

Are they listening?

Aid and humanitarian accountability



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Overview

From Rwanda to Haiti - what progress on accountability?



Photo: Sophia Paris/UN PHOTO

Haitians in Cité Soleil, Port-au-Prince, queue for food distribution

The Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR), a 1996 review by governments and aid agencies into the humanitarian response to the 1994 genocide, highlighted poor coordination, low accountability to genocide survivors, and extensive reports of aid being directed to perpetrators of the violence, among other problems, throwing aid agencies into a flurry of questioning and introspection (and which led to the creation of IRIN).

It kick-started a drive towards better accountability throughout the sector, including higher programming stan-

dards, a better-skilled workforce, and stronger accountability to disaster-affected communities.

Out of JEEAR came accountability mechanisms like the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (HAP-I), the Sphere Project to enhance accountability and quality standards in disaster response, People in Aid, and the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) in Humanitarian Action.

The growing emphasis on accountability was also linked to a sector-wide shift towards rights-based approaches to aid, bringing aid back to the humanitarian principles, and an effort to professionalize (and thus improve) management and strategy, said an October 2011 paper by the Humanitarian Practice Network of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), a UK think-tank. In the past 10 years agencies have realized they need to evaluate the impact of their work rather than simply focusing on the outlay, and in an increasingly competitive industry, donors are now insisting on impact studies too.

Disaster survivors - and states - are also demanding greater accountability themselves. Information and communications technology allows disaster survivors to complain when things go wrong, to voice their priority needs and to bridge the gap between funders and the communities.

Progress since then has been bitty, but "critical mass" has now built up, says HAP interim head Robert Schofield, as actors ranging from UN agencies to small local NGOs realize they can no longer afford to sideline the issue.

"It feels like there is a critical mass that has moved it [accountability] beyond incremental change to something more fundamental," he told IRIN.

For Jacobo Quintanilla, director of humanitarian information projects at InterNews, an international NGO promoting local media, better communication underpins four elements that are crucial to accountability - transparency, participation, monitoring and evaluation, and effective feedback.

Impact

Though studies of how better communication with people in need can impact aid responses are scarce, there is building evidence that better accountability and communication with beneficiaries leads to more useful, relevant programming. For instance, in the 2009 earthquake in West Sumatra, Catholic Relief Services provided shelter based on disaster-affected people's priorities and reportedly received a 99 percent satisfaction rate.

When infoasaid, and international NGOs ActionAid and World Vision, asked drought-affected communities in Isiolo, northern Kenya, in 2011 what their information priorities were, they asked for weekly updates on livestock and food prices, and water and pasture availability, which the agencies sent via text messages. Most people said it was exactly what they needed, had improved their livelihoods, and "made their lives easier and better", said Robert Powell, spokesperson at infoasaid, which uses information technology to improve communication between communities, the media, and aid agencies.

Conversely, a lack of consultation can have adverse consequences. Haitians burnt down a hospital set up by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to treat cholera victims because they worried they would be infected with the disease. Health NGO Merlin found female flood-survivors in Pakistan were not accessing their services because there were no female health staff. Once Merlin rectified this, "user rates shot up", said Richard Cobb, Merlin's monitoring, evaluation and accountability adviser.

But more evidence is needed, said interviewees, and several organizations are currently collecting fresh data. "What is needed are more examples of the causality between improved accountability and superior quality or value for money in programmes... agencies need to present a good business case," said John Borton, accountability expert and co-author of JEEAR and many other evaluations.

No longer an option

Change is happening slowly, and stubborn obstacles remain: among them a gap between policy and practice and inadequate coordination despite a lot of talk, while the deep attachment of aid agencies to autonomy has prevented an external ombudsman being put in place to rate the quality of humanitarian

Landmarks in humanitarian accountability

Heads of UN and non-UN agencies, using the "transformative agenda" of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), are making accountability to disaster survivors a key priority in the push for better quality delivery of humanitarian aid. In 2011 they established a sub-group on accountability to affected populations, which will test new ways of working in three countries.

Quality standards initiatives like the Sphere Project, People in Aid, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), and the Active Learning Network for Accountability in Practice (ALNAP) have come together to consolidate their norms and standards in the Joint Standards Initiative.

The creative use of information and communications technology in humanitarian operations by aid agencies, NGOs and the private sector skyrocketed in 2010 and 2011. Organizations like Internews, Infoasaid, Ushahidi, BBC Media Action, and the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities network continued to strengthen.

A major impetus for change was the Haiti earthquake of October 2010 and its aftermath.

Ten months after the earthquake in Haiti in October 2010, cholera broke out, eventually infecting 500,000 people and causing 7,000 deaths, according to Médecins sans Frontières. Studies linked the outbreak to poor sewage disposal at the UN peacekeeping troops' camp. In November 2011 the US-based Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH) and the Haitian Bureau des Avocats Internationaux, sought hundreds of millions of dollars in damages from the UN.

Following problems it saw in the Haiti response, the Swiss Development Cooperation agency joined with the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA - an NGO network), and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to strengthen partnership between international humanitarian groups and national governments to boost quality response.

Meanwhile, IFRC continued its work on an International Disaster Response Law, which focuses on collaborating with national Red Cross societies to help governments better prepare for disasters and develop their disaster management laws.

The UK Department for International Development has five commitments to accountability in its funding decisions, including giving aid recipients a greater voice, promoting better impact assessments, working on standards to assess accountability, and emphasizing adherence to accountability.

performance, as recommended by JEEAR and an interagency review of the response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Another complication is the ever-increasing number and diversity of actors who flock to respond to high-profile crises. When a 7-magnitude earthquake struck Haiti in 2010, thousands of groups, including humanitarian agencies, missionaries, diaspora members, scientologists, and celebrities such as Sean Penn, descended to try to help, with varying results.

"Each major crisis - including the Horn of Africa, the Pakistan floods and the Haiti earthquake - has faced an accountability challenge," said HAP-I's Schofield.

Steps agencies have taken towards greater accountability include more two-way communication with disaster survivors; a shift in aid approaches, such as giving cash rather than food, which enable communities to make their own choices; and the collaboration of Sphere, HAP-I and People in Aid, which promotes good practice among aid workers, to create joint accountability standards.

There have also been institutional changes. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which coordinates UN and non-UN humanitarian partnerships, has endorsed accountability to disaster survivors as a key principle on IASC's "Transformative Agenda".

The Agenda aims to improve leadership, coordination and accountability in emergency response by setting up a working group to improve transparency, feedback and complaints, and participation in programme design and evaluations.

Improving accountability is no longer a choice. "Now [that] disaster-affected populations can make their voices heard through the media, agencies are recognizing that forward accountability [as in, accountability to disaster-affected communities] is no longer an option," said Paul Knox-Clarke, head of research and communications at ALNAP.

Haitians used Twitter to voice their frustration at slow aid responses to the 2010 earthquake. A group of Haitians (with help from the US-based Institute for Justice and Democracy) is taking the UN to court for allegedly fuelling a mass cholera outbreak, which went on to infect 500,000 people and cause 7,000 deaths, according to MSF.

Aid survivors and diaspora communities are directly and vocally influencing aid responses. Survivors of Indonesia's Mount Merapi eruption in 2010 used Twitter, SMS and Facebook to tell the world what was happening, and sent their key findings to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The Somali Diaspora responded directly to funding needs for food aid posted on an interactive map by NGO the Danish Refugee Council; while hundreds in the Haitian diaspora collaborated to create a map of hardest-hit areas using OpenStreetMap.

Struggling to keep up

But many aid agencies are struggling to keep up with the pace of change, said Robert Powell, spokesperson at infoasaid, which uses information technology to improve communication between communities, the media, and aid agencies.

