IMPROVING IMPACT:

DO ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS DELIVER RESULTS?

A joint Christian Aid, Save the Children, Humanitarian Accountability Partnership report, June 2013

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christian aid

HAP Humanitarian Accountability Partnership

Save the Children

Acronyms

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
CA	Christian Aid
CBO	Community-based organisation
CDAC	Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities project
CDC	Community development committee
CRM	Complaints response mechanism
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DFID	Department for International Development
ECB	Emergency capacity building project
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
LEAP	Learning, Education and Active Participation project
MANGO	Management Accounting for Non-Governmental Organisations
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PMC	Programme management committee
PPA	Partnership Programme Arrangement
PVCA	Participatory Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment
SCUK	Save the Children UK
UCCS	Ukamba Christian Community Services
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Front cover photo
Women are now actively determining development plans and projects in Makueni District, Kenya

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FOREWORD

Why does accountability matter? Why do so many humanitarian and development organisations put such effort into ensuring not only that the wishes of the people they aim to help are taken into account, but also that beneficiaries are able to hold aid organisations to account?

Most of us would respond that accountability matters because we are morally obliged to use the resources held in trust for other people according to the wishes and best interests of those people. We are also morally obliged to show that we have done so.

We could stop there, but many other compelling moral and practical arguments have been made for having accountability to affected communities. It is suggested that accountability improves the effectiveness of humanitarian and development programmes by ensuring that goods and services are relevant to people's needs – and that this helps ensure sustainability; that where accountability systems support community participation in programmes, they can contribute to political and social empowerment; that accountability can even make programmes more efficient, by allowing people to identify and correct waste and mismanagement.

All of these arguments make good sense. They sound as if they ought to be true. Perhaps this is why, over the years, we have done so little to investigate whether they *are* true on the ground.

This report, then, is rather special in that it goes beyond assumptions. It records a methodical investigation of the effects of accountability mechanisms on the quality and results of aid. The author and design team made strenuous attempts to ensure that the methods used were robust and that, as a result, the conclusions are as evidential as possible. Given the nature of the topic and the difficulty of measuring individual perceptions, social dynamics and cultural values, this is a significant achievement.

The report is the product of a collaborative and collegial design process, led by Christian Aid, Save the Children UK and Humanitarian Accountability Partnership, and including colleagues from more than 15 other organisations. Its findings suggest that, in developing accountability mechanisms, 'a modest investment… brings a significant return'. By delivering convincing evidence through a single joint study, it shows that the same can be true of research.

Paul Knox-Clarke
Head of Research and Communications, ALNAP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the humanitarian and development sectors, significant efforts have been made to strengthen accountability from implementing agencies to their project participants. But good practice remains patchy and there has been little robust evidence for the contribution that accountability mechanisms make to project quality and impact.

The purpose of the research

This research seeks to contribute evidence for the value of introducing accountability mechanisms into projects, and demonstrate the importance of promoting them. It seeks to establish **how accountability mechanisms between aid organisations and affected communities contribute to the quality and impact of the assistance provided**.

The proposed theory of change is that accountability mechanisms improve the quality of projects – their **relevance**, **effectiveness**, **efficiency** and **sustainability** – and lead to increased impact for the communities that they support (see annex 1 for definitions of each of the criteria and annex 7 for the terms of reference).

Methodology

The research focused on three benchmarks of accountability and quality management from the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) Standard: **information sharing**, **participation**, and **complaints handling**. Together these were considered to form an 'accountability mechanism'.

The research drew on a literature review (including an analysis of documents submitted by the HAP peer-learning group[1] members) and on action research involving two case studies piloting the methodology (in Kenya and Myanmar).

Using an adaptation of the 'Listen First Framework'[2], the first step in the case study research was to assess how well components of the accountability mechanism functioned against the three HAP benchmarks. The second step was to assess the contribution of the accountability mechanism to programme quality.

This summary focuses on the findings and recommendations from the research. Details of the methodology and research from the individual case studies are provided in the body of the report and in the annexes.

Analysis of the findings

The findings of the research provide significant evidence of the link between accountability mechanisms and the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of projects.

Relevance: strengthening the targeting and quality of assistance

Accountability mechanisms improved the targeting of assistance, the nature of supported interventions and the location of services. Community participation provided agencies with a better understanding of local vulnerabilities and increased the usefulness of projects to communities.

Effectiveness: promoting trust, empowerment and acceptance, and addressing mismanagement

Accountability mechanisms have strengthened trust between agencies and project participants and highlighted the link between community participation and ownership.

The research revealed evidence of increased empowerment and self-esteem among project participants. It also noted greater willingness of groups to demand accountability from other duty bearers – schools, local authorities and even private companies.

The literature showed that accountability mechanisms made a contribution to 'trust dividends' with communities in insecure environments, and that there was an associated reduction in violence against staff and increased attention paid to fraud and mismanagement.

Efficiency: optimising the use of resources and promoting value for money

The literature review highlighted several instances where community involvement in procurement had increased a programme's efficiency. Where communities had been empowered to monitor contractors, there was greater efficiency and value for money.

Sustainability: enhancing community ownership of projects

An important link was identified between the participation of a community in a project and perceptions of its sustainability. The case studies demonstrate that participation can increase the relevance of projects to their context and strengthen a community's ownership of processes and results.

Issues arising from the research

A number of research and accountability related issues arose during the research. These are grouped and discussed below, under relevant headings.

Research-related issues

The relevance of the methodology to a range of agencies, contexts and interventions

The quality of the results suggests that the techniques used to obtain them were appropriate for the range of age groups (adults, young people and children), the different contexts (rural Kenya, semi-urban and rural Myanmar), the diversity of projects (covering resilience, livelihoods, early childhood development and care, and non-formal education) and for the different types of implementation (community-based organisation (CBO), national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), partner-led organisations, operational agencies).

The importance of facilitating community discussions

The use of facilitators with relevant language skills and experience was essential for the participation of the community, and it enabled sensitive issues and community perceptions to be discussed. Building trust and understanding between the researcher and facilitator was essential for a successful outcome.

Going beyond the nuts and bolts – making the link between accountability, quality and impact

Communities in both Kenya and Myanmar described the ways in which accountability mechanisms strengthened project outcomes and, on occasions, impact. The validation of the research framework by different groups within a project location, different project locations in the same case study country, and in the two different case study countries, provides an important level of credibility to the findings.

Filling the counterfactual gap

While the absence of counterfactual case studies was disappointing, it provided an opportunity to test the sensitivity of the adapted Listen First Framework to accountability mechanisms functioning at differing degrees of effectiveness. In the future, if the methodology was trialled in an emergency context, there might be an opportunity to include counterfactual examples. In such a context, it is likely that a range of humanitarian organisations would be providing a number of different services with varying (and likely contrasting) approaches to accountability.

Drawing conclusions from the quantitative data

Quantitative research data was collected from the participatory exercises for both case studies. Analysis of the data provides some evidence of trends – particularly between the villages, where the accountability mechanisms functioned in different ways – but it is insufficient.

Accountability-related issues

Whose accountability counts? The challenges of simplifying complex issues

When trying to assess an accountability mechanism, it is difficult to reconcile community perceptions of accountability with an objective standard such as HAP's. On several occasions, community perceptions about the strength of an accountability mechanism (collected through the opinion-ranking exercises), contrasted with the assessment of the mechanism against the HAP benchmarks.

The relevance dilemma – informal v formal accountability mechanisms

The research highlighted a number of dilemmas in translating the HAP benchmarks to community realities. Only responses to formal accountability mechanisms were documented. Yet in Myanmar, for example, some communities preferred an informal (verbal) mechanism over a formal (written) mechanism. The way forward may be to focus greater attention on the HAP requirement to put in place 'complaints procedures that are based on the preferences of the people they aim to assist.' If 'informal' face-to-face and phone contacts were included in the 'formal' complaints response mechanisms, and there was rigorous documenting of each of the mechanisms, the system could be considered as a whole.

The need to contextualise accountability

The research suggests that there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all accountability mechanism. The relationship between those providing assistance and those receiving it forms an important context for accountability, and is likely to require a range of mechanisms. Strong community participation in project design and delivery can help minimise the number of complaints during implementation.

Assessing accountability in hierarchical relationships

All participants in a hierarchical accountability chain (from members to groups to CBOs to NGOs to INGOs) share basic accountability requirements, but as power travels up the chain the needs of stakeholders change. A well-functioning,

effective accountability mechanism must incorporate the needs of each of the stakeholders. Where some stakeholders are perceived as 'more valuable' than others, the links in the chain can easily break.

Conclusions and recommendations

The action research, supported by the literature review, suggests that the use of accountability mechanisms can strengthen quality and impact by improving the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of projects. So it is of concern that development and humanitarian projects continue to seem opaque to so many people. The research findings are of particular value in building the case for the contribution made by accountability mechanisms, addressing the immediate gap in evidence, and testing the methodology so that other agencies can add further to the evidence base.

Implications for development and humanitarian practice

Being better at doing better

The results from the two case studies are compelling. Developing project-level accountability mechanisms should not be considered an add-on, to tick an organisational or donor box. They should be viewed as essential contributions to the development process. **Organisations across the sector need to be far better at routinely ensuring the existence of strong accountability mechanisms, monitoring their effectiveness and periodically evaluating how they contribute to project outcomes and impact.**

The need for a step-change across the sector

Linking the research to the HAP peer-learning group provided an exciting opportunity to gather evidence and good-practice case studies from a range of organisations. **Given the findings of the research, there is an urgent need to strengthen practice and a strong justification for more rigorous documentation. At best, the lack of evidence represents a missed opportunity; at worst it highlights a failure to understand and communicate the impact that accountability mechanisms have on development and humanitarian outcomes.**

Building the evidence base

The study has provided important signposts to the contribution that accountability mechanisms make to project quality, but it relied on just two case studies. There is, therefore, significant scope for building on the findings, in different contexts. **Given the priority placed on accountability by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC's) Transformative Agenda, sanctioning and support of the research by a Humanitarian Country Team would provide an exciting opportunity for real-time feedback, in addition to contributing important evidence.**

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the research

In recent years, the aid sector has made significant efforts to strengthen accountability between implementing agencies and project participants. But accountability mechanisms that include the provision of information, participation of stakeholders, and the means to elicit and respond to complaints, are still far from commonplace – and evidence of their contribution to project quality and impact is scant.

A more systematic examination of the role that these mechanisms play in strengthening programme quality and impact is required to ensure the best possible services are provided to the communities that need them. This report gathers evidence that will start to fill this information gap.

The research question

The question that guided the action research and development of the methodology is as follows: **In what ways do accountability mechanisms from aid organisations to affected communities contribute to the quality and impact of the assistance provided?**

We propose that accountability mechanisms improve the quality of projects, including their relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. In turn, better quality projects have greater impact on the lives and livelihoods of the communities at which they are targeted.

In order to test and advance the research question, we reviewed evidence from existing documents and supplemented it with qualitative and quantitative case study research in Kenya and Myanmar.

The findings were expected to contribute to the evidence base for the value (or otherwise) of introducing accountability mechanisms in projects and were also expected to support agency messaging about the importance of continuing to support accountability mechanisms in their projects.[3]

Women and men participating in the research survey, Makueni District, Kenya

THE STATE OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE SECTOR

The humanitarian and development sector's accountability to project participants has, for many years, lagged behind other aspects of international assistance. Until recently, agencies rarely put into place, or formalised, measures to provide information to those receiving aid, to ensure their participation in projects or to provide a means for their feedback or complaint.

A story of progress

This accountability deficit is now being addressed. A revolution in quality and accountability, which gained prominence in the mid-1990s, has led to significant progress in the sector.

Driven in part by a move towards rights-based programming, and informed by humanitarian principles and the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct, there has been a fundamental shift in practice. In humanitarian settings, in particular, accountability mechanisms are becoming the norm rather than the exception. A range of methodologies and approaches have developed that seek to pass power to those receiving assistance.

Some of the most significant progress has been made in the humanitarian sector, where organisations and inter-agency initiatives, such as the HAP and the Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), have helped to strengthen both individual agency and collective action.

