and how staff engage with the process and procedures of acting accountably to all stakeholders.
- *Management (leadership) ownership*: progress on accountability rests very strongly with management.
- *Delegating accountability to partners and networks*: agencies cannot delegate accountability, but instead share the accountability commitments with partners. To deliver institutional accountability, agencies have to make clear to partners their expectations and to assist in building capacity to meet those expectations.
- *Resources and advocacy*: accountability to beneficiaries does not need to require an increase in resources whereas accountability to donors does – as a result of the increasing demands for reporting forms and matrices. José suggested that, "we have to teach and train our donors to understand what we mean by accountability to beneficiaries and the absolute importance it has for the quality of our work".

The final comments of the presentation focused on the ever-developing role of research in UNHCR's accountability activities. Two salient points are highlighted here. Firstly, the recognition that baseline data is needed to gain a clear starting point, and that UNHCR's Evaluation Policy, Peer Reviews and learning documents must be read and recommendations adopted where feasible. Secondly, that research assessments can provide a paper trail; agencies must use the data already being collected as opposed to undertaking 'new' projects. Data from feedback mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation activities, existing complaints mechanisms, community involvement exercises, and critical incident reporting and response are all open and available to provide a picture of the agency and its accountability to its beneficiaries.

Jock Baker, *CARE International*, focused his talk on how different stakeholder groups perceive "evidence" of improved accountability. He noted that different stakeholders (some of whom are listed below) may look for very different types of evidence. Some such as donors may emphasize documentary evidence in the form of external evaluations or research-based studies. Others, such as disaster-affected communities, look for signs that an agency is being transparent and is following up on complaints.

Individuals	Staff	Politicians
Communities	Partner's staff	
Donors	Media	

This difference in how each stakeholder draws their conclusions is seen to be one of the main reasons for having an accountability system that addresses all key stakeholder groups. There are, however, some positive signs of convergence. One example of this is that ECHO's audit guidelines state that funded agencies should have a proven track record in how they handle complaints.

The remainder of the discussion focused on two questions; 1) what is the evidence that can be provided to make sure that funding is well-spent? and 2) what is meant by the term 'evidence'?

Addressing the first question, results of the recent SCHR Peer Review clearly highlighted the need for agencies to allocate time and resources to quality and accountability as a part of its "life saving measures", thus raising the profile for humanitarian managers, whose main job is often to prioritize and balance stakeholder needs.

For the latter question, Jock presented a number of alternative interpretations for evidence based on the stakeholders' viewpoint. For the donor, it is often important that evidence relate to efficiency, whereas for the community, evidence might take the form of trust and confidence in an agency's capability to manage processes that result in concrete outcomes. Increased trust and confidence often translates into greater community participation, which provides another bit of evidence. The gap between different stakeholder groups, notably donors and beneficiaries, makes it difficult to come up with a comprehensive system to measure outcomes and impacts. Humanitarian accountability at a community level requires a much more qualitative approach versus the results-based measurements, e.g. measuring mortality and morbidity rates.

Marian Casey-Maslen, *ACT Alliance*, presented the ACT Secretariat's activities and catalysts for actively engaging with HAP and its programme quality assurance scheme. As the Alliance is a membership organisation of diverse faith-based organisations, with many members working through local partners, the accountability chain is highly convoluted. This makes it necessary to consider accountability to affected populations at many different levels of ACT engagement. The ACT Alliance acknowledged the benefit of evaluating and, if needed, changing current institutional systems so as to improve accountability to communities of concern.

The questions ACT posed to the audience based on the conference theme were:

- Whose definition of accountability determines what evidence is collected?
- What evidence is needed to link all the layers of the ACT Alliance accountability chain from the Secretariat to the affected community?
- Is a good relationship between the implementing partner and affected community enough to reach our institutional accountability commitments? If not, what is?
- Is too much focus on accountability creating barriers between local partners and affected communities?

Thomas Biersteker, *Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding*, examined the contribution to evidence on accountability that can come from the scholarly community. Private actors play a very significant role in global governance; current global governance cannot be understood without taking such actors into consideration. NGOs play an important role in contemporary global governance, with

elements of traditional state authority being delegated to them and thus increasing their influence.

Research centres have the authority of expertise and are able to address, with some objectivity, questions such as how to improve accountability to beneficiaries. But from where do private actors derive their authority, and why do they act with authority in certain domains? What are the normative implications for the inclusion of private actors in global governance?