Traditionally risk-averse, agencies must change their approach - moving away from a reliance on donors to partner with private companies - which have a lot of money to invest - to create better and economically sustainable two-way communication tools.

A growing number of entrepreneurial technology companies have provided help in disasters. Frontline SMS, which can turn one computer into a communications hub, has been used to track disease spread in Cambodia and violence against children (with Plan International) in Benin. Google created missing persons lists in Haiti; while the country's largest mobile phone network Digicel used its GPS trackers to map out post-quake people movements.

Rather than seeing themselves as charities, agencies should start thinking of themselves as service providers for their clients, said Borton. But this requires NGOs going back to basics. "Why do aid agencies exist? It shouldn't be to perpetuate their own bureaucracies - it is up to them to shift their working agenda to better serve people."

Responding to feedback

Communications is one thing, responding to it, another. World Vision's associated director of humanitarian accountability, Madara Hettiarahchi, said many agencies are wary of adverse publicity, while staff members fear personal criticism, but responding to feedback is the only way to get people the assistance they really need.

Feedback will only work if the organization is ready to respond to it, if it is culturally appropriate, and does not ignore or duplicate existing local feedback mechanisms, said ALNAP's Knox-Clarke. It must also be designed not simply to reinforce power structures within affected communities, but to give space to often-overlooked groups such as women, children or the elderly, to speak their minds.

Critics say technology-reliant feedback mechanisms favour one group: young urban males, who represent the largest proportion of mobile phone and Internet users. But while women and rural communities are lagging, they increasingly have access to mobile technology. As an aid worker told BBC Media Action "They [Somalis] may not have had lunch, but they have a mobile phone."

Agencies are becoming more attentive to listening to often-unheard groups: Save the Children has set up children's committees through which they channel feedback; many agencies present feedback options pictorially so that illiterate people can engage with them.

Derk Segaar, head of OCHA's Communications Services Section, said feedback must be well-coordinated or it will risk creating confusion. It also works best when set up ahead of time - the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) aims to put in place formal agreements with mobile phone providers in 50 disaster-prone countries to set up emergency helpline numbers in advance of a disaster.

But still, too few agencies currently have efficient ways of collecting, analyzing and responding to feedback, or sufficient staff with the necessary skills, noted a 2011 report by the Collaborative Learning Project.

Compliance

Expertise on accountability is growing but it is still seen by many agencies as an add-on activity rather than

People matter

Accountability to disaster survivors - including better two-way communication with them - is "still driven by a select number of individuals within organizations, who in many cases lack the institutional support and resources to do the job systematically, and in other cases simply lack know-how," said Jacobo Quintanilla, director of humanitarian information projects at Internews. "We don't have enough people with adequate skills to make it happen."

A number of initiatives have taken off in recent years to help build up a cadre of sufficiently skilled humanitarians, and to create 'surge forces' who can be deployed at a moment's notice. These include the Emergency Capacity Building Project, created by 15 British aid agencies to determine the common humanitarian competencies required by aid workers, and what kind of leadership works best.

"Without... a commitment to staff development inside the organization, nothing will happen," said Jonathan Potter, head of People in Aid, which was set up in 1997 to improve management and technical skills across the humanitarian sector.

being integral to good programming, and major gaps remain, said accountability expert, Borton.

Infoasaid's Robert Powell said their ideas for boosting interaction with disaster survivors are being resisted by aid agencies in the Sahel, who say they do not have the time.

While the impetus towards accountability must come from agencies themselves, donors can encourage this by stressing compliance with minimum accountability standards. Some worry this would just end up being a paper work exercise to please donors, but unless everyone is pushing higher standards across the board, "it won't work" said Borton.

Some stand out - Denmark's development cooperation agency (DANIDA) has pushed NGOs to comply with minimum quality HAP standards. The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) has for years been accountability-driven. The UK Department for International Development (DFID) insists on accountability to disaster-affected people if NGOs are to receive their 72-hour rapid response disaster funding, said a DFID spokesperson.

But coordination among donors is currently weak, as evidenced by the flagging Good Humanitarian Donorship, an informal, voluntary donor coordination and quality initiative, "which is cause for despair", Borton added.

Humanitarian actors have for years shunned third-party enforcement, and the system "desperately protects its autonomy", said Borton. "Looking back, one could say it was absurd to have created something [the Sphere standards] that is at the core of what we do, but with no commitment to follow through or monitor adherence," he told IRIN.

HAP-I tries to institutionalize compliance by calling on all members to live up to quality standards. Membership has grown to 82 agencies, 13 of them certified to the HAP standard, but most are small or medium NGOs. The larger agency federations shun membership, partly because it is difficult to ensure each member complies.

Agencies working mainly through partners - such as health NGO Merlin, which works through government health ministries - say joint accountability is complex. In this context, compliance is all the more important and must come down to insisting on meaningful, quality partnerships, according to ALNAP's Knox-Clarke.

The reluctance to be monitored is not always well received. Quintanilla of InterNews pointed out that "local media accept the power of a watchdog on governments and different actors - why don't we do the same? Do checks and balances on anything that matters to communities... from governments to humanitarian organizations," he suggested.

While enforcing compliance is not realistic at least in the near future, now is the time for accountability bodies to "lift their vision" and embrace the new focus on beneficiary accountability put forward in the IASC's "Transformative Agenda", so that all actors can start to use the same standards. "This would be a big prize," said Borton.

Progress on accountability is likely to continue, albeit inefficiently, he added. Quintanilla puts this down to risk-aversion. "The humanitarian system is risk-averse to a degree... The system simply cannot continue doing business as usual."

Accountability – what’s in a word?



Photo: Kate Holt/IRIN

Ask me what I need: Badbado IDP camp, Mogadishu

The concept of “accountability”, like much humanitarian vocabulary, can be complex and elusive. Some organizations, like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) do not even like using the word.

“We’re not very comfortable with the term ‘accountability’, because... we are still not very clear on what we mean by accountability,” said Caroline Abu-Sada, coordinator of MSF’s research unit in Geneva.

And if understanding its meaning in English can be a struggle, translating it into other languages can be near impossible.

For example, “In French, it’s absolutely untranslatable,” Abu-Sada told IRIN. The best she and her colleagues have come up with is “redevabilité” - “it’s an unpronounceable, very bizarre word. It’s not really user-friendly.”

“How do you explain ‘protection’ if you try to translate it into your mother tongue?” asks Maria Ahmad, who manages a humanitarian communications programme for the International Organization for Migration in Pakistan. “I still don’t know how I can explain ‘protection’ to my mother.”

In an effort to make its meaning clearer, IRIN has gathered some conceptualizations of “accountability”:

Accountability (to those in need) is ...

... “the responsible use of power.” (Humanitarian Accountability Partnership - HAP)

... “about keeping beneficiaries informed in such a manner that they have the necessary tools to hold us accountable.” (Niels Bentzen, global accountability focal point, Danish Refugee Council)

... “first and foremost about communication with affected people.” (Jacobo Quintanilla, director of humanitarian information projects, Internews)

... “really about systems and processes. Do you have the right staff? How do you communicate? What are your participation methods? Boiling accountability down to feedback mechanisms is a bit of a cop-out.” (Gregory Glead, member of roving team, HAP)

... “about beneficiaries participating in the process of improving their situation.” (International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies)

... “about bridging the gap between listening to what affected people say and taking action based on that feedback.” (Ground Truth program)

... “leadership/governance; transparency; feedback and complaints; participation; design, monitoring and evaluation.” (Inter-Agency Standing Committee Sub-Group on Accountability to Affected Populations)

... “proximity, acceptance, transparency... It’s about making sure that the medical services we’re providing are

first of good quality and second are corresponding to the needs.” (Caroline Abu-Sada, research unit coordinator, MSF)

... “ensuring that communities have a right to say what their concerns are; and our duty to respond and ensure their rights are met and their right to receive assistance is met.” (Madara Hettiarachchi, associate director for humanitarian accountability, World Vision International)

... “a shared commitment to learning as the path to excellence and to integrity in fulfilling commitments to stakeholders.” (World Vision International’s Accountability Framework)

... “a responsibility, not a choice.” (International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies)

Accountability in action



Photo: R.Redmond/UNHCR

How are humanitarians perceived?