Many of the country-level UN coordination clusters have also developed tools to make the humanitarian sector more accountable to affected communities, as have the terms of reference for humanitarian coordinators and country teams. The recent inclusion of 'accountability to affected populations' as a key component of the Transformative Agenda – agreed by the IASC in December 2011 – has now provided the foundation for effective collective action.

Work still to do

These are all encouraging steps, but much more still needs to be done. This is particularly true of collective efforts across the sector, where reports and evaluations continue to highlight deficiencies. The IASC real-time evaluations from two recent, high-profile emergencies – the 2009 Pakistan displacement crisis[4] and the 2010 Haiti earthquake[5] – both raise a level of concern that serves to underline the importance of strengthening practice:

> 'In general, only camp-based beneficiaries were consulted. Generally, where there was some consultation, it was community elders or the Shura who were consulted rather than the broader group. Women were seldom consulted, and assessments treated households as monolithic and did not look at the different needs of women, boys, girls and men within the household.'

> 'Despite innovations such as the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) initiative, overall the earthquake response has been highly exclusive. The affected population was not consulted, informed or included in the design, planning and implementation of the humanitarian response. As a consequence, the affected people and local NGOs interviewed for this evaluation underlined that they had often felt that they were not respected by international aid organizations.'

While the 2012 edition of the ALNAP *State of the Humanitarian System* report praises the progress made by humanitarian agencies in establishing information, participation and complaints systems, the stakeholder survey reveals that this progress has yet to meet the expectations of project participants (see figure I, overleaf). For each of the questions relating to key aspects of accountability mechanisms, the level of dissatisfaction with the performance of aid agencies was considerably greater than the level of satisfaction.

The challenge of (mis)perceptions

As well as the rights-based programming agenda, there are also compelling operational reasons for strengthening accountability. In a growing number of countries, relief and development agencies operate in highly politicised and insecure contexts, where the aid community rubs shoulders with less-principled actors and where foreign governments often seek to dilute impartial assistance to meet broader stabilisation, or political, goals.

In such places, it is not only important for agencies to do what they say they will do but also for them to distinguish themselves from those that may create the perception of a lack of impartiality and independence.

This gap is further widened by the poor performance of some aid providers. Several recent studies[6] have shown that in some of the most complex contexts there is a significant gap between the type, quality and quantity of assistance required and that which is provided. This reveals an 'accountability deficit' for agencies that has potential operational and staff-security consequences.

Conversely, by building trust, understanding and a sense of ownership of projects, effective accountability mechanisms may have positive implications for staff security. This was a central recommendation of a recent perceptions study undertaken in Pakistan[7]:

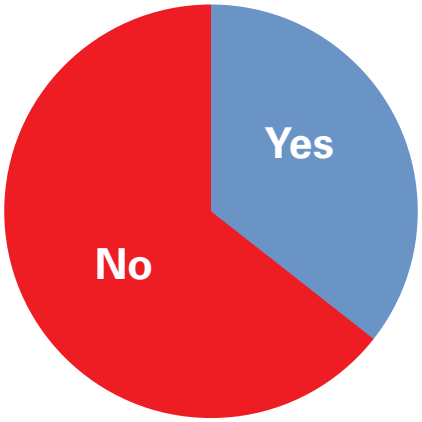
'It will only be through a far more inclusive process of assistance that emphasises high quality, needs-based practice, that lost ground can be made up which will give the humanitarian project the best chance of surviving the challenges of responding to conflict.'

Given the trend of an increasing number of attacks on aid workers – particularly in complex, politicised environments, enabling aid-agency staff to listen and respond to affected populations through formal mechanisms can only help increase the relevance and usefulness of international assistance.

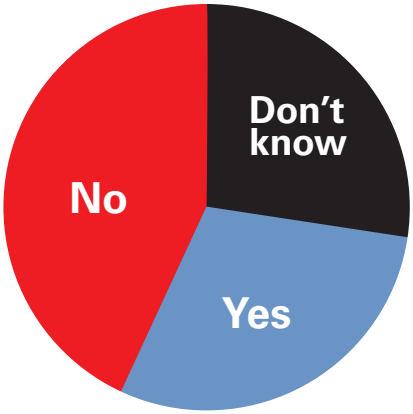
These trends underline the importance of strengthening efforts to understand the impact of accountability mechanisms on aid programmes and the important role that evidence can play, both to ensure the best possible outcomes for those in need of assistance and to create and sustain an effective environment in which to provide that assistance.

Figure I: Perceptions of humanitarian accountability – responses to questions put to 1,104 people who received humanitarian aid during 2009-2010 in Haiti, DRC, Pakistan and Uganda[8]

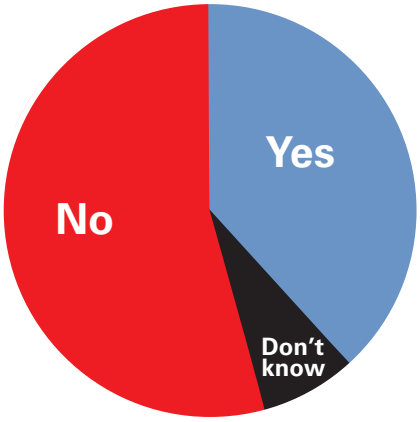
Were you consulted by the aid group on what you needed prior to the distribution?



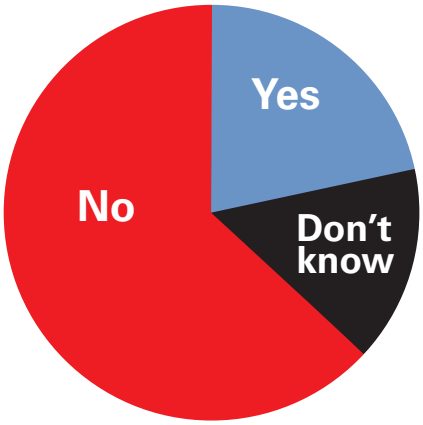
Did the aid groups communicate well with the recipients and local communities about their plans and activities?



Were you able to give your opinion on the program, make complaints, or suggest changes?



Did the aid group listen and make changes based on your input?



METHODOLOGY

The foundation of the research was the HAP Standard in Accountability and Quality Management[9], which helps organisations to design, implement and assess, improve and recognise accountable programmes. Based on the principles set out in the code of conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in disaster relief, with the addition of a set of HAP accountability principles, the Standard is made up of six benchmarks – reference points against which performance can be assessed.

Development of the methodology

The research focused on three of the HAP Standard benchmarks, which together were considered to form an 'accountability mechanism'. The mechanism was made up of benchmark 3 (sharing information), benchmark 4 (participation) and benchmark 5 (handling complaints).[10]

The objective of the research was to generate evidence of the causal link between well-functioning accountability mechanisms and programme quality.

The first step in the process was to assess the functioning of the three components against the relevant HAP benchmarks. This was done using an adaptation of the 'Listen First Framework'.[11] The framework provided a four-stage assessment tool: the most basic accountability mechanism termed 'basic', followed by 'intermediate', 'mature' and finally 'HAP compliant' (a fully-functioning mechanism). The adapted Listen First Framework is reproduced in annex 3).

An assumption of the research is that the better-functioning the accountability mechanism, the greater contribution it makes to programme quality.

The second step was to assess the contribution of the accountability mechanism to programme quality.

For the purposes of the research, 'quality' was determined by using four of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)/Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria for evaluating development assistance: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability – which together result in programme impact. (See annex 1 for definitions of each of the criteria.)

An exercise was conducted in December 2012, by the HAP peer-learning group, to identify assumptions about the contribution of each of the HAP benchmarks to programme quality (see figure III, overleaf). This was strengthened with the findings of a review of over 80 documents submitted by the peer group and supplemented by case studies from recent literature.

The assumptions were then tested during the fieldwork, with the objective of going beyond proving any simple causal relationship between the accountability mechanism and programme quality, and investigating the questions: In what ways do accountability mechanisms contribute to programme quality? And, to a more limited extent: What contribution do specific accountability components make to programme quality?

A flowchart providing an overview of the approach is shown in figure II. The methodology, including the participatory exercises used to assess how an accountability mechanism functioned and how it contributed to project quality, is given in annex 2.

Figure II: Flowchart of the research approach

Figure III: Research framework

Criteria	Assumption	Themes for the research
Relevance	• Increased participant influence over the project • Greater likelihood of culturally appropriate and context-specific projects • Participants able to define their own priorities and input into the programme • Marginalised or vulnerable participants better able to have a voice • Increased participant influence and control over the project • Needs-based programming strengthened • Improved targeting by the project, leading to improved outcomes • Opportunity for participants to influence programme strategy	**Accountability mechanisms contribute to the RELEVANCE of projects by:** • assisting in the identification and targeting of the most vulnerable or relevant participants • ensuring the assistance is most suited to the needs and priorities of the participant group.
Effectiveness	• Ability of participants to hold the agency to account • Better understanding by participants of project objectives, processes and entitlements • Agency better able to communicate delays and avoid confusion • Improved access of participants to services • Improved uptake by participants of services • Provides stronger evidence that implementation is on track and permits swifter response to problems • Monitoring and evaluation strengthened, resulting in more relevant projects • Agency more confident that implementation is on track • Agency management decision-making improved • Trust built between participants and agency • Project quality improved • Community power dynamics challenged • Participant bias eliminated • Increased participant satisfaction • Defused tension, heightened acceptance and improved agency security • Strengthened agency monitoring systems • Dignity of participants protected • Problems more swiftly highlighted and addressed • Agency responsiveness to participant concerns improved • Fraud and mismanagement more likely to be identified	**Accountability mechanisms contribute to the EFFECTIVENESS of projects by:** • increasing participant understanding and uptake of the project • strengthening the relationship between the participants and the agency • respecting the dignity of participants and empowering communities • identifying and addressing problems swiftly (including fraud and mismanagement) • strengthening operational security.
Efficiency	• More appropriate use of resources • Alternative means of procurement identified through knowledge of community • Project processes more efficiently delivered, due to involvement of the community	**Accountability mechanisms contribute to the EFFICIENCY of projects by:** • optimising the use of programme resources.
Sustainability	• Stronger engagement and better contextual knowledge improve sustainability • Participant ownership of project processes and outputs strengthened	**Accountability mechanisms contribute to the SUSTAINABILITY of projects by:** • strengthening the contextual basis for the project • increasing participant ownership of the process.

Issues for the research

The primary concern was that the methodology of the action research should balance practicality with rigour and the possibility for replication.

The research was intended to help fill the accountability-quality evidence gap. Research was undertaken in only two case studies, but it was anticipated that the methodology would be adopted by others. To strengthen the research and to encourage uptake, the methodology was peer reviewed by the HAP peer-learning group.

The purpose of the research was to investigate links between accountability mechanisms and their contribution to programme quality. Case study locations for the research were selected because they were perceived to have projects with high-performing mechanisms alongside projects with weak or absent mechanisms (counterfactuals). This was felt to offer the best opportunity to advance the research question.

In developing the methodology, some important design issues were taken into account so as to ensure an acceptable level of rigour.

Research issue	Approach
Definitions	A lack of shared definitions for key accountability terminology and mechanisms is a challenge for interpreting the findings and for replication of the methodology by others. To improve this, a glossary of key terms is provided at the end of this document, which draws from existing agreed definitions (see annex 1). Where no agreed definition exists, an explanation of the term is provided.
Measurement	To get the greatest benefit from the small number of case studies (Kenya and Myanmar), a mix of methods was used. These included both qualitative and quantitative tools (scorecards, opinion-ranking exercises, focus-group discussions, key-informant interviews).
Replication	One of the key outputs of the study is a methodology replicable by agencies across the sector. The challenge was to enable replication but still ensure adequate rigour. Important for this were assumptions made about the relevance of the HAP Standard to both humanitarian and development programmes. This is borne out in the recently published guide to the HAP Standard, which notes that during the 2010 revision process 'HAP members, and other organisations that applied the HAP Standard in their humanitarian work, highlighted that they found its application equally beneficial and important in their advocacy and development work.' Both the case studies are development-focused and in neither case did Christian Aid or Save the Children UK moderate their accountability frameworks or their commitments to project participants for the research. In order to support the adoption of the methodology by others, this report provides an overview of the methodology, the challenges faced in piloting the approach and an analysis of the findings.
Credibility	To ensure the credibility of the results, to mitigate the risk of bias, and to facilitate replication of the research method by organisations with diverse stakeholder groups, the research data was verified across interviewees and within individual interviews.
Causality	Causality is the link between the cause and the effect, and was explored through the following means:[12] • specific questions were asked of those participating in the research and the implementing agency, including: Has the accountability mechanism made a contribution to programme quality? In what ways? Is there reasonable evidence to support this? What other factors could have influenced this? • efforts were made to use a counterfactual comparison (to provide evidence of what would have happened without the intervention). Where this was not possible, projects with strong or mature accountability mechanisms were compared with projects with the same objectives but weaker or less mature accountability mechanisms. • a critical review was undertaken to determine plausible alternative explanations for the results.