For non-state actors, accountability matters. States are accountable to their populations, while private actors are principally responsible to their boards, their members, or their donor states. Some declare their accountability to an issue domain (the environment, human rights), while scholars are accountable to their academic peers. This situation raises a normative accountability issue: to what extent ought these actors be accountable to their beneficiaries? The cautionary note here is that scholars are primarily accountable to scholarly peers (and their disciplinary reputations). Therefore, if scholars engage too closely with policy, they may find it challenging to translate it back into the *objective*. The temptations of being influential or maintaining access can be more important than being scholarly. This is one of the risks of commissioning scholarly work on any topic, including accountability. While acknowledging the challenges inherent in commissioning research on a topic such as accountability, Prof. Biersteker remarked that there are potential benefits of humanitarian agencies engaging scholars:

- Researchers have the resources and time to investigate an issue, place it in context, and analyse it systematically;
- Researchers are able to identify a range of policy options and construct options for each one, facilitating a debate that could not happen in routine institutional channels, and
- Scholarly researchers can give voice to ideas from within NGOs, IGOs, and States that would or could not otherwise be articulated publicly (because their authors might be considered too independent or at variance with official policy)

Main discussion points

The issues raised by the Panel were meant to provoke ideas for the “buzz groups” in the afternoon sessions. Some questions were noted and discussed during the short open discussion. These included:

Susanna Campbell, *Tufts University*, highlighted that the understanding of state-building in Paul Harvey’s presentation related predominantly to building the capacity of the state, with limited focus on state-society relations, and this risks leading to a narrow set of conclusions. Monica Blagescu, *HAP International*, suggested that the Governance Assessment Project data could constitute a good starting point for further studies on the linkages between the accountability of states to their citizens and the accountability of aid agencies to disaster-affected communities.

José Riera responded to several questions by clarifying UNHCR’s experience with crisis-mapping tools to increase accountability and visibility of relevant issues during emergency responses. Scott Chaplowe, *IFRC*, noted that accountability is linked to power relationships; therefore, to create an enabling environment for accountability and to avoid engaging with elites alone, agencies need to acknowledge that communities are not homogeneous groups. This point was reiterated by Bijay Kumar, *Action Aid*, who provided an example of elite control over community

engagement and brought forward the warning that agencies will not make meaningful progress on accountability to affected communities until they understand existing power dynamics.

Jock Baker, *CARE International*, suggested that, for the afternoon sessions, participants consider that transparency may be an enabler of accountability, but it neither guarantees it nor replaces it.

Thomas Biersteker was asked if there were examples, to his knowledge, of studies on the costs and benefits of different self-regulation systems in other sectors. He responded that there were such studies in the corporate sector but indicated that they may be of limited comparative value for the NGO sector.

Discussion 2: HAP's approach and contribution to addressing some evidence gaps

Click [here](#) for Monica Blagescu's presentation

Click [here](#) for Maria Kiani's presentation

Click [here](#) for Mark Foran's presentation

Monica Blagescu, *HAP International*, provided an overview of the HAP Standard and the HAP certification scheme. Key points raised were:

- The Standard's application to multi-mandated agencies and to organisations of all sizes.
- Without leadership and senior management buy-in and support, accountability will never be a priority.
- Experience to date indicates that agencies focus too much on "hardware", for example, setting up complaints boxes or notice boards as opposed to identifying most context-appropriate means through which complaints can be raised and information shared.
- There is still a disconnection between accountability policy and practice within agencies, but many of the HAP member agencies are making progress in closing this gap. On the one hand, systematic good practice at field level cannot progress without institutional support and policies that guide it; on the other hand, policies are only as good as the practice that they lead to.
- There is often insufficient feedback to communities to show them how their input has been taken into account.

Maria Kiani, *HAP International*, highlighted lessons learnt by HAP's Roving Team from engaging with HAP members and non-member agencies during new emergencies in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Some key points included:

- The Roving team interaction with agencies is output focused, i.e., improving the practice of accountability and quality management at the country and programme site levels through guided self-assessments
- There is a disconnection between headquarters and programme sites with respect to policy and practice. Some have good practice not supported or captured in policy and vice versa.
- If a country manager is not committed to accountability to beneficiaries, then it is difficult to measure its practice in the country (even where it exists) at the implementation level.

- A high level of staff turnover between emergencies (in countries with chronic or protracted emergencies) often does not allow for lessons learnt to be reflected in practice.