Accountability has become a buzz word in the aid industry in recent years, but in the eyes of many aid workers, it remains a luxury they cannot afford given the pressures and constraints of working in the field.

For Maria Kiani, senior quality and accountability adviser at the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), “the debate isn’t about principles versus pragmatism. It is about an approach that can be a principled pragmatism... It’s not about trying to fix the context; it’s how you work within that context.”

Here are some initiatives that have tried to make accountability a reality, even in the most difficult circum-

stances:

SMS/social media pilot, Somalia: The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is piloting a new feedback mechanism in Somalia’s capital Mogadishu in which complaints or other feedback sent by text message are plotted onto an online map and filtered by theme and location. Affected people, partners, government or outside observers can search the site and track the response to each complaint, or subscribe to receive emails about specific topics. Some complaints are then shared on Facebook, Twitter, and a blog for further discussion.

“It’s a bit risky,” says the DRC director for Somalia, Heather Amstutz, “but it has shown us that it is possible.”

Humanitarian Communications Programme, Pakistan: What started as an experiment to find out why relief items given to displaced people in northern Pakistan were being sold on the open market has become a nationwide inter-agency humanitarian call centre, hosted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). It receives feedback and complaints on any aid operation in the country, whether delivered by the UN, NGOs or the government, and refers the complaint to the cluster or agency in question, which must try to resolve the issue within a specific period of time.

The programme has developed a “yellow pages” service directory for people in need, based on the 3W (Who is doing What, Where) model shared among humanitarian actors, and uses it to refer people to the right agency.

As part of the programme, IOM created a document with Frequently Asked Questions by beneficiaries like “Where should I get food?” or “What kind of documentation do I need to get assistance?” which was translated and distributed to field workers who then explain the answers to communities.

The HESPER Scale: The Humanitarian Emergency Settings Perceived Needs Scale is a free, user-friendly 15-30 minute questionnaire developed by King’s College in London and the World Health Organization. It combines survey research methods with qualitative interviews to assess the perceived needs of communities affected by natural disasters or conflict in a representative and scientifically sound way. World Vision has started using it in the field and is also considering turning it into an application for the iPhone.

Humanitarian Media Roster: Aid agencies have sometimes struggled to find “humanitarian communications” specialists in the midst of an emergency. In January, Internews launched a humanitarian media roster to try to fill the gap. As part of its so-called Transformative Agenda, the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is also establishing a roster of senior experienced humanitarian leaders who can deploy within 72 hours to an emergency. The Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS) is also building a roster of experts in needs assessment and preparedness, for quick deployment.

Accountability Working Group, Dadaab: When a multiplicity of actors asks the same communities for feedback in an emergency, affected people can experience “accountability fatigue”. To try to address this and other challenges, HAP helped create the Dadaab Accountability and Quality Working Group, where agencies working in the field can discuss issues relating to accountability and plan joint activities.

Anti-Fraud Hotline, Pakistan: The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has established a hotline for people to report corruption in any USAID-funded projects in Pakistan to Transparency International Pakistan and track the complaint.

In the Eyes of Others: Pushed to action by the killing of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staff in Afghanistan and a confusion between MSF and the UN peacekeeping force in the Democratic Republic of Congo, MSF recently made an effort to understand how it was perceived by the people it was trying to help. The result was a book, published in April, called *In the Eyes of Others*. MSF says it has learned many lessons and changed its modus operandi since. For example, patients complained that MSF focused on neglected diseases, while malaria was the biggest killer, or that in places like the Middle East, it needed to focus on chronic diseases like diabetes instead of vaccinations and epidemics.

“This research has opened a lot of Pandora boxes on various aspects, from HR to medical management to security management to identity issues - redefining the principles of independence, neutrality, impartiality,” says Caroline Abu-Sada, MSF’s research unit coordinator in Geneva and editor of the book.

Dadaab Humanitarian Information Service: The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and other humanitarian partners are supporting the creation of a community radio station to be operated out of Dadaab refugee camp and run by Star FM. Internews will identify and train refugees and members of the host communities as reporters. As part of the effort to close the information gap between aid workers and affected people, other media have sprung up in Dadaab, including a small newsletter called *The Refugee*.



Photo: The Cash Learning Partnership

That will do nicely – cash transfers provide choice and help maintain dignity

Communication project, southeast Kenya: World Vision and infoasaid are using text messages and a sponsored 45-minute monthly radio show to spread information about things like livestock prices, contents of food aid packages, and aid delivery dates. The radio show also allows World Vision staff to be available live on the show for questions.

"It works really well because... it creates space for communities and staff to have this ongoing dialogue," says Madara Hettiarachchi, associate director for humanitarian accountability at World Vision International. "The community demands it."

Solar chargers, central Kenya: ActionAid and infoasaid gave out 250 phones and solar chargers to drought-hit communities in Isiolo, central Kenya. Using technologies like Frontline SMS and Freedom Fone, they provided them with information about livestock prices and food distributions. But the equipment also saved aid workers trips into the field with 4x4s, allowing people to get in touch with aid hubs 24 hours a day by mobile phone.

"Obviously face-to-face is necessary, but this made communication more flexible," says infoasaid's Robert Powell, who helps aid agencies develop two-way communication with the people they are trying to help.

Humanitarian Crisis Map, CAR: In the Central African Republic, Internews and the Association of Journalists for Human Rights have launched a humanitarian crisis map, in which local journalists verify crowd-sourced information, plot it onto a map, and share it in real time with humanitarian actors, who can then share information on the map about their response.

Camp Committee Assessment Tool: Aid agencies often designate camp representatives as interlocutors for feedback and complaints - but they are not always representative, experienced or ethical. HAP has developed guidelines - including questionnaires and discussion guides - to help aid agencies assess the quality and representativeness of their camp committees.

UN Global Pulse: Started by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, this initiative aims to find ways to detect and aggregate digital signals in order to better understand people's lives in areas that may not be accessible by aid workers, but where people are leaving behind a trail by using mobile phones or accessing digital services. Adding money to the mobile accounts could be a sign of good economic times. Selling off livestock could be an early predictor for a food crisis. "The true effects of a global crisis only become clear years later... when the damage is already done," the Global Pulse website says. "Much of the data used to track progress toward the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), for example, dates back to 2008 or earlier - before the onset of the current economic crisis." Giving humanitarians faster access to real-time information about people's lives on the ground could enable faster decision-making and response.

The Listening Project: A project of the Collaborative for Development Action, a consulting agency, the Listening Project spent four years visiting 20 countries to speak to grassroots community members, government officials, religious and traditional leaders, teachers, health workers, business people, staff of local organizations, youth and children, women and men about their experiences as recipients of aid. Some of the lessons they learned can be found here.

ACAPS: The Assessment Capacities Project, an initiative of a consortium of NGOs, has developed a number of tools to help the humanitarian system carry out better needs assessments in a crisis, including background sheets with detailed steps to follow in different types of disasters. For example, what kind of technical information should you obtain following an earthquake? What is the likely impact of a flood?