Figure IV: Summary of issues for the research

KENYA CASE STUDY

Christian Aid partner Ukamba Christian Community Services (UCCS) in Makueni County, Kenya

Christian Aid-funded sand dam, Makueni County, Kenya

With support from Christian Aid, and funded by DFID's Programme Partnership Arrangement, Ukamba Christian Community Services (UCCS) has been implementing a resilience project in Makueni County in lower Eastern Kenya. By adopting a Participatory Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (PVCA) methodology, UCCS worked with the community to identify the main issues preventing families from establishing and maintaining a good living. The community identified drought, conflict, environmental damage, poor health, low incomes, youth unemployment, substance abuse and lack of school funds as the biggest obstacles preventing them escaping poverty.

Community based Organisations (CBOs), led by programme management committees, were established in each area to organise and oversee project work. They have been targeted by Christian Aid for capacity building initiatives to strengthen their organisation and activities.

Issues affecting the research

Every day, two meetings were conducted, the first with the PMC and the second with a mixed group of members that included young people and women. The results of the methods were not disaggregated by gender or age.

All of the focus-group discussions were held in the local language, Kikamba, independently of UCCS. There was good participation and engagement across all meetings by both genders and all ages. In many cases women made the greatest contribution in the discussions.

No non-members took part in the focus group discussions. This was the choice of UCCS, given that, other than taking part in mass meetings, non-members were largely excluded from the accountability mechanism. (This issue is explored later in the report.) All the meetings were closed to passing participation, which ensured the coherence of the group and consistency across the exercises. In total, 150 people participated in the research (63 men and 87 women).

Conducting the research in communities with no, or undeveloped, accountability mechanisms was believed a valuable opportunity to provide counterfactual examples (and thereby isolate the contribution of accountability mechanisms to project quality).

In the Kenya case study, the proposed counterfactuals were villages in which UCCS had only recently started working and therefore in which the CBO and group members had less knowledge of the accountability mechanism. However, in all of the counterfactual villages a PVCA had previously been undertaken. As a result, the knowledge of UCCS and

participation in the identification of projects was, generally, high. Only the complaints mechanism was unestablished. Because a two-step methodology was used in the research – assessing first the functioning of the accountability mechanism and then its contribution to project quality – the results from these villages disqualified their inclusion as counterfactuals. This is reflected in the presentation of the findings.

Results of the research[13]

On the basis of the participatory exercises and focus-group discussions, the benchmark components of the accountability mechanism in each village were assessed and given a rating. The adapted Listen First Framework and associated scorecard, developed for the purposes of the research, were used to guide this process (see annex 3).

The participation of the CBOs in decision-making (supported by the system of mass meetings), meant that in all villages information sharing was judged to be at an 'intermediate' stage. The most significant limitation was a lack of shared financial information.

Because the CBOs had responsibility for articulating the community's needs (proposing projects and implementing non-technical aspects of the project), in all villages participation was considered to be at a 'mature' stage.

In the villages that had longer relationships with UCCS, the knowledge and use of the formal complaints mechanism (supported by opportunity to give direct feedback to the project officer), meant that complaints handling was judged to be at a 'mature' stage. In the villages that had a far shorter relationship with UCCS there was a gap in understanding of the complaints mechanism and complaints handling was judged to be at an 'intermediate' stage.

When the scores for each of the three components were added together, the accountability mechanisms in the three villages that had the longer relationships with UCCS were given an overall assessment of 'mature', while the accountability mechanisms in the villages where the relationship was shorter were assessed as 'intermediate'.

Ref	Village	Score	Justification
K1	Kyawango	**Intermediate**	Information sharing and participation strong. UCCS has only recently started work in the village and as a consequence there is limited knowledge and use of the complaints mechanism.
K2	Itoleka	**Intermediate**	Information sharing and participation strong. UCCS has only recently started work in the village and as a consequence there is limited knowledge and use of the complaints mechanism.
K3	Mutulu	**Intermediate**	Information sharing and participation strong. UCCS has only recently started work in the village and as a consequence there is limited knowledge and use of the complaints mechanism.
K4	Kalawani	**Mature**	All three accountability components established and in place. Lack of knowledge about the budget, for the majority of the community, is a weakness.
K5	Kithungu	**Mature**	All three accountability components established and in place. Lack of knowledge about the budget, for the majority of the community, is a weakness.
K6	Ukanga	**Mature**	All three accountability components established and in place. Lack of knowledge about the budget, for the majority of the community, is a weakness.

Figure V: Summary assessment of the functioning of the accountability mechanism, Kenya case study

MYANMAR CASE STUDY

Save the Children in Meiktila and Kyaukpadaung townships, Myanmar

Children in Meiktila play during breaktime at the summer school run by the local CBO

Save the Children's programme in Myanmar's Kyaukpadaung and Meiktila townships focuses on child protection and non-formal education. The Learning Education and Active Participation project aims to ensure children, communities and civil-society networks in Myanmar actively contribute to the country's development and positive social change. To that end, it increases access for out-of-school children, aged 9 to 16, to basic competencies and life skills, and supports education-focused community based organisations.

Funded by the United States Agency for International Development, Save the Children's Civil Society, Community and Township programme seeks to promote good governance by building on its distinctive competence and experience in child protection and child-rights governance programmes. Through the programme, Save the Children supports CBOs, children and young people. It also helps community-based structures and mechanisms to monitor, respond to and prevent child rights and protection violations.

Save the Children creates and works through village-level CBOs, developing their ability to identify, implement and administer projects over a number of years. The work of the CBOs is enhanced by the involvement of children's groups, which develop, implement and oversee aspects of the work.

Issues affecting the research

Separate meetings were held with men and women, and methods were developed to include children in the research. Each of the meetings lasted

one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours and was conducted independently of Save the Children. Over the course of five days, 14 meetings were held with a total of 229 people (63 men, 75 women, 44 boys and 47 girls). Findings were disaggregated by gender and age.

As in Kenya, in the end it was not possible to use the proposed counterfactual projects for the study. The only difference between the counterfactuals and the other projects was their lack of a formal complaints-response mechanism (CRM). (Informal complaints mechanisms still existed and were actively used by the community.) Three of the villages that participated benefited from the CRM and two villages did not.

Results of the research

The knowledge that communities had of Save the Children, the programmes and of progress made against objectives, demonstrated the effectiveness of the information sharing and engagement of the community.

The level of participation in project selection, design and delivery, meant that both information sharing and participation were considered 'mature'. (The sharing of information about the direct costs associated with village-level projects, and participation in the management of the budget, are worthy of particular mention.)

In the villages where the formal CRM had been rolled out, the availability of formal and informal methods for feeding back and raising complaints merited a 'mature' score. But preference for use of the informal mechanisms suggests there may be further scope for working with village members to explore issues of relevance.

Where the formal CRM had yet to be rolled out, the villages received a 'basic' score. That said, the community had substantial confidence in the informal mechanisms that existed for complaints and feedback.

When the scores for each of the three accountability components were added together, the villages that benefited from a formal CRM were judged as 'mature', while those without were considered 'intermediate'.

Ref	Village	Score	Justification
M1	Lat Pan Khar Kough	**Intermediate**	Information sharing and participation strong. The absence of a formal complaints mechanism and reliance on informal, undocumented mechanism is the main weakness.
M2	Yae Cho	**Intermediate**	Information sharing and participation strong. The absence of a formal complaints mechanism and reliance on informal, undocumented mechanism is the main weakness.
M3	Nat Gyi Kone	**Mature**	All three accountability components well established and functioning. Provision of financial information limited to direct project costs, and preference for informal (and undocumented) feedback systems, resulted in an 'intermediate' assessment rather than a 'mature' assessment.
M4	Zay Kone	**Mature**	All three accountability components well established and functioning. Provision of financial information limited to direct project costs, and preference for informal (and undocumented)feedback systems,resulted in an 'intermediate' assessment rather than a 'mature' assessment.
M5	Yone	**Mature**	All three accountability components well established and functioning. Provision of financial information limited to direct project costs, and preference for informal (and undocumented) feedback systems, resulted in an 'intermediate' assessment rather than a 'mature' assessment.

Figure VI: Summary assessment of the functioning of the accountability mechanism, Myanmar case study

ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS AND PROJECT QUALITY

After assessing how the accountability mechanisms functioned in the two case studies, the next step was to explore their contribution to project quality and impact. This was investigated through participatory exercises, and the results were used to support the assumptions developed by the HAP peer-learning group (presented in the research framework in figure III). The findings for the case studies are summarised by village in figure VII, below.

Relevant examples from the documents submitted by the HAP peer-learning group and the literature review have also been included in the analysis of the findings (more detail of this can be found in annex 4).

In the following analysis, instances where the assumed contribution of the accountability mechanisms to project quality was validated during the research have been highlighted and an identifier has been inserted to clarify the link with figure VII.

Criteria and identifier	**Assumed contribution of accountability mechanism (information, participation, complaints) to project quality**	**11 villages (five intermediate and six mature)**										
	Assessment against the adapted Listen First Framework	**Myanmar**					**Kenya**					
		Intermediate		Mature			Intermediate			Mature		
	Village reference (see figures V and VI for village names)	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	K1	K2	K3	K4	K5	K6
Relevance R1	Assisting in the identification and targeting of the most vulnerable or relevant participants				●	●				●	●	
R2	Ensuring the assistance is most suited to the needs and priorities of the participant group	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
Effectiveness E1	Increasing participant understanding and uptake of the project	●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●
E2	Strengthening the relationship between the participants and the agency	●	●	●				●	●	●	●	
E3	Respecting the dignity of participants and empowering communities			●					●			
E4	Identifying and addressing problems swiftly (including fraud and mismanagement)								●	●		
E5	Strengthening operational security											
Efficiency V1	Optimising the use of programme resources											
Sustainability S1	Strengthening the contextual basis for the project (improving the relevance of the project will increase its sustainability)					●				●		
S2	Increasing participant ownership of the process	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Impact I1	Exposure to and/or use of accountability mechanism has had intended/unintended impact	●		●	●			●				

Figure VII: Summary table of the contribution of the accountability mechanism to project quality, Myanmar and Kenya

Relevance

The participation of affected communities in the project was considered to have made an important contribution to the success of the project in 4 of the 11 villages. In each of these, **an explicit link was made between participation of affected communities and the successful targeting of the most vulnerable participants (R1)**.

> 'For the selection of students for the non-formal education (NFE) programme, the villages have the information and so we are better able to select the right people. We can decide for ourselves what is best for the community and are better able to get the targeting right.'
>
> Male focus group member, Nat Gyi Kone village, Myanmar

> 'We prioritised the dry areas and in doing so made choices about who was most in need. This led to a better outcome as we know the needs of the community – others don't.'
>
> Programme management committee member, Kalawani location, Kenya

More specifically, the documents submitted by the HAP peer-learning group identified several instances where the use of complaints mechanisms by community members highlighted errors of inclusion or exclusion, and in so doing improved the targeting of programmes.

> 'Based on complaints, the committee held an open village meeting and a decision was made, based on the selection criteria, that one name should be removed from the list and another one added.'
>
> World Vision International, accountability to communities – feedback and complaints mechanisms in Bangladesh

In discussion with children's-group members in Myanmar, examples were given of programme issues that had been raised – either formally or informally – that, because Save the Children had responded, had increased the benefit of the programme to the community.