Mark Foran, *Harvard Humanitarian Initiative*, was seeking input into the best formulation of methodologies as HHI prepares an analytic tool to measure impact of the HAP Standard in programmes of certified agencies and others implementing the HAP Standard. Main questions raised for feedback from participants were:

- What evidence is needed to measure impact?
- What quantitative data can be collected?
- What type of qualitative data can be collected and how could this be converted into quantitative data.

Main discussion points

A number of comments, clarification points and questions arose from the session, including challenges of converting qualitative data collected from interviews into quantitative results; and the verifiability of the results.

Susanna Campbell, *Tufts University*, commented on the role of academic research interests into the questions emerging from the Workshop. The basic work that organisational behaviour and development scholars undertake is to look at the relationship between delivery and outcome (what is actually happening). As the HAP Standard focuses on the delivery of accountability, a series of management questions emerge of how to establish systems of good practice.

Scott Chaplowe, *IFRC*, suggested that HHI ought to add other data gathering methods to the analytic tool so as to triangulate any outcomes on the impact of the Standard.

Jean-Louis Arcand, *Graduate Institute, Geneva*, suggested that the chief means to improve upon any impact study is essentially to control the sample selection. Collecting data for variable indicators over time may not render meaningful results (no effect to little impact or change). More work needs to go into the sampling framework and the counter-factual, Jean-Louis offered support in reviewing the drafted tool.

Jock Baker, *CARE International*, said that a key lesson learnt from CARE's implementation of the accountability framework is that, unless programme and project staff regard tools and studies to be related to a priority task, they are unlikely to use them. In response to the benefits of having a tool which agencies could use to measure the impact of the HAP Standard on their programmes, he suggested that CARE would potentially be interested both in an external review and the resulting findings that would help in improving existing systems and processes in CARE.

Markus Haake, *Geneva Call*, commented on the added value of the HAP roving team and the HAP-related topics being discussed throughout the day. In response to some earlier comments, he questioned whether it was within HAP's mandate (or the mandate of any initiative) to educate donors.

Nicholas Stockton, *HAP International*, asked the academics in the room, *what is it that brings about effective change in organizational behaviour? Is it sanctions or*

incentives? In response to the question on donors, raised by Markus Haake, he commented that donors have to ask questions about their own behaviour with regards to accountability, before HAP or any other initiative can advocate that they fund only agencies with a proven track record of accountability. Donors tend to assume that all NGOs are accountable – this misunderstanding has to be corrected as *prima facie*.

Kevin Savage, *World Vision International*, cautioned that agencies get caught up in a northern cycle of self-examination; it is therefore important to take a step backward and reflect on whose opinion counts and what is being measured.

Buzz Groups: What research-based evidence is needed?

Participants were divided into 'buzz groups'. Each group was asked to address two key questions for the remainder of the afternoon:

- What factors influence changes in the accountability practices of humanitarian agencies?
- What do we not know about humanitarian accountability that we should find out?

The groups reported their answers and the main discussion in plenary. The purpose of this final session was to identify and prioritise research questions and themes emerging from the day, and to make suggestions on possible research themes that could inform the structure of a conference on Accountability to Beneficiaries tentatively scheduled for the end of 2010.

Main factors that influence change in the accountability practices of humanitarian agencies:

- **New leadership:** leadership acts as a driver for change
- **Research design** – Research can impact change.
 - Research institutes do not focus on key areas that would be of concern to beneficiaries, such as the quality of delivery systems or management effectiveness.
- **Speed versus quality of delivery**
- **Political will:** Agencies need political will and ownership to deliver accountability.
- **Capacity:** Knowledge, tools, staff, finances, and equipment are all important drivers. If agency staff are trained and know methodologies for improving accountability, and they will be able to progress much more efficiently.
- **Donor requests:** As donors request evidence of accountability to beneficiaries in project and programme proposals, agencies can devote more resources to quality management systems and improved accountability.
- **Media and public pressure:** By asking *what agencies have delivered now, was it water, shelter, food, etc?* Expectations are high and media and public pressure can be both productive and counterproductive.
- **Critical Evaluations:** Some examples of critical evaluations were highlighted, situations where the critique forces an organisation to reassess and (perhaps) change; the catalyst might be the evaluation but it can also be staff response, an internal reflection, to a critical evaluation which brings about change.

- **Large scale disasters drive change:** Disasters can provide the resources for agencies to improve accountability systems – unfortunately, a large scale disaster often means agencies have the opportunity to work with more staff and more money.