Ground Truth project: Led by Nick van Praag of the charity Keystone Accountability, which aims to make non-profit organizations more effective, the Ground Truth project tries to bridge the gap between listening to

affected communities and taking action. It is encouraging a new methodology for asking “the right questions” and organizing feedback in an actionable way. It is also trying to develop an index, by which aid agencies’ performance would be publicly rated based on the perceptions of affected people.

Sexual exploitation and abuse 10 years on



Photo: Gwenn Dubourthoumieu/IRIN

Are agencies more accountable to the communities they are meant to serve?

How much has really changed since NGO Save the Children, and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) published a report that shocked humanitarian agencies a decade ago, when it exposed sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) perpetrated on disaster-affected communities in West Africa by aid workers, peacekeepers and other community members?

The 2002 report documented abuses perpetrated by 67 individuals across 40 agencies. Accountability experts and aid workers say abuse has continued in UN agencies and NGOs, but the extent is unclear.

A few NGOs, such as Oxfam, give figures on their websites or in annual reports, but most do not, and there is no independent centrally held monitoring system. UN agencies are more transparent, reporting numbers annually on the Conduct and Discipline Unit website.

“Every agency is at risk from this problem,” a follow-on study by Save the Children entitled *No one to turn to*, concluded in 2008.

Progress

Since 2002 a lot of action has been taken to clamp down on SEA. Staff have been appointed to address prevention (PSEA), training programmes have been set up, coalitions built, and there is more monitoring and reporting of what goes on in the field. Many more agencies have instituted codes of conduct, partly spurred by Save the Children’s initial report, and dozens of staff have been dismissed following investigations.

Policy commitments are also in place, said interviewees who contributed to this series of reports. A task force set up by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which coordinates UN and non-UN humanitarian partnerships and reports to the UN Secretary-General, has been reinstated to put into action some of the recommendations of an independent review in 2010.

The task force’s co-chairs, Luc Ferran, senior technical adviser for beneficiary protection from exploitation and abuse in the human resources department at NGO International Rescue Committee (IRC); Marie Elseroad, human resources officer at the International Medical Corps, a global non-profit organization; and Jaqueline Carleson, from the UN Development Programme (UNDP), said the biggest step agencies took in 2011 was to accept adopting minimum operating standards on PSEA for all IASC members.

Helping humanitarian actors become more accountable to aid beneficiaries could be the antidote to SEA. In 2004 the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (HAP-I) set up Building Safer Organizations (BSO), which has helped train agencies to set up and carry out reporting and investigation procedures, and all

HAP members are now required to put in place a code of conduct to prevent SEA.

But agencies changed their approach to PSEA more to protect their reputations than to become more accountable to communities, said a critic.

"Procedures and mechanisms are in place, but the initial momentum didn't turn into action, and the momentum stopped once agencies had satisfactorily risk-proofed themselves," commented an SEA expert who asked to remain unnamed. "We do not need more guidelines or policies - existing ones just need to be applied."

The IASC task force co-chairs told IRIN: "Focus and attention should never be reliant on scandals. It is up to each agency to maintain its own focus on PSEA, even if that means couching the issue in terms of... accountability to beneficiaries, improved protection and more effective programming."

The change that is occurring is ad-hoc, not systematic, according to HAP-I, and this cannot continue. Various reports on agencies' approaches to preventing SEA note that focal points are often untrained in dealing with SEA and are spread too thinly to give the issue the attention it needs. Most agencies have SEA policies and codes of conduct, but they are rarely discussed in person - rather, a document is handed to each employee, and half of the 14 agencies reviewed by the IASC did not know whether or how to inform senior management of incidents of reported abuse, or even what their organization's complaints mechanisms actually were.

Leadership

The UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) has made far more progress than the NGO sector in institutionalizing prevention, and shifting the UN organization's mind-set, the IASC review notes.

The DPKO has had much higher numbers of reported abuses and partly changed course to avoid further scandals (as occurred in 2002 and 2008), but its hierarchical management structure and the resources it allocated to the issue have delivered results.

"There is no one in DPKO that doesn't know what the rules and measures are [for PSEA], and what the consequences are," said Sylvain Roy, senior policy adviser at the UN Conduct and Discipline Unit.

Prevention will only work with stronger commitment from senior management, said many interviewees.

During the IASC review of humanitarian action in the northern Democratic Republic of Congo, the head of a large international NGO said they regularly discussed accountability with staff regarding financial integrity, but they were never called on to discuss or report on PSEA in inductions, training, country briefings or programme visits.

Grey areas

Navigating the issue of rape, date-rape, sexual abuse and harassment in society is "complicated and difficult", and preventing sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in the humanitarian context is no different, says one expert.

Agencies have different definitions of sexual exploitation and abuse - some bar all relations between their staff and the people they are seeking to help, others focus specifically on transactional sex with so-called beneficiaries, and some bar all transactional sex, including with those they consider "prostitutes".

IASC definition

Views differ on where to draw the line between SEA and commercial sex work. "These grey areas affect the numbers," said the expert.

There are few clear-cut cases - as when an adult staff member offers a 15-year-old refugee money for sex or for aid - and more harder-to-navigate issues, such as when an aid worker with a refugee girlfriend gives her money.

Perceptions of how to define an activity often shift, depending on the cultural lens. The IRC's Luc Ferran, a refugee assistance NGO, says decisions must be framed by the organization's values.

"You can choose between an organizational value-based approach and a more heavy-handed policy approach, and you need to strike the balance between the two," he told IRIN.

The key to improved transparency could be to ask why staff might not be open about a relationship. "A lot of the time people hide it because they are aware that something in it compromises them or their agency," said an SEA expert who preferred anonymity.

In contrast, the SEA expert told IRIN: "In peacekeeping, the senior staff know it will be their problem if it's a scandal, rather than being ghettoized in an HR [human resources] or a gender department."

Luc Ferran of the IRC, told IRIN: "It doesn't matter where it [responsibility for perpetrating abuse] sits - if a leader says you could be fired it will be taken seriously."

Complaint reporting

Complaints mechanisms can only work when staff are trained, said Smruti Patel, head of services and certification at accountability body HAP-International. "It is one of the most important things to get right to prevent SEA," she told IRIN.

They are also effective when agencies and disaster-affected communities develop them together - as was the case in Nepal, Kenya and Liberia - and when communities know about them.

Some attempts to do this have worked well. In Liberia agencies agreed a joint referral pathway and outlined it clearly to complainants on posters.

When UN staff in Yemen showed the PSEA training DVD, *To Serve with Pride*, to refugees, many of them said they had not realized that some of the behaviours they had experienced could be called abuse.

In the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, 26 agencies so far have signed up to the Code of Conduct for Humanitarian Workers, sharing standards, training on how follow-up and investigations can work, agreeing to collaborate in maintaining the code of conduct, and raising awareness among beneficiaries.

Agencies texted communities how to complain in the Philippines, and in Zimbabwe they set up complaints' tables for children.

Abuse of power

But many disaster-affected people are too scared to complain. Communities in South Sudan, Haiti and Côte d'Ivoire consulted by Save the Children said it was "unthinkable" to complain about the worst forms of exploitation and abuse when it was already so difficult to complain about basic day-to-day concerns.

Some feared their confidentiality would be breached, or there would be retribution by the perpetrator, or aid might be withheld from them. They lost trust in the process when their complaint was not acted upon.

These fears underline the role of power in the relationship between an aid worker and a person in need. Save the Children found that most of the individuals who had experienced SEA were orphans, separated children, displaced people, the poorest families, and those most dependent on assistance, almost all of them female.