Save the Children complaints response mechanism in Myanmar

> 'The NFE students suggested that the library should be moved to the middle of the village, from its location near to the monastery, as it was problematic for mixed-age children to use it. Save the Children agreed and it was moved, which allowed more children to benefit from it. If there hadn't been an open discussion, then this wouldn't have been possible and [the project] wouldn't have been so relevant.'
>
> Children's group member, Yone village, Myanmar

In all of the villages where the research was conducted, **participation in projects was considered an important contribution to ensuring that the project met the needs and priorities of communities (R2)**. Lack of participation was considered a significant hindrance to successful interventions; and while the UCCS programme in Kenya was felt to benefit from very strong involvement by the community, examples were given of other projects where a lack of participation had resulted in poor project outcomes.

> 'We agreed that a dam would address both the water and food security problems. The community used its knowledge of the context to ensure the project was targeted correctly and this made it more successful.'
>
> Programme management committee member, Kalawani location, Kenya

Effectiveness

Accountability mechanisms, particularly the provision of information, were considered to have facilitated project progress and participation in 9 of the 11 villages. The availability of information about the agency and the project in both case studies played an important part in the project's success.

In the Kenya case study, the use of mass meetings to inform the community about the project ensured that knowledge was widespread. For this reason, people trusted UCCS and had a good understanding of what the organisation had achieved.

In the context of a participatory project relying, to a large extent, on the community sharing the responsibility for undertaking the work (by providing labour, sand for dams and overseeing the work of contractors and keeping records for stock levels), **provision of information was considered essential for the work to progress (E1)** and it meant UCCS only needed to provide minimum supervision.

> 'Information has helped people come together to work in the project as they know what is happening and how to assist.'
>
> Programme management committee member, Kalawani location, Kenya

Save the Children's transparency was felt to have helped gain the communities' trust and respect (E2), contributing to the effectiveness of the project. The importance of two-way communication, through the provision of information and community participation, was considered to have benefitted the project in 7 of the 11 villages in which the research took place. During focus-group discussions in two of the villages, an explicit **link between empowerment and accountability (E3)** was made.

> 'Save the Children listen to us and encourage us to decide by ourselves. This has helped build trust between us.'
>
> Female focus group members, Lat Pan Khar Kough village, Myanmar

> 'In the building of the village library [in which children participated in the planning and implementation], Save the Children listened to us and as a result the project is of better quality. It makes children feel valued.'
>
> Children's group members, Lat Pan Khar Kough village, Myanmar

In 2 of the 11 villages, discussions highlighted **how accountability mechanisms can raise and resolve issues of potential fraud or mismanagement (E4)**. In Kenya, the formal complaints mechanism had addressed a problem in the way in which the community was participating in the project. Resolving this conflict ensured that progress was not stalled.

> 'Each of the different groups took it in turns to assist with the dam construction, but not all groups bothered to turn up, which many thought was unfair. If we didn't have a complaints mechanism we wouldn't have been able to address this, and the programme would have stalled and there would have been animosity in the community.'
>
> Programme management committee member, Mutulu location, Kenya

Andy Featherstone

Signboards: at a Christian-Aid-funded sand dam, Makueni County, Kenya

The provision of information and good communication between UCCS and the community was felt to have built on the contribution of the accountability mechanisms to ensure project progress and to have limited the possibility of fraud. In so doing, it ensured that the intended beneficiaries received the maximum benefit.

> 'The contractor overseeing the work on the dam said the community should rent him a house. We were uncertain of this and checked with the UCCS office, who responded immediately to say that they had already given him the money to do this.'
>
> Programme management committee member, Kalawani location, Kenya

The literature review highlighted several examples demonstrating **the link between the participation of communities in the implementation and management of project work and the best use of resources and value for money (V1)**. It also provided examples of how accountability mechanisms can help ensure the implementing organisation delivers on its commitments.

> 'Monitoring committees can check that the work is done on time and to a good standard. In Burkina Faso, a new school was being funded by local government, who contracted a local building company to do the work. Previously, government contractors would be left unsupervised by government officials, and this could cause problems as sometimes building

work could be sub-standard and not finished on time. To address this problem, the monitoring committee, made up of community members, was responsible for checking the quality of the work and they could also directly feedback to the government to challenge the quality of the work if they deemed it to be poor. The committee also oversaw the workers as they built the school, to ensure that they worked the hours that they were contracted to do.'

Christian Aid, 'Accountability to Affected Populations and Value for Money'[14]

'With the setting up of complaints and response mechanisms (CRM), and the communities and children being made aware of CRM and information boards, an increased trust has been created between the community and the partner NGO. The staff also realise their increased accountability towards the children and community, as they know that the community and children are now empowered… It has also led to proactiveness among staff in dealing with issues of children's feedback from the India programme.'

Save the Children, Breakthrough quarterly reports 2011-2012

Neither of the research locations suffered from insecurity at the time the research was conducted. But an example in a paper written by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2012)[15] did provide insight into how **accountability mechanisms can strengthen the security of those providing aid (E5)**.

'For several agencies, instances of violence against staff working in difficult environments were reduced after they improved their communication and feedback processes with affected communities. Through increased dialogue and better communication, organisations that had been experiencing violence or threats eventually found themselves on positive terms with local communities, and in some cases were even protected by the local community from armed groups.'

Efficiency

The two case studies didn't offer any evidence about whether accountability improved efficiency. This was disappointing, but understandable given the nature of the interventions and how information was shared. In Kenya, the community had very limited access to financial information and therefore little input into budgetary discussions. Conversely, in Myanmar the community had control over how village-level budgets were spent.

Better evidence was collected where both the community and the organisation had discussed how funds were spent, for example in a community resilience programme in Chin State, Myanmar:

'It had initially been planned to buy paddy in Paletwa, but at the time the procurement was happening there was insufficient stock available in the township. The project team discussed this with the concerned community development committees (CDCs) and agreed to procure the paddy from Kyauk Taw, which is located in Rakhine State and is also the entrance of the plain lands to Paletwa. The CDC from each of the villages went to Kyauk Taw to purchase the paddy, including visiting the paddy field – during which they learned new crop practices and networked with local farmers. In addition to securing cheaper prices, they also made important commercial links.'

'Similar to the paddy example, the original plan was to procure timber for rice-bank construction in Paletwa. When the time came to place the order, it was found to be very difficult to procure sufficient quantities and quality of timber in Paletwa, and the transportation cost was found to be high. In discussion between the project team and CDCs from the target villages, it was agreed to buy wood in their respective villages. The change in plan reduced procurement costs, in addition to negating the need to pay for transport. It also created income for some of the villagers.'

Sustainability

Accountability mechanisms were considered to have contributed to the sustainability of projects in 10 of the 11 villages. Reference was made to the **link between the contextual relevance of a project and its sustainability (S1)** in one village, emphasising both the importance of community participation in the selection of the intervention and how it can increase the longevity of a project's benefits.

'The community, CBO and children's group all discussed and prepared the proposal. We had the best information and were able to take the decision ourselves. This is an important building block for sustainability. We can't sustain the project ourselves at this time, but our participation has helped us towards this [goal].'

Children's group member, Nat Gyi Kone village, Myanmar

Frequent reference was made to communities 'owning' projects that they had been involved in and how this strengthened sustainability (S2). Communities having access to information and being able to raise concerns was also felt to make projects more sustainable.

'Because we participated in selecting the project it is ours, and so we're willing to give our time to it and we value the intervention.'

Programme management committee member, Kyawango location. Kenya

'[Participation] in the decision-making process is important as it brings people's ownership, which will continue beyond the project lifespan.'

Men's focus group member, Lat Pan Khar Kough village, Myanmar

Conversely, there was considerable concern about the sustainability of projects in which communities were unable to participate.

'If we hadn't participated in the decision-making about the project, we would not be willing to provide labour and would not take care of it in the same way. There would be a greater likelihood that it would fail to meet our need and there would be a greater risk of bringing conflict to the community.'

Programme management committee member, Kalawani location, Kenya

Impact

The Myanmar case study offered a number of examples of how exposure to, and use of, accountability mechanisms had influenced the actions of communities in ways that went beyond the expected outcomes of the project. These ranged from community decision-making processes through to raising complaints with banks. It is difficult to quantify the influences, but in each circumstance the community made explicit reference to the accountability mechanism as a major influence.

'Having participated in decision-making processes [with Save the Children] we have now adopted the process to help organise our village rice donation. Previously we didn't know how to make decisions together, so this is a lesson for us which we now use for broader community decision-making.'

Men's focus group member, Lat Pan Khar Kough village, Myanmar

Opinion-ranking exercise, Meiktila Township, Myanmar

'Previously the village elders had no practice of mass meetings; now they choose to hold more formal meetings and have a proper [transparent] system for budget management, and we vote on important issues.'

Male focus group member, Yae Cho village, Myanmar

In the Kenya case study, familiarity with UCCS' participatory planning and decision-making processes was felt to have had a broader impact on the community. One of the villages proposed a more participatory approach to decision-making in religious gatherings. This was felt to reduce conflict among members and make the project more successful.

'We're using the knowledge we have of participation to bring people together in the church, in order to assist them in identifying issues... which has reduced conflict among groups.'

Programme management committee, Itoleka location, Kenya

ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

The findings from the two case studies, supplemented by the evidence submitted by the HAP peer-learning group and literature review, add considerable weight to the hypothesis that accountability mechanisms make an important contribution to programme quality. The findings also provide some important insights into how they do this and of the contribution made by specific accountability components to the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of a project. These contributions are summarised below.

Project targeting (relevance)

The participation of communities in targeting provides agencies with a better understanding of localised vulnerability and has increased the usefulness of projects to communities.

Complaints mechanisms are shown to be effective in raising issues about targeting (with regard to both exclusion and inclusion), helping ensure that assistance goes to those most in need.

The case studies revealed the benefit of making the targeting criteria and beneficiary lists public, and prominently displaying these in the villages. This reduced concern about bias and ensured greater trust in the process.

Quality of assistance (relevance)

Providing project information to communities resulted in feedback about the best timings for distributions, as well as greater participation in key aspects of the project. This influenced the type of assistance on offer and the location of services – improving access for those most in need, making projects more relevant to community priorities and filling important gaps in service provision. Complaints concerning gaps in knowledge about programmes led to targeted training to enable full participation.

Relationships (effectiveness)

The provision and use of accountability mechanisms strengthened trust between agencies and project participants. The research showed a strong link between community participation and ownership, and also highlighted the role that community voice and feedback played in assisting the sustainability of projects.

Where agencies shared financial information, it significantly strengthened relationships with communities (as well as giving more tangible outcomes on fraud and mismanagement – see below).

In insecure environments, the 'trust dividend' with communities was, in some cases, repaid by a reduction in instances of violence against staff. This could be of particular relevance in countries where there is a highly politicised aid environment.

Empowerment (effectiveness)

Evidence of the link between accountability mechanisms and aspects of empowerment was compelling. Numerous instances were documented in which exposure to, and participation in, project-level accountability mechanisms led to greater confidence and willingness from groups to demand accountability from other duty bearers – in schools, local authorities and even private companies.

The research provided strong evidence in Myanmar, where participation in Save the Children's accountability mechanisms has helped promote community organisation and citizen voice. The benefits went beyond the project itself and demonstrate the potential impact that mechanisms can have. The HAP peer-learning group and literature review found similar examples from India[16] and Ecuador.[17]

The research highlighted greater confidence and self-esteem in project participants, and an understanding of the right to participate in other important aspects of public life.

Dealing with problems (effectiveness)

The research highlighted the contribution made by information and feedback mechanisms to deal with problems that could have hindered progress at project-level. The literature review highlighted the use of complaints mechanisms to report mismanagement and fraud, and revealed examples of successful follow-up and subsequent increase in trust. Project staff also cited the existence of complaints mechanisms as a motivating factor in delivering the right support to the communities.