What we don't know about humanitarian accountability that we should find out:

- **Who is defining accountability within agencies;** Do different management levels have a different definition or different interest in terms of accountability?
- **What different evidence of accountability is available at different stages in the response cycle;** the crisis phase demands a different type of evidence than that of the recovery and reconstruction phases.
- **How much flexibility within the data collected is acceptable to indicate consistent and comparable practice?**
- The **levels of accountability** for those working in partnership:
 - What does accountability to beneficiaries mean for non-operational agencies that fund local partners?
 - What does accountability mean for operational agencies that also fund others to deliver programmes?
- **What are the risks of not being accountable to affected communities?**
- The **cost of duplication:** the number of new initiatives in the sector is far greater than those closing or merging. This implies quite a high level of duplication of services and deliverables as well as competition and increase in the time spent on coordination. Are there studies on the implicit costs of duplication – what portion of the money spent is actually wasted? Why do agencies join all initiatives?
- **Is humanitarian accountability really impartial in areas where non-state actors dominate the delivery of aid?**
 - How do we measure adherence to humanitarian principles and actors' accountability to the populations in areas that are controlled by non-state actors.
- **Who actually bears the responsibility for humanitarian accountability within the agency;** is it head office management, country management or programme site staff?

Closing discussion

Monica Blagescu, *HAP International*, reminded participants that the subject discussed today was to explore the role of evidence needed to support humanitarian actors as they make decisions to improve accountability to beneficiaries. What we need is a realistic vision of how to deal with these research questions and how operational agencies and researchers can best work collaboratively. Can evidence ensure change, or is it another tool of analysis? We must continue to look at our context and make sure we are asking the right questions to the right stakeholders. The HAP Secretariat hopes to continue similar discussions, and that all those present will be willing and able to take part.

Jock Baker, *CARE International*, highlighted the point that the sector needs to challenge itself and focus choose methodologies so as to continue the learning

and encourage the implementation of accountability into current and future programmes.

Jamie Munn, *HAP*, thanked Oliver Jütersonke, Keith Krause and the rest of the CCDP staff for hosting the Workshop, to the speakers and all participants for sharing their expertise.

Appendix I: List of Participants

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Appendix II: Agenda

9:00 – 9:30	Registration
9:30 – 10:00	<p><i>Welcome and objectives for the day</i></p> <p>Keith Krause, Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP)</p> <p><i>Accountability and programme quality assurance: setting the context</i></p> <p>Nicholas Stockton, HAP International</p>
10:00 – 11:00	<p><i>The annual Humanitarian Accountability Report: preliminary findings on humanitarian accountability in 2009</i> John Borton (Independent)</p>
11:00 – 11:15	Coffee Break
11:15 – 12:45	<p>Panel: The contribution of research-based evidence to improving policies and practice on accountability Chair: Oliver Jütersonke, CCDP</p> <p><i>The role of research in UNHCR's approach to strengthening accountability to People of Concern</i> José Riera (UNHCR)</p> <p><i>What evidence can support aid agencies' efforts to improve humanitarian accountability?</i> Jock Baker (CARE)</p> <p><i>Joining HAP's quality assurance programme: what evidence mattered?</i></p> <p>Marian Casey-Maslen (ACT Alliance)</p> <p><i>Towards good humanitarian Government: the role of the affected state in disaster response</i> Paul Harvey (Humanitarian Outcomes)</p>

	<p><i>The role of self-regulatory bodies in research on accountability and compliance verification, Thomas Biersteker (CCDP)</i></p>
12:45 – 13:45 pm	Lunch
13:45 – 15:15	<p>HAP's approach and contribution to addressing some evidence gaps</p> <p>Chair: Gilles Carbonnier, CCDP</p> <p><i>The HAP Standard and the certification scheme (tbc)</i></p> <p><i>HAP during new emergencies: approaches and opportunities for data collection</i> Maria Kiani (HAP)</p> <p><i>The impact of the HAP Standard: progress in developing an analytical tool</i></p> <p>Mark Foran (HHI)</p>
15:15 – 15:45	<p>What research-based evidence is needed?</p> <p>Group work. Based on their experience and that of their organisation, participants will discuss the following two questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What factors influence decisions to improve policy and practice on accountability to beneficiaries? • What research-based evidence would further improvements in current policy and practice?
Refreshments available	
15:45 – 16:30 pm	<p>What research-based evidence is needed? (continued)</p> <p>This session is designed to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prioritise research questions identified in the earlier session and other themes emerging throughout the day; • make suggestions on by whom, when and how some of the research questions could be addressed in preparation for the 2010 conference on accountability to beneficiaries

16:30 – 17:00	Closing discussion Participants reflect on the day; organisers summarise main themes and reiterate next steps.
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