Working with survivors and mapping out the power differences, including those in communities, is the starting point to giving the vulnerable a voice, said Oxfam's West Africa gender change manager, Margherita Maffii.

Follow-up

The external context and practical constraints in the field will always be a challenge. National laws can make dismissal of locally employed staff difficult; a weak and/or corrupt judicial system may render criminal cases inconclusive; high staff turnover can make SEA hard to implement; and practical issues like not having enough money can make it hard for smaller NGOs to investigate allegations while keeping staff members on the payroll.

Investigations of DPKO-related allegations are often drawn out as troops and police come under the jurisdiction of member states, said Roy of the UN Conduct and Discipline Unit. HAP's Patel said the process needs to be speeded up to have legitimacy.

Just three out of eight agencies had standing operating procedures on follow-up, according to the IASC review. Follow-up on cases needs to be more systematic, said Patel.

It is also vital to communicate with complainants about the status of their case so they do not lose faith in the process.

Way forward

The point is to admit that sexual exploitation and abuse exists, and deal with it, said one aid worker.

Everyone needs to make the issue more visible - there should be regular training, and more transparency on SEA, say aid workers.

Most agencies are very reticent about communicating on the issue. Even Save the Children, which vigorously pushed for more transparency by humanitarians, no longer publishes statistics on its website or in its annual report, and could not provide the statistics when asked. Staff declined several IRIN requests to be interviewed.

The IASC review and others have urged aid agencies, donors and UN leaders to take a variety of actions to proactively stamp out sexual exploitation and abuse, including re-adopting IASC's leadership role, launching intensive PSEA activity in five pilot countries, and giving PSEA activities a budget line by including them in funding appeals and cluster work plans. Progress is being made on some of these fronts.

Leadership is the key to progress, said Patel. "PSEA competes with a lot of other things in terms of what needs to be done, but if you don't have high-level buy-in, then any good work you do could be under threat."

In a sense the humanitarian community's approach to PSEA "defines who we are", said a seasoned aid worker who has worked on the issue. "If we are causing harm to people, this isn't who we are supposed to be at an essential level, and surely we cannot accept that."

Stepping up to prevention

IRIN surveys the development of policy and practice since the launch of a ground-breaking report in 2002, in terms of preventing the perpetration of sexual abuse by humanitarian aid workers and their associates.

2002: A report by UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and Save the Children reveals the prevalence of SEA in West Africa, and documents allegations against 40 aid agencies.

A Plan of Action on protection from SEA is developed, using six core principles now included in the code of conduct and staff rules and regulations of IASC member agencies:

- SEA is grounds for dismissal

UN numbers

Statistics for 2011 show 41 allegations were made against UN military personnel and 30 against UN civilian personnel. Up to April 2012, some 10 UN military personnel were accused, versus 12 civilian UN staff.

A large proportion of recent military allegations have been made against UN peacekeeping missions in the DRC, Haiti, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire.

Figures go up and down each year - 124 allegations were made against UN staff in 2007; 82 in 2008; 106 in 2009; and 166 in 2010. Each allegation against UN military personnel accounted for 29-59 percent of the reported cases.

- Sexual activity with children under 18 is prohibited
- Exchange of goods and services for sex is prohibited
- Sexual relationships between humanitarian workers and beneficiaries are strongly discouraged
- Co-workers have an obligation to report SEA concerns
- Managers must create an environment that prohibits SEA

2003: The UN Secretary-General's Bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from SEA is issued. Every year since 2003 the Secretary-General has issued a report with updates on the scope of the problem and the prevention and response measures taken by the UN.



Photo: UN Photo/Daniel Morel

Peacekeepers in Haiti: An IASC review notes the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations has made far more progress than NGOs in institutionalizing prevention

2002-2004: An IASC Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse looks at best practices in providing a consistent, effective approach across all agencies.

2004: The Building Safer Organizations (BSO) project, now part of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), is set up to help NGOs apply PSEA.

2005: Following the final IASC task force report, the UN Executive Committees on Humanitarian Affairs and Peace and Security (ECHA and ECPS) meets to discuss implementation of the goals.

It is decided to focus on strengthening UN investigative capacity, victim assistance, training, and getting buy-in from countries contributing troops.

A working group of 30 members, the ECHA/ECPS and NGO Task Force on PSEA, is set up.

2006: Save the Children UK reports high levels of abuse of girls in Liberia, some as young as eight. According to the report, in 2004 peacekeepers in DRC exchanged food for sex. During the UN mission in Cambodia in 1992-93 the number of commercial sex workers rose from 6,000 to 25,000, many of them children.

HAP-International publishes To complain or not to complain: still the question.

2008: A global UN and NGO meeting on PSEA agrees to address SEA in terms of management and coordination, engagement with local populations, prevention and response.

2008: Save the Children UK publishes No one to turn to.

2010: An independent review is published to evaluate progress made by IASC members in ensuring that vulnerable people were not sexually exploited or abused by people associated with humanitarian agencies. It also looked at progress on putting in place policies to protect aid beneficiaries against SEA. Self-evaluation was carried out in DRC, Nepal, Kenya, Liberia, Somalia, South Sudan, Thailand and Yemen.

2011: A new IASC task force was established as a result of the IASC review. Among other activities the task force has developed and endorsed Minimum Operating Standards on PSEA, to apply to all members. Members also agreed to nominate Senior Focal Points among IASC members and to submit work plans to make shows of commitment more concrete.

Accountability in Islam



Photo: Ibrahim Malla/Syrian Arab Red Crescent

Local people help Syrian Arab Red Crescent volunteers unload supplies

The rights-based framework may only have been formally adopted by the international humanitarian and development community in the past decade; but the concept that people in need have a right to assistance has existed in the Muslim world since the birth of Islam.

“When we [in the international community] started thinking differently about relief, and talking about a rights-based approach, it was very easy to equate and put this within the Islamic perspective,” said Khaled Khalifa, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for the Gulf Region. “It was there, but we

didn’t know about it.”

Despite an increased focus on accountability in recent years and a growing role for aid agencies from the Muslim world in mainstream humanitarian aid operations, few analysts or academics - neither in humanitarian thought nor in Islamic jurisprudence - have asked the question: What does accountability look like in the Islamic context?

The answer can be contradictory.

On the one hand, the Muslim Holy book, the Koran refers to the “known right” of the petitioner and the deprived to the wealth of observant Muslims: “Give to your relatives, to the poor and to the traveller their right, and do not spend wastefully [on yourself],” it says in verse 26, surah 17.

Islamic scripture requires Muslims to give 2.5 percent of their wealth in `zakat`, or mandatory alms, to specific categories of people in need.

“`Zakat` is not charity,” says Tariq Cheema, president of the World Congress of Muslim Philanthropists (WCMP). “`Zakat` is an obligation. `Zakat` is a mandatory discharge of duty. It’s not your money. It belongs to the poor.”

As such, billions of dollars are spent each year in helping those in need.

On the other hand, aid in the Muslim world is understood to have more than one purpose.

Fulfilling a religious obligation

Part of it is fulfilling a religious obligation, which means that Muslims should see themselves as first and foremost accountable to God. This can lead to what Marie Juul Petersen, a researcher in politics and development at the Danish Institute for International Studies, calls “the invisibility of the recipient”.

“The provision of aid is a way to gain religious rewards and a place in Paradise,” she wrote in her PhD thesis, *For humanity or for the umma?, a study of four transnational Muslim NGOs’ ideologies of aid*. “If the purpose of aid is to ensure rewards for the donor, the recipient easily becomes irrelevant as anything but an instrument to obtain these rewards...”