Use of resources (efficiency)

The literature review highlighted several instances where efficiencies were achieved through communities sharing feedback with project staff about cost-efficient procurement practices. Where communities were empowered to monitor contractors, there was greater efficiency and value for money. Linking community monitoring and the provision of information is an effective means of holding local authorities to account for the provision of services and use of public finances.

Ownership (sustainability)

A link was made between community participation in projects and perceptions of sustainability. The case studies suggest that participation increased the contextual relevance of projects and strengthened the sense of ownership of both processes and results. The involvement of the community in identifying projects made them passionate about sustaining the work, both because of its relevance to their needs and a sense of ownership.

ISSUES ARISING FROM THE RESEARCH

In the course of undertaking the case studies a variety of issues arose, some of which have a bearing on the research (process, method, replication) and some of which relate to broader discussions about the nature of accountability mechanisms. Issues are grouped and discussed below under the relevant headings.

Research-related issues

The relevance of the methodology to a range of agencies, contexts and interventions

The methodology had a strong focus on participation and used opinion-ranking exercises to identify community perceptions about the usefulness of accountability mechanisms. This provided an opportunity to compare results between locations, but also enabled discussion about how the mechanisms contributed to the quality of projects. The research found value in the participatory techniques, but their greatest benefit was to engage the research participants and highlight issues for further discussion.

The results suggest that the techniques were appropriate across the range of age groups (adults, youth and children – albeit with some modifications to the methodology), in the different contexts in which the research was conducted (rural Kenya, semi-urban and rural Myanmar), across the range of projects studied (resilience, livelihoods, early childhood development and care, and non-formal education) and for different types of implementation (CBO, national NGOs, partner-led organisations and operational agencies). The successful application of the methodology in the two case studies suggests that it will be relevant to organisations wanting to build on the research in the future.

The importance of facilitating community discussions

Strong facilitation was of great importance to the results of the research. Use of facilitators with relevant language skills and experience was essential for the participation of the community, and for the opportunity to explore complex issues and community perceptions.

In both of the case studies, the most useful discussions occurred between the facilitator and the community, and these included translation of key results and examples. Building trust and understanding between the researcher and facilitator was an essential precursor to a successful outcome. Permitting discussions to flow, and prompting focus groups to critically assess agency practice, played an important part in the success of the study.

Going beyond the nuts and bolts – making the link between accountability, quality and impact

There was concern that a disproportionate amount of time would be spent assessing the functioning of the accountability mechanism as opposed to seeking to assess its contribution to programme quality. It was certainly easier to discuss the more tangible issues of accountability mechanisms, but communities in both Kenya and Myanmar spoke of how the mechanisms strengthened project outcomes and, on occasions, impact.

The validation of the research framework by different groups within a project location, different project locations in the same case study country, and in the two different case study countries, provides important credibility to the findings.

The strong engagement of communities adds weight to the assertion that accountability is a key concern of communities.

Filling the counterfactual gap

Initial discussions about the design of the research methodology underlined the value of using a counterfactual to isolate the contribution that the accountability mechanism made to project quality. However, in both the case studies the anticipated counterfactuals were, in practice, akin to weaker factuals. In the Kenya case study, the variable was the length of the relationship between the organisation and the community; and in the Myanmar case study, the variable was the presence (or lack of) a formal complaints mechanism.

The absence of counterfactuals was disappointing, but provided opportunities to test the sensitivity of the adapted Listen First Framework and assess different levels at which accountability components function.

In the future, it may be possible to compare results for different accountability mechanisms and find counterfactual examples by trialling the methodology in a humanitarian setting in which there are a number of humanitarian organisations providing a range of services.

Drawing conclusions from the quantitative data

Quantitative data was collected from both case studies. For the Myanmar case study, findings were broken down according to age and gender. While this data provides some evidence of trends – particularly between the villages, where the accountability mechanisms themselves functioned in different ways – it was not compelling.

Discussions weren't entirely free from bias (deference was shown to the village chief when he was present during discussions), but analysis of the results suggest that this did not significantly skew the results. The most significant bias was, possibly, that communities receiving assistance were more positive in

their responses. This underlines the value of the focus-group discussions which, on occasion, tempered the results of the community opinion-ranking and scorecard exercises. Identification of bias was a strength of the methodology, but it highlighted the challenge of achieving sufficiently clear questioning, independence from bias, and the dilemma of how best to use quantitative data generated during research.

Accountability-related issues

Whose accountability counts? The challenges of simplifying complex issues

The decision to 'score' accountability mechanisms against an adapted Listen First Framework (not part of the original methodology) was taken for pragmatic reasons: in both case studies, the accountability components were at different stages, so it was not possible to apply a single classification to the mechanism as a whole. The use of a range of scores for each of the accountability levels ('basic', 'intermediate', 'mature', 'HAP-compliant'), based on the aggregation of the scores for the three components, allowed the framework to account for variation.

Even allowing for variation, making a judgment that reconciled community perceptions of accountability with the realities of the HAP benchmark was sometimes problematic. On several occasions, community perceptions of the strength of accountability mechanisms (given in the opinion-ranking exercises) contrasted with the outcome when the mechanism was compared against the HAP benchmark. This presented a challenge: whose accountability counts? The research used the HAP benchmark to guide it, and at times this led to scores different from those that would have been assigned by the community.

The relevance dilemma – informal v formal accountability mechanisms

The research highlighted some of the dilemmas of translating the HAP benchmarks to community realities. A good example of this was encountered in Myanmar, where a preference was expressed by community members for the informal (verbal) mechanism over the formal (written) mechanism. Save the Children had a process for documenting and responding to formal complaints, but not informal.

In three of the five villages, there was a strong mix of formal and informal mechanisms to elicit community feedback. In the remaining two villages, the lack of a formal complaints and response mechanism meant that it was assessed as inferior, despite the preference of the community for the informal over the formal.

A way forward would be to focus greater attention on the HAP requirement to put in place 'complaints procedures that are based on the preferences of the people they aim to assist'. By incorporating informal, face-to-face contact and phone contact as part of the menu of formal complaints-response mechanisms, and initiating a rigorous process of documenting both, it would be possible to consider the system as a whole.

The need to contextualise accountability

The research suggests that there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all accountability mechanism. The relationship between those providing assistance and those receiving it is an important context for accountability. In a rapid-onset humanitarian project, where there are weak links between those who are providing assistance and those who are receiving it, a range of formal mechanisms (supported by a rigorous process of documentation and management response) is probably required to meet agency responsibilities to elicit and respond to feedback. However, in a development project where organisations are working in long-term partnership with communities, and have a 'mature' relationship that benefits from trust and engagement, informal mechanisms may, in practice, deliver strong results.

Similarly, where there has been strong community participation in project design and implementation, there is likely to be greater understanding of, and satisfaction with, the project and less likelihood of complaints. There is still a need for formal complaints mechanisms in such situations, but a single formal mechanism (such as the one in place in the Kenya case study) may be sufficient – particularly if the community has confidence in it. Such a mechanism is important as a safety net for serious breaches of trust and mismanagement.

Assessing accountability in hierarchical relationships

The Kenya case study had a long accountability chain: from members to groups, from groups to the CBO, from the CBO to the partner (UCCS) and finally from the partner to Christian Aid. All the links share some basic accountability requirements, although as power travels up the hierarchy the accountability needs of stakeholders change.

To be effective, an accountability mechanism needs to incorporate all of the stakeholders. Where some stakeholders are perceived to be more valuable than others, links in this chain can break down. In the Kenya study, for example, the accountability between the group member and the group, the group and the CBO, and the CBO and the partner, was strong and mechanisms were used regularly. The accountability at the top and bottom of the chain – of non-members to the

group and between the partner and Christian Aid were less strong, and the mechanism used less regularly. The accountability weakness between Christian Aid and the partner had been identified in a previous participatory learning exercise and was being addressed. The accountability weakness between non-members and the group had not been addressed and was of more concern.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results will perhaps come as no surprise: a modest investment in information sharing (in terms of financial resources, staff time and agency commitment), involvement by project participants in the design and delivery of programmes, and ensuring there is a means of listening to and acting on feedback, brings a significant return – not only in participant satisfaction and engagement in projects, but also in the tangible success of projects.

Our research, supported by the literature review, suggests that the use of accountability mechanisms can help ensure that more of the most vulnerable people get the sort of assistance that they most need. Our examples suggest that mismanagement and corruption can be raised and tackled at the same time as efficiency and value for money is strengthened. In insecure environments, accountability mechanisms can increase the acceptance and operational security of aid programmes. More exciting still is the contribution accountability mechanisms can make to empowering communities – and in so doing have impact that goes beyond the immediate objectives of aid projects.

Examples from the research suggest that a robust system of accountability between those providing and receiving assistance can provide a compelling model for others to claim their rights from duty bearers.

While the literature review that preceded the research highlighted the good progress made in strengthening accountability across the sector, it is a concern that development and humanitarian projects seem opaque to so many people. It is hoped that replicating the methodology tested in Kenya and Myanmar, to strengthen the evidence base and inform agency practice, will address this perceived accountability deficit.

A second key lesson from the research is the enduring need to contextualise accountability, ensuring its relevance to those communities receiving assistance. As the nature of need, and the best way to address it, changes, so should the means for agencies to account for their actions.

But while it is important for accountability mechanisms to be contextualised, the responsibilities of those providing assistance remain the same. If common perceptions of accountability imbalances are to be challenged and changed, there is a need to ensure that – whether the mechanisms are considered 'formal' or 'informal' – issues are routinely documented, and the need for change assessed, responded to and, where appropriate, redressed.

Implications for the sector

In drawing conclusions from the research, it is clear that progress is necessary at both individual-agency level and collectively across the sector.

Being better at doing better

The results, even given the small number of case studies, are compelling. Project-level accountability mechanisms cannot be considered an add-on to tick an organisational or donor box. They are an essential contribution to the development process, irrespective of the nature of the programme (be it short- or long-term) and the context of the intervention.

Recommendation: Organisations across the sector need to be far better at routinely ensuring the existence of strong accountability mechanisms, monitoring their effectiveness and periodically evaluating how they contribute to project outcomes and impact.

The need for a step-change across the sector

Linking the research to the HAP peer-learning group provided an exciting opportunity to harvest evidence and good-practice case studies from a range of organisations. Yet, even with the support of these agencies with organisational commitment to accountability, there were only a handful of case studies available that documented the contribution of accountability mechanisms to project quality and impact.

Recommendation: Given the findings of the research, there is both an urgent need to strengthen practice and a compelling case to more rigorously document contribution. At best the lack of evidence represents a missed opportunity, at worst it highlights a failure to understand and communicate the impact that assistance is having on communities.

Building the evidence base

The study has provided some important signposts as to the contribution that accountability mechanisms make to project quality, but there are limits to what can be achieved by analysing just two case studies. There is significant scope for building on the findings. In particular, research in different contexts would strengthen the applicability and value of the results. Cross-agency research in a rapid-onset emergency may provide opportunities to contrast the benefits of different agency approaches and offer counterfactual examples that would strengthen the data.

Recommendation: Given the priority placed on accountability by the Transformative Agenda, sanctioning and support of the research by a Humanitarian Country Team would provide an exciting opportunity for real-time feedback, in addition to contributing important evidence.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Definitions

Accountability

The means through which power is used responsibly. It is a process of taking account of, and being held accountable by, different stakeholders, and primarily those who are affected by the exercise of power. (HAP, 2012)

Accountability mechanisms

A project approach that permits stakeholders to hold an agency to account through the provision of information, participation in project design and implementation, and recourse to feedback and/or complaints mechanisms that are followed-up by the agency.