"What the donor gives is not important; what is important is the intention. This is perhaps most clearly expressed in the frequently mentioned saying, 'If you save one person it is as if you saved all of humankind.' It is not important whether you save one or 100 people, but that you save - in other words, it is not the result of the action, but the action itself (and the underlying intention) that matters."

Some Muslim NGOs complain of the challenges of raising funds for certain activities, because some donors give based on what they believe they will be rewarded for in heaven - building mosques or sponsoring orphans - rather than what may be most needed on the ground.

"Even though donors are becoming more aware of the need to donate toward sustainable development projects, a great deal of raising awareness is still required, especially amongst the first generation of immigrants in the EU and America, about the obligations Islam places on its adherence to help community and eradicating poverty," said Inlia Aziz, of MuslimAid, a UK-based international NGO.

During many humanitarian crises in the Muslim world - from Somalia to Syria - some Muslim donors have simply sent whatever they have to offer, instead of assessing the true needs of people affected.

"If you are doing charity simply to fulfil your own requirement, then accountability is not there," Cheema told IRIN. "Accountability is going to come when you are thinking from the perspective of the beneficiary."

But increasingly, civil society within the Muslim world is realizing the potential of 'zakat' being spent more effectively and calling for a more needs-based and sustainable approach.

Strengthening the 'ummah'

Another perceived purpose of aid in the Muslim world, according to Juul Petersen, is strengthening the 'ummah', or global Muslim community, "as a response to problems of spiritual poverty" - meaning that recipients of Muslim aid are primarily Muslim.

"If you are doing charity simply to fulfil your own requirement, then accountability is not there ... Accountability is going to come when you are thinking from the perspective of the beneficiary"

Some see nothing wrong with this approach, pointing to other examples of the same: Australian aid focuses on the Pacific region; Belgium focuses on the Great Lakes; increasingly, other donors are targeting their aid by reducing the number of recipients and the scope of work.

"A number of donors' aid allocation is based on historical, regional, religious, cultural and language ties - should Arab donors be any different?" asks Kerry Smith, programme officer with Development Initiatives, a research and advocacy organization. "Aren't they best placed to understand the needs of Muslim countries in their region?"

Some Muslim aid workers believe this solidarity between the "sons of the ummah" makes them more accountable, because of their close ties to the people they are trying to help.

"[Other aid workers] don't have the same feeling of family as we have, that the orphans are a part of our family, that it's about humanity, family, about making the orphans feel important. For them, it's routine, it's just a job they need to do, it's about finishing work to get home to your own family," one employee of the Kuwait-based International Islamic Charitable Organization told Juul Petersen.

But the approach has also garnered criticism from secular, Western NGOs, claiming that they discriminate among recipients, thus violating principles of universalism and neutrality so tied to accountability.

In any case, many of the Muslim aid agencies working in the world's major emergency zones have long worked in the international system and have adopted mainstream development practices. But that too raises questions of accountability.

According to a study of Islamic Relief's work in Bangladesh, religious leaders in a refugee camp complained that the NGO was not meeting their religious needs because it had not built enough religious schools, mosques and graveyards.

"We can live without food but we can't live without our religion," the refugees reportedly said.

Refugees in Kenya call for more effective aid delivery



Photo: UNICEF/Riccardo Gangale

Take a ticket and get in line: Newly-arrived refugees in Dadaab, Kenya

Hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees in Kenya's northeastern Dadaab refugee camp depend on aid to meet all their basic needs; while they are grateful for the help and the relative security the settlement provides, many feel the aid could be managed in more effective ways.

Food distribution is one of the areas in need of improvement, say refugees. Each family should receive a food ration - including corn-soy blend, beans and cooking oil - twice a month amounting to about 2,100 calories per person per day. However, many refugees IRIN spoke to say the food is insufficient and

delivery ineffective.

"The biggest challenge comes from the food distribution. Refugees do not get the right amount of food... That is why almost all the refugees... complain about food shortage," said Aden Cagalab, a refugee leader. "The food cuts off before the next cycle of food distribution and people stay hungry for about five days or borrow from their neighbours."

"[Agencies] should do constant monitoring during the food distribution and bring higher [numbers of] staff to closely check the quantity of food given to the beneficiaries," he suggested.

According to Cagalab, the medical services at Dadaab leave much to be desired. "People with chronic diseases have lots of problems to get attention. The camp doctor is always said to be busy, and sick people have difficulties getting referral for further treatment in Nairobi or Garissa [town in the northeast]."

Dadaab, originally built to house 90,000 refugees, currently hosts close to 500,000. Administration of the camp was handed over to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in the early 1990s; UNHCR runs the camp in partnership with several other UN agencies and local and international NGOs and with the support of the Kenyan government.

Corruption

"There are refugee workers who are employed for the [food] distribution but they are not paid well so they

manipulate and cut the share of beneficiaries and sell it in the market," said Bilay Mohamed, another refugee leader.

"Some people have more ration cards which makes them get more food. They buy the extra ration cards from other refugees who leave for Somalia or are resettled inside Kenya like Garissa or Nairobi," said Fatuma Abdi Bihi, a young mother.

The elderly and young mothers seem to be particularly affected by the problems with food distribution. "Some of us are pregnant while others are sick and elderly but no one cares about our condition... at the end what we get is not sufficient," said Halimo Mohamed Badal, an elderly woman at the camp.

"We walk from very far distances... for almost two hours to a distribution site... but when we reach the site, we spend more than 10 hours in a long queue and we get back home hungry and exhausted," Bihi said.

Dignity

The large crowds on food distribution days are controlled by security officers whom the refugees accuse of excessive violence. "We are left in a very long queue in the sun and police are hired to control the crowd, but instead they beat us like animals. Some refugees go back to their homes with nothing after being beaten," said Badal.

"I would request the aid agencies not to hire policemen to control the crowd," she added. "The community leaders would be in a better position to control the crowd ... [they] should be involved in the decision-making and should be given that role."

And while most agencies operating in Dadaab have channels for feedback, the refugees say they are ineffective and their complaints are not dealt with effectively.

"Agencies always encourage beneficiaries to report all abuse cases but it does not happen accordingly, because refugees are not trained on the complaint mechanism," said Ebla Abullahil, a youth leader. "I would therefore suggest more trainings to be conducted for all the refugees on their rights and what services, how and when they are entitled to [them] and the way they can channel their complaints so they will be able to demand their rights should they be violated."

"I would suggest that [aid agencies] be very strict on the service delivery and accountability so that refugees are treated with dignity," said Hassan Dahir, another youth leader.

"I would suggest that aid agencies be very strict on the service delivery and accountability so that refugees are treated with dignity"

Seeing where the money goes



Photo: Ben/ClearlyPhotographic.com

Well-meaning: Charity auction at a church hall, in north Reading, UK

Commuters on the London Underground may have looked up from their newspapers recently and found themselves looking into the dark, wistful eyes of an African or Asian child. For just 50 pence - well under a dollar - a day, the child sponsorship advertisements promise, you can change this child's life, and you can do it today, right now, just by sending a text message.

Action Aid is one of Britain's longest established child sponsorship charities, with 40 years of experience in the field. Sponsoring a named child is a tried and tested model for attracting donors and is extremely popular because of the immediate connection it offers to the beneficiaries.

Action Aid's Andrew Robinson says it was always conceived as an approach which had accountability at its core. "It makes giving manageable," he told IRIN. "It breaks down a global problem into a local problem, and lets donors see that they are making a difference in a child's life."

But once the text message is sent, the actual process of child sponsorship has changed very little over the years. Sponsors communicate with their allocated child the old-fashioned way, by written letter, via the sponsoring charity, and sometimes receive photographs or school reports, perhaps once a year. And in reality, most child sponsorship money is used for projects in the child's country or local area, rather than going to one individual child or family.

Compassion, a church based agency, is one of the few which does use the money for the named child, to pay for a place on one of its programmes offering education, health care and social support, and it also allows sponsors to send gifts of money to the child's family.

For its sponsors, like Chrissy Dove who has recently been linked up with Habitamu, a six-year-old Ethiopian boy, this is a very significant relationship. "For years I wanted to do this, but part of me was a little bit confused about whether it was the right thing to do. Now our youngest child is leaving home and it felt like the right time to start looking after another child. I have a photograph, and I will be praying for him. Knowing that there is a child out there who I can pray for makes a big difference."

For Dove the chain of accountability runs through her own church to Habitamu's church in Ethiopia, giving her a feeling of personal connection and of knowing where her money goes. This is the kind of connection that the bigger agencies can struggle to create.

Anna Forwood is one of those who have turned their back on the big-name NGOs. She says: "I just feel that something like Oxfam has become this gi-normous juggernaut. When you think of how much money they now get from the government, and they still call themselves a charity - I just think, 'No!'"

Instead she channels her support through a much smaller organization, the Burkina Women's Education Fund, which helps young women in Burkina Faso to go to university. She can see a chain of accountability through someone she knows personally, a former colleague who became involved in the project after his retirement. "I

trust him, basically. And he blogs and sends letters with pictures of who he has been talking to, so you see the girls and you see them as real people.”

So would she like to go a step further and communicate with the beneficiaries directly? For Forwood that would be a step too far: “I wouldn’t really want a personal connection. I have enough going on in my life!”

It is perhaps these smaller, more personal charities which have benefited most from the new technologies. Once a personal relationship of trust has been established with the beneficiaries, they can now operate without any kind of permanent, in-country presence.

Mobile phone order

One tiny charity which supports two schools in Liberia recently provided a motorbike for transport to a remote village near the Guinea border. The order for the bike was placed by mobile phone; it was paid for by money transfer; the agreements for its use were exchanged by scan and email; and proof of its safe receipt came in the form of a photograph which could be posted on the charity’s Facebook page for all its supporters to see.

"I just feel that something like Oxfam has become this gi-normous juggernaut. When you think of how much money they now get from the government, and they still call themselves a charity - I just think, 'No'"

The group’s treasurer, Peter Nettleship, says: “Liberia is still a difficult place to communicate with but without the mobile phone network - accessed by Skype to keep costs down - we could not do anything. We’re eagerly looking forward to the next steps. Wider direct internet access, as it spreads, should make life a lot easier and cheaper.”

Bigger organizations are also starting to explore what can be done. The Kenyan NGO Vetaid is currently vaccinating against East Coast Fever. By supplying its local vets with basic smart phones, it can use a programme called EpiCollect to map exactly how many animals have been vaccinated, where and when and what with. Funding partners like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation can see exactly where their money is being spent.

One of Vetaid’s founders, Nick Short, told IRIN: “At the moment this is just for large donors, but I can see a time where the general public might see where Oxfam, for instance, was spending their money. At the moment they don’t quite know where the money is going, and if they could see photos of progress they would feel tied into it more.”

Middle-aged supporters

Over at Action Aid, Andrew Robinson, as the organization’s Digital Acquisition Manager, is exploring the way he can provide child sponsors with more of this kind of feedback.

Action Aid’s core supporters are middle aged, people with children of their own and enough disposable income to sponsor a child overseas. They are happy to communicate by letter and, he says, don’t want to ask for more feedback if it might take money out of programme work. “But,” he says, “I would expect that to change as the twenty-somethings of today move into our target age group. With their experience of using technology ever since they were little, I would expect that kind of demand to increase.

“It’s challenging for us because we work with the poorest and most excluded children, so by definition they are the farthest from urban centres. The big advantage of digital communication is its immediacy, but we have children in Nepal whose villages are a day’s vehicle travel from the nearest mobile phone signal. People aren’t necessarily asking for direct contact with a sponsored child, but they are interested in the community and the impact of their help on the community. And we need to be able to show the difference we are making.”

How To: Put accountability into practice



Photo: Book Aid International

The power to be heard: Mobile phone charge point, Kenya

At the highest levels, humanitarian aid agencies are increasingly realizing the importance of being accountable to the people they are trying to help, with several important developments on the policy front in the last decade. But as field staff try to put the lofty concepts into practice, they face many challenges, from the basic (people don't always understand the word "complaint") to the complex (how to be accountable when managing a project remotely due to insecurity).

"Some [organizations] might have very public commitments to accountability," says Maria Kiani, senior accountability adviser with the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), "But those procedures, practices don't [always] trickle down to the field operation sites."

Here is some advice on getting and acting on feedback from affected communities:

Get buy-in from all stakeholders

Accountability mechanisms can be met with resistance from many sides: your organization's management, your field staff, the government, or other humanitarian partners you hope to engage.

"The number 1 challenge would be... buy-in from your partners," says Maria Ahmad, who manages a humanitarian communications programme for the International Organization of Migration (IOM) in Pakistan.

Take the time before you start a programme to make the various stakeholders more receptive to the idea. Re-assure your staff that accountability is more about a "culture of learning", as TearFund puts it, than a "policing" mechanism. Creating an equivalent feedback system for staff may help reinforce this idea.

Understand the local information eco-system

Understanding how people communicate in any given context is crucial. Two-way communication is a central part of accountability - but aid agencies often forget to consult affected people before designing those communication channels. If the people affected have not helped shape your communications mechanisms, they are unlikely to use it.

For example, a recent assessment by media development organization Internews in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya found that most communications at the camp level happened verbally through pre-established camp administration and other networks among social groups. But the assessment found that many residents did not trust these channels, preferring radio, mobile phones and friends or family, and that verbal information took weeks to reach its targeted audience, "if it reaches them at all."

"We end up in many occasions operating based on assumptions rather than knowledge," says Jacobo Quintanilla, director of humanitarian information projects, at Internews. "If you can understand how the information flows, or the information ecology, you can more successfully set up accountability mechanisms."

Speak their language

Beyond the challenges of translating expressions like “accountability framework” and “feedback mechanism” into local languages, the concepts themselves may be foreign to local people.

“It is all very well agreeing that we need to be more accountable, but what constitutes accountability for an elderly woman living in rural South Sudan, or a young Japanese man who has recently survived a tsunami,” Karyn Beattie, an independent consultant who has worked with TearFund in the past, writes in the October 2011 issue of the Humanitarian Exchange magazine, which focused exclusively on accountability. She describes the word “accountability” as elusive and complex.

In areas where people are accustomed to traditional community dispute resolution systems, for example, they may be skeptical about the idea of complaining to an NGO.

The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) has struggled with this in West Africa, where “there is a culture that we should not criticize, because if we criticize, there will be trouble,” according to its global accountability focal point Niels Bentzen. There, they have replaced the expression “complaint mechanism” with “feedback” or “letter box mechanism”.

“It is all very well agreeing that we need to be more accountable, but what constitutes accountability for an elderly woman living in rural South Sudan, or a young Japanese man who has recently survived a tsunami?”

Have a viable complaints system

A complaints system that is not understood or owned by the people is unlikely to have impact. Explain what your accountability mechanism is, how you work with affected people, what their entitlements are, and how they can give feedback and be part of the process.

Actively seek out complaints on a regular basis instead of waiting for them. Raise awareness about the complaints mechanism.