Complaint

A specific grievance from anyone who has been negatively affected by an organisation's action or who believes that an organisation has failed to meet a stated commitment. (HAP, 2012)

Counterfactual

The situation or condition that hypothetically may prevail for individuals, organisations, or groups were there no development intervention. (HAP, 2012)

Effectiveness

A measure of the extent to which an aid activity attains its objectives. (OECD/DAC, 2002)

Efficiency

Efficiency measures the outputs – qualitative and quantitative – in relation to the inputs. It is an economic term and signifies that the aid uses the least costly resources possible in order to achieve the desired results. This generally requires comparing alternative approaches to achieving the same outputs, to see whether the most efficient process has been adopted. (OECD/DAC, 2002)

Empowerment

Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable, institutions that affect their lives. (World Bank, 2002)

Information-sharing

This refers to the backwards and forwards flow of accurate, timely, relevant and accessible project information between an agency and participants of a project. (Based on HAP, 2012)

Impact

Positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended. (OECD/DAC, 2002)

Monitoring

A continuing function that uses systematic collection of data on specified indicators to provide management, and the main stakeholders of an ongoing development intervention, with indications of the extent of progress and achievement of objectives, and progress in the use of allocated funds. (OECD/DAC, 2002)

Outcomes

The likely, or achieved, short-term and medium-term effects of an intervention's outputs. (OECD/DAC, 2002)

Participation (and informed consent)

Listening and responding to feedback from crisis-affected people when planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programmes, and making sure that crisis-affected people understand and agree with the proposed humanitarian action and are aware of its implications. (HAP, 2012)

Partnership

A formal arrangement for working jointly to achieve a specific goal, where each partner's roles and responsibilities are set out in a written agreement. Different organisations have different types of partners. (HAP, 2012)

Relevance

The extent to which the aid activity is suited to the priorities and policies of the target group, recipient and donor. (OECD/DAC, 2002)

Sustainability

Sustainability is concerned with measuring whether the benefits of an activity are likely to continue after donor funding has been withdrawn. Projects need to be environmentally, as well as financially, sustainable. (OECD/DAC, 2002)

Transparency

Being honest and open in communications and sharing relevant information, in an appropriate form, with crisis-affected people and other stakeholders. (HAP, 2012)

Annex 2: Methodology

1. Introduction

- Name and background.
- I am in [country], researching how agencies account for their activities to project participants by providing information, fostering participation, and listening and responding to feedback and complaints, and how these mechanisms strengthen project quality.
- My trip is being sponsored by [agency], who are hosting me.
- I don't work for [agency] and neither does the facilitator – we are both independent of them.
- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions, I'm purely interested in the experience of the community in this location.
- I'll be talking to a number of groups around [location] and the findings will help strengthen the case for improving community accountability mechanisms.

Figure VIII: Introduction to the process

Introduction
• Introduce yourself and invite introductions. • Explain purpose of process and use of information. Explain what will happen and get consent to proceed. This is a warm-up question. It will give you an introduction to how the community sees the project.

Figure IX: Opinion-ranking exercise and follow-up questions on information sharing

Information-sharing exercise: Which of the four options best describes how much information you have about the organisation/partner and the project? **You have 20 coloured stickers (if it's a mixed group, 10 of one colour for women and 10 of another colour for men). Distribute the stickers under each of the smileys to illustrate your score.**				
Opinion	I know nothing about the agency or about the project activities	I know a little about the agency and about the project activities	I know a lot about the agency and have a good knowledge about the project activities	I know a lot about the agency, the project activities and the budget for the work
Smiley				
Follow-up questions	• What do you know about the organisation/partner? The aims of the project? The progress that has been made? How do you get this information? Who doesn't have this information? • How has this information helped you get involved in the project or benefit from it AND/OR how has the lack of information hindered the success of the project? Can you give specific examples? • Has the information you've received about the project led to changes in your expectations of how other organisations or institutions work with the community?			

Figure X: Opinion-ranking exercise and follow-up questions on participation

Participation exercise: Which of the four options best describes the ways in which you are involved in each of the different stages of the project? You have 20 stickers (if it's a mixed group, 10 of one colour for women and 10 of another colour for men). Distribute the stickers under each of the smileys to illustrate your score.				
Opinion	Informed but not involved – I'm told how the project will affect me	Consulted – the organisation/partner discuss decisions with me	Collaborative/joint decision-making – the organisation/partner will sit with me and we will make decisions together	Community-led/managed – we make the decisions and the organisation/ partner will help us to implement them
Illustration				
Follow-up questions	• In what ways did your participation differ in the different stages of the project cycle (assessment, implementation, monitoring)? • Can you give an example of the difference that your participation in the project has made and any ways in which your involvement (in the project selection, targeting and implementation) has made the project more successful AND/OR how your lack of participation in the project hindered its success? • Has your experience of participating in this way helped you in other ways, outside of the project, with other organisations and institutions?			

Figure XI: Opinion-ranking exercise and follow-up questions on complaints handling

Complaints and redress exercise: Which of the four options best describes the way in which you can feedback to the agency about the project? You have 20 stickers (if it's a mixed group, 10 of one colour for women and 10 of another colour for men). Distribute the stickers under each of the smileys to illustrate your score.				
Opinion	I don't know how to give feedback to the organisation/partner about the project	I am able to give feedback but I don't understand how the mechanism works and haven't used it	There is a mechanism to give feedback, I understand how it works and I know that feedback has been used to make changes to the project	There is a mechanism to give feedback, I understand how it works and I regularly receive feedback about the issues raised and how they have influenced changes to the project
Smiley				
Follow-up questions	• Can you describe how the mechanism works? Which members of the community have used the mechanism? What response was given by the organisation/partner and when did it arrive? Were any changes made as a consequence? • Can you give specific examples of how the project was improved as a result of feedback/complaints that the community provided AND/OR in what ways did the lack of a feedback/complaints mechanism hinder the success of the project? (Note: explain the importance of confidentiality and suggest against using examples that may be sensitive). • Some complaints are very personal or serious – would you feel able to share these issues with the organisation/partner and how would you do it? • Has your experience of participating in this way helped you in other ways beyond the project, with other organisations or institutions?			

Figure XII: Scorecard exercise and follow-up questions on relevance, effectiveness and sustainability

Relevance, effectiveness, sustainability exercise	Follow-up questions
Community scorecard exercise: **The group should discuss each question in turn and assign a single tick, a sticker, or place a stone on the scorecard to indicate the performance of the project in the following areas (choose from five options – very bad, bad, ok, good, very good).**	
	
1. How successful has the project been in targeting those in the community most in need of assistance (relevance)? **2. How successful has the project been in meeting the most important needs of community members (relevance)?** **3. How sustainable is the project (sustainability)?** **4. What level of trust is there between the community and the implementing agency (effectiveness)?** **5. What level of ownership des the community have of the project (sustainability)?**	• How has the accountability mechanism contributed to targeting those most in need? • How has the accountability mechanism contributed to meeting the most important needs of community members? • How has the accountability mechanism contributed to the sustainability of the project? • How has the accountability mechanism contributed to building trust between the agency and the community? • How has the accountability mechanism contributed to community ownership of the project?

Efficiency and value for money

A discussion about the efficiency of the project and value for money can only be had if budgetary information has been shared with the community.

- How efficient do you consider the project to be in its use of resources? Can you give examples of how you have influenced the use of resources to achieve greater value for money (that is, that the same, or fewer, resources have been used to achieve the same, or better, results)?

Annex 3: Assessing how an accountability mechanism is functioning

An adapted version of the Listen First Framework is used to assess the functioning of the three accountability components; information sharing, participation and complaints handling.

The framework provides four levels of functionality, on a progressive scale according to their level of compliance: 'basic' is the lowest level and 'HAP compliant' is the highest. The assumption is that the greater the compliance with the HAP benchmark, the greater the contribution made to programme quality.

'Scoring' a complicated set of processes and interactions between an organisation/partner and those it works with is inevitably simplistic, but it provides an important measure of the functioning of the accountability mechanism. As it is likely that an organisation will have made uneven progress against the benchmarks, a score will be assigned for each, which can be aggregated to give an overall measure of attainment.

Figure XIII: Research framework to test the effectiveness of an accountability mechanism

HAP benchmark	Basic	Intermediate	Mature	HAP compliant
Benchmark 3: Information sharing	NGO staff provide project participants with basic information about the NGO and its goals and work. Most information is about project-specific aims and activities. Most information is provided verbally and/or informally. It is generally provided at the beginning of projects, and may not be updated often.	Information about the NGO and its work is made publicly available to participants. This includes contact details for NGO staff, programme aims and activities, timescales, selection criteria (where appropriate), and some budget information. The methods used for sharing information are chosen by the NGO (for example, meetings, information sheets, noticeboards, radio, posters, newspapers).	Full information about the programme is made publicly available to local people and partners. It includes a budget, showing all direct costs. Information is regularly updated – for example, with reports of activities carried out, expenditure made, and changes to activities or budgets. The methods and languages used are easy for local people to access. Specific efforts are made to provide information to women and the most marginalised people (including people who are illiterate).	Full programme and financial information is published, in ways that are easily accessible for all local people (including women and men). Information is published systematically, including all budget and expenditure information for direct and indirect costs. Updates and progress reports are published regularly. Ways of publishing information are discussed with local people. NGO staff check if information is relevant and understood, particularly by excluded groups.
Benchmark 4: Participation	Participants are informed about the NGO's plans, throughout the project cycle. Proposals and plans are mostly written by senior/technical NGO staff. Plans are discussed with key informants in the community. NGO staff assume that key informants represent poor and marginalised people. There is limited analysis of who holds authority in the local community and how.	Participants are consulted about the NGO's plans. They provide information that NGO staff use to make key decisions about their work, at all stages of the project cycle (for example, planning, designing, reviewing and evaluating activities). NGO staff consult women and men separately. They identify the main social groupings in the community, including the most marginalised, and consider their priorities. They identify the local institutions responsible for delivering services, and also discuss plans with them.	Decisions are made jointly by NGO staff and project participants. Local people contribute equally to making key decisions about the programme, throughout the project cycle, including planning the budget. NGO staff make sure they work with individuals and organisations that truly represent the interests of different social groups, including the most marginalised people, and women as well as men. They help individuals reflect on their current situations and make sure they feel free to contribute to discussions and decisions.	Local people and partners take a lead in making decisions, drawing on the NGO's expertise, as relevant. The work is owned by them; the NGO plays a supporting role. NGO staff check that the work truly reflects the priorities of the poorest and most marginalised people (including women as well as men). Conflicts between different interest groups in the local community are recognised and tackled using mechanisms that local people respect. The work strengthens connections between groups.

Figure XIII continued

HAP benchmark	Basic	Intermediate	Mature	HAP compliant
Benchmark 5: Complaints handling	NGO staff encourage feedback from project participants. Most feedback is provided verbally and/or informally. Informal opportunities are made during staff's day-to-day activities. There are no formal systems for encouraging feedback, or for recording and monitoring complaints.	Staff make opportunities to hear feedback and complaints from project participants. Local people are provided with formal systems for feedback and complaints – for example, complaints boxes, phone lines, feedback forms, meetings with managers, and written reports. All complaints receive a formal response. Staff and managers spend time in local communities, and ask for informal feedback from local people and partners (including women and men).	The NGO actively encourages people to give feedback and make complaints. Formal systems are provided that are safe, easy and accessible for project participants to use (including women and men). They are in local language(s), and are promoted to local people. All feedback, complaints and responses are recorded by the agency and there is evidence that action is often taken in response. The NGO regularly monitors how satisfied people are with their work (for example, using feedback forms, focus groups or surveys). Staff carefully create informal opportunities to hear from different people.	Feedback and complaints systems are designed with project participants. They encourage the most marginalised people to respond, and cover sensitive areas like sexual abuse. They build on respected local ways of giving feedback. The NGO regularly monitors satisfaction levels. All feedback, complaints and responses are recorded, and there is evidence that they are systematically acted on and acknowledged with those that submitted them. Staff and managers set targets for the time they spend in communities and monitor their performance. They may employ staff to liaise with different social groups.

Annex 4: Analysis of evidence from the HAP peer-learning group

Members of the HAP peer-learning group were invited to participate in the research by submitting evidence to advance the hypothesis. Over 80 documents were submitted and the results were supplemented by a web-based document search. An initial review was undertaken to gauge the relevance of the documents to the research. This was followed by a more detailed analysis of those documents felt to offer relevant findings. The table below provides an overview of the documents reviewed and their relevance to the research hypothesis.

As the table suggests, the majority of the documents submitted either focused their attention on the effectiveness of the accountability mechanism itself or described its functioning. Agency-authored case studies were the most relevant for assessing the contribution of the mechanisms to project quality. Most of these were in the form of short text boxes – describing the effect of a particular accountability component or (as part of an internal learning exercise) assessing both functioning and, to a lesser extent, contribution to quality.

The methodology documents submitted tended to either focus on the means of establishing effective accountability mechanisms or on how to assess their functioning. There was no single mechanism submitted that was dedicated to determining the contribution of the accountability mechanism to programme quality, although there was significant interest within the peer-group agencies in doing so.

It is noteworthy that several of the public/external reports that were reviewed had, as their key theme, the impact of accountability mechanisms – particularly on development effectiveness[18]. Each of these sought to review existing evidence and each came to similar conclusions as to the complexity of the task and the lack of rigorous or comprehensive evidence.

Figure XIV: An overview of the documents reviewed and their relevance to the research hypothesis

Accountability tool	Number of documents reviewed	Strengthens accountability to affected populations	Provides evidence of the link to programme quality	Syntheses of evidence
Accountability framework	6	Yes	No	These documents are primarily for purposes of defining an agency's approach to accountability. They contain little or no reference to the impact of the mechanisms themselves.
Accountability assessment tool	11	Yes	No	These documents provide a methodology to assess the effectiveness of an accountability mechanism. They do not assess the link between the mechanisms and programme quality.
Internal accountability reports	8	Yes	Sometimes	These documents tend to focus on the effectiveness of the accountability mechanisms themselves, rather than their link to project accountability. In many cases they serve as an internal assurance mechanism.
External/ public reports	19	Yes	Sometimes – but often negative	This range of documents includes significant publications for an external audience. Among them are several documents that seek to link accountability and project quality, albeit with a focus on the absence of adequate mechanisms (and the consequential shortcomings).
Evaluations	8	Yes	Sometimes	A review of evaluations provide mixed results, with the majority assessing the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms but stopping short of evaluating their contribution to project quality.
Case studies	21	Yes	Yes	These provide the most significant evidence and contribute to advancing the research hypothesis. Quality and content vary greatly, from short vignettes to country case studies.
Accountability mechanism methodology documents	32	Yes	Sometimes	Except for a few examples, these documents are most often concerned with 'how' to assess the contribution of, rather than the outcome of, the assessment.
Beneficiary perception studies	4	Yes	No	These documents highlight how agency practice influences community perceptions and behaviour. They tend to focus attention on the outcomes of weak accountability mechanisms.

Annex 5: The functioning of the accountability mechanisms in the case studies

Ukamba Christian Community Services (UCCS) in Makueni County, Kenya

Information sharing

Information is shared about the work of UCCS in several ways. Regular village-level mass meetings are the most common, especially at the outset of a large project with impact across an entire village (such as a sand dam). Information about smaller projects, targeted at particular groups, is shared with the CBO members and relevant group members.

Programme aims, activities and timescales are jointly discussed and agreed between UCCS, the CBO and participating groups, and are made public during the village meetings. Much of the information (assessment, implementation, monitoring) is generated by the CBO itself and is therefore readily available to the community – although those not attending meetings may miss out. Financial information, even for specific projects, is generally not shared and, as a consequence, communities have very little knowledge of budgets.

UCCS has a project officer responsible for each village, whose job it is to provide support to the CBO and to act as a focal point for interventions in the village. This person plays an important information-sharing role and attends mass meetings and CBO committee meetings.

There are no differences in the way information is shared in those villages where UCCS has a long-established presence and where they have recently started operations. However, as the relationship in this project is comparatively new, people tend to know less about UCCS; and where discussions about project selection haven't progressed to implementation stage, there is only limited information available to share.

Participation

Participation in the projects is extremely strong, and the adoption of the PVCA methodology ensures that there is good participation from within the CBO committee and groups to identify the livelihood vulnerabilities of the community, to explore the capacities it has to address these, and to prioritise projects to address more significant threats.

Most decisions are made jointly between the UCCS and the CBO/group members (non-members have limited reach into decision-making processes). The groups form the key stakeholders, decision-makers and beneficiaries, and project priorities are made by these groups. However, the benefits of larger-scale infrastructural projects are shared more widely.

While there is opportunity for the CBO and associated groups to take a lead in making decisions to ensure strong ownership, decision-making for infrastructural projects tends to be 'guided' by UCCS' distinctive competence and implementation capacity. Participation is routinely strong throughout the villages.

The UCCS project officer has an important role in overseeing the project and in capacity building. Technical assistance for project design is provided by relevant UCCS staff. The burden of implementation is shared between UCCS (providing technical skills) and the CBO (providing labour, a share of the costs and oversight of the project).

Complaints and feedback

A formal complaints system is written into the constitution of each of the groups and the CBO, and this offers a hierarchical approach to dealing with concerns raised by members. Each group, and the CBO, have a committee dedicated to dealing with concerns, and it is only when the mandated committee fails to resolve an issue that it is passed up the hierarchy. The process is usually triggered by a written complaint, but it can also begin with issues raised verbally. Each rung in the hierarchy is responsible for escalating issues that are not resolved and feeding back on action taken. In this way, the complainant, and those involved in seeking to provide redress, are kept informed of the progress made. The mechanism is primarily for the CBO, and group members bound by their constitution, and it takes between two and four weeks to deal with a complaint and provide a formal response. The formal complaints mechanism is not generally known about or used by non-members. They tend to raise concerns through traditional means (most often the village administration).

The UCCS project officer also provides a means for members to raise minor issues and suggestions. S/he sits on the programme management committee and, in this capacity, can seek to offer support before a complaint is made. Ultimately, complaints can be escalated to the UCCS Board, which has a body mandated to address and respond to them. There is also a feedback box in the UCCS office through which complaints or other concerns can be raised. This is rarely, if ever, used by group members – because of the long distance between the project locations and the office.

There is significant trust in the functioning of the system by CBO and group members. Although the

formal mechanism tends to be used infrequently, the good relationship that UCCS has with each of the CBOs, and the participatory nature of the programme, goes a long way to ensuring that voices are heard throughout the project cycle – leading to a high level of satisfaction with the programme.

The same complaints system is written into the constitution of CBOs in both the established villages and new villages, but it has been in place for a far shorter time in the latter. It is assumed that, because of the limited duration of the relationship between the CBO and UCCS, knowledge about the complaints system (even within the CBO members) is far more limited. (This is, indeed, reflected in the results from the research.)

Save the Children in Meiktila and Kyaukpadaung Townships, Myanmar

Information sharing

Information is provided to people via several mechanisms. The community hear about Save the Children and the work they are funding through village mass meetings, as part of discussions with CBO members and children's groups, and through interactions with Save the Children staff when they visit (which they do on a monthly basis, or more regularly when specific projects are in progress). Signboards are used (where specific infrastructure is being constructed – for example, village libraries) to provide information about Save the Children, the donor and the CBO responsible for the project.

Save the Children produce a series of information leaflets, translated into the Myanmar language, about the organisation – although at the time of this research these are not in use in the research area. The vision, mission and activities of the Save the Children-sponsored CBO are often written in the local language and prominently displayed. As many of the activities are determined by the CBO, there is generally good knowledge of these within the membership, although non-members know far less. Budgets for village-level project work are held and managed by the CBO, whose leaders have good knowledge of expenditure. A summary of expenditure is sometimes shared during village mass meetings.

Participation

Participation in the project work is primarily organised by the CBO. After a series of meetings and targeted training activities, it identifies priorities for its work with Save the Children and is then responsible for project development, proposal design and implementation.

Choice in project selection is somewhat constrained to areas that converge with Save the Children's mandate and funding, but there is some scope for identifying and selecting community projects outside this. Decisions are either made jointly or led by the CBO, with Save the Children playing an important support and facilitation role (an important contribution to the strong relationship it has with the community).

Efforts are made to expand the membership of the CBO to include the participation of non-members, but those who aren't involved in the CBO (either because they choose not to be or because their livelihoods don't permit them to attend the meetings) tend to play a more marginal role.

For project work, funds are handed over and controlled by the CBO, which is held accountable for their use. Save the Children play an important role in nurturing participation and supporting it. It reduces its level of involvement as the CBO matures and the CBO's capacity for implementation and accountability (both upward and downward) grows.

Complaints and feedback

A formal complaints response mechanism has been rolled out across a number of the villages, including three of the five that participated in the research. The mechanism provides a purpose-developed envelope, written in the Myanmar language, in which complaints can be recorded and passed on to Save the Children. There is also a mechanism of feedback pictures, designed for children, which may be used instead of the envelope – although at the time of this research these are not in use in the research area.

Beyond these formal mechanisms, a variety of informal mechanisms exist and are used by CBO members and children's groups. These range from raising issues with Save the Children staff during monthly meetings or project visits, to using the staff telephone list (provided to the CBO and children's groups), to visiting the local Save the Children office and raising issues directly with project staff or management. Issues raised through these mechanisms are responded to but not routinely documented.

There is considerable satisfaction with the different formal and informal mechanisms, and Save the Children has a good track record of providing redress when issues have been raised – although there is a shortcoming in that non-members of the CBO are less likely to know about or use the mechanism.

For the villages without a formal CRM, satisfaction with the informal mechanisms is generally high (counter to what was anticipated). It is likely that the considerable participation of community members in project design and delivery has limited the number of complaints. The preference of community members is for informal mechanisms (informal meetings and direct verbal contact) over formal ones (written messages).

From the perspective of the Listen First methodology, the lack of a formal CRM makes a significant difference to the score that can be assigned. The findings of the research suggest that villages with a formal CRM mechanism use both the formal and informal complaints systems more than the other villages. However, focus group discussions in the counterfactual villages suggest that lack of a formal CRM mechanism has limited impact on the willingness and ability of communities to raise concerns and provide feedback. The reason for this is a predilection for direct contact. Less clear from the research are the implications of not having a formal, or confidential, CRM in the event of a serious issue arising.

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Annex 7: Terms of reference

Accountability impact research

Joint consultancy – Christian Aid (CA), Save the Children UK (SCUK), Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP)

Terms of reference – October 2012

Background

Improving the accountability of programmes to affected communities is a focus of increasing importance in the NGO sector. Several initiatives, with dedicated resources and a plethora of tools and guidance, have been developed to implement accountability programming in the field. However, there is a lack of robust evidence demonstrating the impact that these efforts are having on the quality of programmes, on our relationship with communities, on community and staff members as individuals, and our organisational systems. In

addition, there is increasing pressure on agencies, both internally and from donors, to show what difference this work is making.

To address this evidence gap, an interagency accountability peer-learning group was formed in August 2012, coordinated by HAP International. Under this group, Save the Children UK (SCUK), Christian Aid (CA) and HAP International commissioned a consultancy to develop methodology that they could use to build an evidence-base for accountability.

In the last few years, both SCUK and CA have been working with country offices to roll out the HAP Standard. CA has, to date, initiated its roll out across 18 country programmes, and is committed to rolling it out across the remainder of its country programmes by 2015. Similarly, SCUK launched a 'breakthrough' on accountability to children and communities in 2011 and has, to date, worked with 21 country programmes (15 of these for a period of almost two years) to establish systems and widespread good practice in accountability and children's participation. Both agencies, along with HAP International and several members of the learning group, believe this is a good time to focus on finding more impact-based evidence to support work on accountability.

Purpose

The purpose of the research is to characterise the impact of accountability mechanisms on programme quality – particularly, though not exclusively, in the areas of participation, information sharing and feedback/complaints.

This piece of research will reveal:

- evidence – which can contribute to our organisations' messages and our evidence base for the value, or otherwise, of introducing accountability mechanisms in our projects
- good practice – so that recommendations can be made as to how we can improve our mechanisms
- our commitment to HAP and accountability in our programmes
- learning – which can contribute to sector-wide discussions on the value, or otherwise, of introducing stronger accountability mechanisms to projects.

Process

A consultant will be identified and will work jointly with CA and SCUK accountability advisers and HAP Head of Policy. The proposed activities of the consultant are:

1. To review and synthesise the current methods used by agencies to determine the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms and their positive or negative impact, if any, on programme quality.