“One of the constraints is to make sure that people really understand their entitlements,” says Olivier Beucher, director of DRC’s programmes in Lebanon and Syria.

“They often don’t know about their rights because we don’t tell them,” HAP’s Kiani adds.

Ensure everyone has a voice

In an effort to engage with affected people, aid agencies have often turned to community representatives or camp leaders as interlocutors. These community committees are not always representative, but rather “self-selected elder men who hold these positions of power”, according to Gregory Gleed, a member of HAP’s roving team. Thus, people may not be comfortable complaining about community leaders or sensitive issues through this forum, and the confidentiality of verbal feedback cannot be assured.

“When working well, committees may ensure greater community ownership and empowerment, access to local knowledge, and enable more efficient programme design and delivery,” HAP says. “When working poorly they may be linked to corruption, exploitation and abuse; the needs of diverse groups (including women, men, children, elderly, disabled, and other groups) not being identified or blockages in key information.”

According to a study by the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) of its communication with people affected by the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, women and people over 50 are the most information-deprived in a

disaster situation. In several circumstances - in Dadaab and Mogadishu - camp leaders and community representatives were found to be charging money for information or relief. Holding separate meetings for women and girls, men, youth and ethnic minority groups can help ensure that all affected people have a voice. This may require respectful negotiations. Ensuring you have enough female outreach workers to interact with women in the community is another good way to engage with the more isolated.

Take sensitivities into account in your programming

For many aid agencies, context-specific sensitivities have posed a challenge to implementing accountability mechanisms.

"Cultural sensitivities can play havoc with your message," says Ahmad, of IOM in Pakistan. Advertising a hotline for victims of rape and sexual exploitation, for example, would "create an uproar" once translated into Urdu, she says, because communities would be offended by public reference to the word "sex". Before putting out any message to affected people, Ahmad recommends asking your national staff: "Would your mother listen to this? Would it be ok if you were saying this to your sister? If your government heard this, would they find it offensive?"

Similarly, when designing feedback mechanisms, be aware of the sensitivities. An NGO in Pakistan had good success with complaint boxes in the south, but received no feedback when it used the same mechanism in the north - people affected by civil war in the north were afraid the information would be misused, Kiani said.

Build accountability into budgets and staff responsibilities

Some accountability mechanisms can be expensive. Think of the human resources needed to communicate information in camps and to translate documents; the cost of toll-free numbers or text messages; and the staff required to man a call-centre. In Pakistan, a project to give cash assistance to 1.1 million people affected by floods cost \$2.2 million in communications - spreading information, receiving feedback and making referrals - alone. Factor the costs in advance and include them in your grant proposal.

The IFRC's beneficiary communications programme during the provision of shelter at a camp for people displaced by the Haitian earthquake had a separate budget and terms of reference. Staff are more likely to follow through with something that they are required to report on. Include "responding to beneficiary feedback" in employees' responsibilities and performance evaluations.

Another gap has been adequate staff with the right skills. "Effective communication with communities is a specific and important technical area of work, separate from PR or external relations," says Imogen Wall, a communications specialist who worked with the UN during the Haiti earthquake.

Re-assure your staff

A common challenge in implementing accountability mechanisms is reaction from staff, who often see feedback and complaints mechanisms as a way of policing them.

"The word 'complaints' can be threatening to people," says Madara Hettiarachchi, associate director for humanitarian accountability at World Vision International.

"The first time, when you speak to staff about this, they immediately say, 'you are giving our beneficiaries a possibility to undermine us, to try to gang up against us, and you are giving us no defences,'" DRC's Bentzen says.

But researchers have found that negative perceptions by staff of accountability usually stem from a lack of understanding of the concept.

Technology is not the silver bullet

While technology, like Frontline SMS, has helped fill gaps in accountability and communication with affected people, it still requires human resources to be effective. For example, Ushahidi (the crowd-sourcing mapping software) helped identify areas of concern in Haiti, but detailed needs assessments and field visits were needed afterwards to complete the picture.

"Twitter, Facebook and blogs can all be used for communication, though harnessing these real-time but indirect channels, and utilizing them in an effective way, remains a challenge," Gwyn Lewis and Brian Lander, co-chairs of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Sub Group on Accountability to Affected Populations, wrote in Humanitarian Exchange. "Information communicated through these means can be difficult to verify and may not be consistent or accurately reflective of needs."

"Twitter, Facebook and blogs can all be used for communication, though harnessing these real-time but indirect channels, and utilizing them in an effective way, remains a challenge"

After the eruption of Mount Merapi in Indonesia, local community group Jalin Merapi used twitter, SMS and Facebook to inform people of what was happening and get feedback on their needs. To close the loop, they communicated these to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) for further action.

Coordinate your accountability mechanisms

After the 2004 tsunami in Asia, many NGOs began conducting meetings with affected communities. "All of us want[ed] to be accountable," says Quintanilla, of Internews. This led to "meeting after meeting" in the same community.

Given beneficiaries have a hard time differentiating between aid agencies, in many contexts, joint or at least coordinated accountability mechanisms would go a long way.

But there are clear risks, as Lewis and Lander, of the IASC sub-group say:

"If, in the case of a joint feedback/complaints system, one organization does not respond in a timely and systematic manner, what was initially feedback can become a complaint. If there is no follow-up on a complaint and corrective action is not taken, this can become an even more serious issue, potentially posing a threat to all organizations working in a community, because everyone is seen as equally culpable and confidence in the whole system is weakened."

Manage expectations

"Expectations are raised when communities are asked for feedback," David Bainbridge, Tearfund's international director, wrote in Humanitarian Exchange.

Gleed, of HAP, warns against making too many promises in the assessment phase, not only to affected communities, but to government and other stakeholders: "Agencies that go in with clear-cut messages - we can and can't do this - from the outset, are less likely to disappoint the communities they are working in."

When you cannot meet someone's needs, refer them to another agency that can.

Explain that your organization is dependent on funding and that you may not be able to do more than one project in the same community.

Researchers have found that affected people recognize, respect and appreciate the limitations of agencies that communicate well and involve beneficiaries in their programming.

Some advice from Bryony Norman, a programme officer with Tearfund who has just completed a study on accountability in insecure environments: "We encourage staff to begin all discussions with the statement: 'This part of the discussion I'm having with you is for Tearfund learning... to enable us to improve what we do... We want to listen to your feedback... and we want to be continually learning, but it does not mean that Tearfund will be able to do everything you have asked'."

During the 2004 tsunami in Asia, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) stopped accepting funds at one point because it believed it no longer had the capacity to spend more money.

Look for ways to be adaptable

Many aid workers have pointed to the tension between accountability to donors and accountability to affected people, with donors' reporting requirements often making it difficult for aid agencies to adapt their programmes according to feedback from affected people.

"The biggest challenge appears to be achieving the rigour required for donor accountability, while being flexible enough to include the voices of affected people," write Paul Knox-Clarke and John Mitchell of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP).

Some have suggested setting aside a certain amount of money in every project to allow aid agencies to change course, if necessary. But while donors are increasingly recognizing the need to be flexible, they have not reached the point of including such a budget line.

Try seeking out sources of funding that allow for more flexibility. Privately funded organizations like MSF and community-based organizations do not need permission from donors to change course and thus can respond faster than those who have to wait for institutional funding.

In-Depth IRIN

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Obinna Anyadike
Editor-in-Chief
IRIN
obi@irinnews.org
Tel: +254 20 7622 1343

Catherine Trevelline
Liaison Officer
Palais des Nations S-314
CH-1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland
trevelline@un.org
Tel: +41 22 917 1135 / 4209