   The agencies represented on the HAP peer-learning group will be asked to submit examples of how they are currently doing this and the challenges and successes they have encountered. Follow-up interviews with accountability/programme staff can be factored in, if required.

2. To work with the HAP peer-learning group to develop a theory of change, or set of hypotheses, linking the HAP benchmarks to programme quality and, ultimately, to impact. This will underpin the development of the methodology.

3. To work with the research steering-group to develop a methodology based on the findings of the review mentioned in point 1 above, and the set of hypotheses in point 2 above (as well as other documentation and resources available across the sector and the consultants own experience), for measuring the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms and their contribution to project quality. The methodology should deliver convincing empirical data (both qualitative and quantitative), of the contribution (or not) of accountability mechanisms to effective projects.

4. To use this methodology to conduct research in at least two country programmes currently being implemented by CA and SCUK.

5. Based on the experience of conducting the research, the consultant will be asked to review and revise the methodology, so that it can be made available to members of the HAP peer-learning group to adapt and test in their own country offices.

6. To write a report on findings and recommendations from the research, and to debrief CA, SCUK and the HAP peer-learning group. The consultant may also be asked to present the research at a selection of inter-agency meetings, such as the HAP General Assembly and/or evidence summit.

Considerations

- Most communities and implementing agencies will have some forms of existing, even if informal, accountability mechanisms, so we recognise that introduction of accountability mechanisms will not be starting from zero. We are interested in measuring the 'added value', or cumulative impact, of introducing accountability mechanisms. The consultant will therefore have to develop methods that convincingly attribute changes in project quality and impact to new or existing methods of exercising accountability.
- Our proposed theory of change is that accountability mechanisms

contribute to an improvement in the quality of projects – including relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability – and that increased effectiveness leads to increased impact for the communities we aim to assist. We propose this framework as a means by which the consultant can frame his/her approach (see point 2 of the process, above), although it is open to being critiqued. We have outlined these assumptions in the annex below.

- We recognise the risk that accountability mechanisms may be put in place that do not function effectively. We therefore consider it important that the consultant firstly verifies the effectiveness of mechanisms and secondly analyses their contribution to the improved quality of the projects. The methodology will need to have processes (indicators, tools, and so on) in place for establishing both stages, although we anticipate that the review of current methods will present some useful tools for this.

  A key part of the research will be collecting data directly from affected populations (a possible methodology being to collect this both before and after the introduction of the accountability mechanisms). There should be a mix of both qualitative and quantitative data and analysis.
- We recognise that our ultimate aim is to establish the extent to which accountability mechanisms contribute to the positive or negative impact of programmes. However, in order to focus this stage of the research, we plan to determine the extent to which they contribute to a better quality of project. We will rely, for now, on the assumption that more effective projects deliver greater impact.
- We are basing our theory of change on the six HAP benchmarks, and the SCUK and CA research will focus primarily on the three benchmarks of information sharing, participation and feedback/complaints. However, we recognise that the benchmarks do not function independently of each other, and the consultant will therefore need to develop methods that appropriately recognise and attribute the interconnectedness of the benchmarks and resulting mechanisms.

Deliverables and timing

The total timeframe of this consultancy is about seven to eight weeks, between November 2012 and March 2013, as outlined below:

1. Short report presenting findings of review and synthesis of the current methods agencies are using for establishing and evidencing the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms and their contribution to positive or negative impact if any – mid-December 2012.
2. Theory of change or set of hypotheses, linking the HAP benchmarks to programme quality and ultimately to impact – mid-December 2012
3. Methodology document (proposed approach, tools, field guide and field workplan). First draft by mid-December 2012, for comments. Final draft by beginning January 2013.
4. Conduct field-based research (approximately four to five weeks in total).

   CA Kenya – February 2013.

   SCUK location to be confirmed – Feb/March 2013.
5. Reviewed methodology for adaptation and use by other agencies – end-March 2013.
6. Draft report on findings and recommendations by end-March 2013.
7. Debrief to SCUK, CA and HAP peer-learning group – end-March 2013.

The methodology will be made available to the members of the HAP peer-learning group for member agencies to test in their country offices, with the expectation that this report, plus the experiences of other member agencies, will contribute substantial evidence and learning to present at an event in 2013.

Research management

- All members of the HAP peer-learning group will be asked to share examples of their practices and experiences to date.
- The HAP peer-learning group will work with the consultant to develop the theory of change/ set of hypotheses linking the HAP benchmarks to effective projects and ultimately to impact.
- An advisory group, made up of five to six members of the HAP peer-learning group (including CA, SCUK, HAP and ALNAP), will work with the consultant to develop the methodology.
- CA and SCUK will be responsible for all arrangements relating to the field research within their respective programmes.
- This piece of research will be jointly funded by CA, SCUK and HAP.
- CA and SCUK will jointly be responsible for the overall management of this piece of research and ensuring its purpose is fulfilled. To that end, they will sign off the TOR and are responsible for recruitment of the consultant and appropriate management of this process. Advice and support from HAP and the peer-learning group will be sought and incorporated into the process.

- CA, SCUK and HAP will jointly own the report and will agree dissemination of the findings.

Profile of the consultant

- Significant field experience in humanitarian or development programming (both would be an advantage).
- Excellent knowledge of written and spoken English.
- Significant experience in designing and testing research methodologies.
- Good knowledge and practice of participatory research methodologies.
- Knowledge and understanding of the HAP Standard.
- Good communications skills.
- Ability to manage the available time and resources and to work to tight deadlines.
- Ability to write clear and useful reports (will be required to produce examples of previous work).

Expression of Interest (invited by Monday, 5 November 2012)

Applications are invited from suitably qualified consultants. Interested individuals should submit:

- a brief methodology and structure of how the evaluation will be conducted over the evaluation period; as well as how the final report will be structured
- a description of how the consultant plans to spend the budget by research phase – splitting costs and time by research phase (planning, desk review, interviews, management, research and report writing). The total number of days planned, and daily rate, should be clearly outlined
- CV(s)
- references for similar work conducted by the consultant.

Annex 7 i: Elements of an effective project

Our assumption is that introduction of accountability mechanisms leads to more effective projects. We understand effective projects to be those that are relevant, effective, efficient and sustainable – in line with the DAC criteria. We are asking the consultant to establish the extent to which accountability mechanisms contribute to stronger projects in these areas, with particular considerations as set out below:

- relevance (the appropriateness of projects and their responsiveness to the needs and priorities of the communities)
- effectiveness (the likelihood of project objectives being achieved)
- efficiency (the cost-efficiency and value for money achieved by the project – possibly some estimation of the amount of CA staff time required to support partners in this area)
- sustainability (the likelihood of benefits to the community continuing after the project has finished).

Regarding value for money, we are interested to explore community-level concepts of 'value' and how these can be measured against financial inputs to a project, as well as the extent to which accountability mechanisms contribute to more resource-efficient programming.

We are also assuming that effective projects lead to greater impact. We have proposed a draft chain of assumptions from the three HAP benchmarks (information sharing, participation and complaints) to impact. We are asking the consultant to work with the HAP peer-learning group to further develop and refine this and to test and critique these assumptions, in order to establish the extent to which introduction of accountability mechanisms in these three areas improves the impact of the projects.

ENDNOTES

1 Agencies that participated in the development of the research themes during the meeting in London included Save the Children, Christian Aid, HAP, Oxfam, World Vision International, CAFOD, Plan International, Church of Sweden, ALNAP, MERLIN, Care International and HelpAge International.

2 ''Listen First' is a draft set of tools and approaches that NGOs can use to make themselves more accountable to the people they serve. It was developed jointly by Concern Worldwide and MANGO (financial management and accountability of non-governmental organisations). Details of the approach are available at www.listenfirst.org/introduction

3 The terms of reference for the research are reproduced in annex 7.

4 Cosgrave J, Polastro R and Zafar F, *Inter-Agency Real Time Evaluation of The Humanitarian Response to Pakistan's 2009 Displacement Crisis*, DARA, 2010. Available at www.ochanet.unocha.org/p/Documents/IARTE_PK_Displacement_2010_final_report.pdf

5 Grünewald F, Binder A and Georges Y, *Inter-agency real-time evaluation in Haiti: three months after the earthquake*, Urgence Réhabilitation Développement and Global Public Policy Institute, 2010. Available at www.ochanet.unocha.org/p/Documents/Haiti_IA_RTE_1_final_report_en.pdf

6 Featherstone A and Abouzeid A, *It's the thought that counts - humanitarian principles and practice in Pakistan*, ActionAid International, 2010. Available at www.actionaid.org/publications/its-thought-counts-humanitarian-principles-and-practice-pakistan

See also Médicins sans Frontières Switzerland, *In the Eyes of Others: how people in crises perceive humanitarian aid*, 2012. Available at www.msf.org/article/eyes-others-how-people-crises-perceive-humanitarian-aid

And Anderson M, Brown D and Jean I, *Time to Listen: hearing people on the receiving end of international aid*, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, Cambridge MA, 2013. Available at www.cdainc.com/cdawww/publication.php

7 Featherstone A and Abouzeid A, *It's the thought that counts - humanitarian principles and practice in Pakistan*, ActionAid International, 2010. Available at www.actionaid.org/publications/its-thought-counts-humanitarian-principles-and-practice-pakistan

8 Glyn Taylor et al, *The State of the Humanitarian System*, 2012 Edition, ALNAP. Available at www.alnap.org/ourwork/current/sohs.aspx
Survey of recipients of humanitarian aid, p48. Field-based surveys gathered responses of 1,104 people who received humanitarian aid during 2009-2010 in Haiti (179), DRC (325), Pakistan (100) and Uganda (500). The questions covered experience with humanitarian assistance and how the system could improve.

9 *The 2010 HAP Standard in Accountability and Quality Management* is available at www.hapinternational.org/projects/standard/hap-2010-standard.aspx
The 2010 *Guide to the HAP Standard* is available at www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/guide-to-the-2010-hap-standard.pdf

10 Ultimately, the methodology will incorporate all six of the HAP benchmarks, although only the three that are outlined in this document will be field-tested.

11 'Listen First' is a draft set of tools and approaches that NGOs can use to make themselves more accountable to the people they serve. It was developed jointly by Concern Worldwide and MANGO (financial management and accountability of non-governmental organisations). Details of the approach are available at www.listenfirst.org/introduction

12 Adapted from Shutt C and McGee R, *Improving the Evaluability of INGO Empowerment and Accountability Programmes*, Institute of Development Studies on behalf of Christian Aid, 2013.

13 A more detailed description of the findings for both the case studies can be found in annex 5.

14 Christian Aid, 'Accountability to affected populations and value for money' in *VOICE out loud*, issue 16, October 2012, p6. Available at www.ngovoice.org/documents/voice%20out%20loud%2016.pdf

15 CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, *Feedback Mechanisms in International Assistance Organizations*, Cambridge, MA, August 2011. Available at www.cdainc.com/cdawww/pdf/other/lp_feedback_research_report_Pdf_1.pdf

16 Statistical analysis of interviews and surveys undertaken with NGOs and their women's self-help groups showed that downward accountability by NGOs is a significant factor in empowerment of poor women in India. See Kilby P, 'Accountability for Empowerment: Dilemmas Facing Non-Governmental Organisations' in *World Development* Vol 34, No 6, pp951-963, 2006.

17 In Ecuador, Save the Children reported the enthusiasm of children involved in the programme to adopt the accountability mechanisms in the programme and to apply these more broadly to private and public organisations. See Save the Children, Breakthrough quarterly reports, 2011-2012.

18 These documents included the following: McGee R, *Apparently Transparent: does accountability deliver?* June 2011. Available at www.thebrokeronline.eu/Articles/Apparently-transparent and *NGO Accountability and Aid Delivery*, Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, London, 2009. Available at www.accaglobal.com/content/dam/acca/global/PDF-technical/sustainability-reporting/rr-110-001.pdf

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Members of the HAP peer-learning group have played an important role in supporting the study – in the design of the terms of reference, the development of the methodology and offering case study material.

It is hoped that the findings of the research presented in this report do justice to the efforts of all those who have supported the study and offer a practical tool that can be used to build the evidence-base for the impact of accountability mechanisms to affected communities in the future.

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