

Listen First

**25 real-life examples
of downward accountability
in practice**

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Introduction

This document is a collection of 25 short examples to support the Listen First framework developed by Concern and Mango. These case studies demonstrate the variety, creativity and depth of good accountability practices that NGOs and public bodies have used around the world.

This collection is a response to requests from front-line staff for examples of Listen First in practice. We hope that these case studies may help inspire staff to explore new ways of being accountable to the people and organisations they work with. The examples included here are not exhaustive by any means. There are many other wonderful ideas and we look forward to learning more about them the future.

We have looked for examples of good practice that are innovative and demonstrate the art of the possible. The case studies are organised using the four areas of the Listen First framework:

- Providing information publicly
- Involving people in making decisions
- Listening (feedback and complaints)
- Staff attitudes and behaviours

We have tried to find examples that are pragmatic, practical and easy to adapt. They are gathered from a wide range of NGOs, projects, people and countries. Each one is supported by internet references that provide further details.

We are particularly grateful to HAP and ActionAid for the many examples of inspiring work they have published, some of which are referenced and included here.

You can use the Listen First framework and examples...

- as tools for reflection on how we account for our work.
- as starting points for exploring ideas and questions on “*what would happen if we did ...?*”
- to inspire appreciative, creative dialogue on downward accountability.
- to facilitate self-assessment by front-line staff.
- to structure the feedback from groups and communities.
- to improve reporting of the quality of local relationships to country, regional and international offices.

This is a new venture and we would be very interested to hear about your experiences of using this document, and any thoughts, comments, questions and suggestions you have on downward accountability. We are also keen to collect additional case studies that we could include in the next version of this document.

Please contact: Robyn Wilford at robyn.wilford@concern.net with any feedback.

We look forward to hearing from you....

Providing information publicly

1: Leaflets

As part of its response to cyclone Sidr which hit Bangladesh in November 2007, Muslim Aid Bangladesh produced a leaflet in Bengali and English describing its activities. The leaflet was distributed to beneficiaries. It had two sections:

- a report on Muslim Aid's relief response including the names of donors contributing funds and the quantity of relief supplies disbursed by Muslim Aid; and
- details of Muslim Aid's planned sanitation projects including latrine design, government partners, locations of beneficiaries and the process that would be used to distribute latrine construction material to them.

Source: <http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/muslim-aid-bangladesh-information-leaflet-jan-2008.pdf>

2: Notice boards

In Northern Kenya, Tearfund built notice boards in ten project sites. The location of each board was chosen during a consultative meeting, and took into account security, proximity and the long-term use of the boards. The boards were generally placed near water points, community buildings (churches and meeting points) and shops. They included background information on Tearfund; results of recent relevant surveys (for example on malnutrition levels); the names of the water and livestock committees' and Beneficiary Reference Group members; and a list of beneficiaries, how they were selected, and how individuals could question those selected.

Literacy in these areas is low. But community members often reported that people who could read were able to tell others the content and up-date them when new information was added. The oral nature of these communities facilitated information sharing.

Community feedback revealed high levels of satisfaction with Tearfund's levels of transparency, and some communities began to demand better accountability from other organisations in the area.

Note: This example and the *Beneficiary Reference Groups, Suggestion Boxes and Beneficiary Accountability Officer* examples are all part of Tearfund's accountability system in Northern Kenya.

Source: <http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/tearfund-north-kenya-programme-community-notice-boards-to-increase-transparency.pdf>

3: Transparency boards

At Lake Victoria in Kenya, Beach Management Units (BMUs) are community based organizations that bring together everyone involved in fisheries. BMUs can collect levies from fishermen and plan for development. But traditionally, BMU meetings have been marked by conflict over finances, with concerns over corruption and the mis-use of funds.

New legislation requires every BMU to display its financial records to the public. ActionAid, together with the Kenyan Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock Development, trained officials from 12 BMUs in basic book keeping, and helped them design a Transparency Board that had spaces to display daily, weekly and monthly collections of levies.

Mama Jane, a fish monger at Marenga BMU said: *"We can now hold the officials accountable. They can not tell us they do not have money as they used to say. I also keep my records alongside what they post and will compare it with what they will read to us during our Annual General meeting."*

Source: <http://www.kenyalink.org/mwangaza/2006/AAMwangaza250506.pdf>

Providing information publicly

4: Making financial information simple

In 1997, a new Health Board was set up among aboriginal communities in Katherine West, Australia. It was made up of representatives of local communities and was given control of local healthcare budgets. The challenge was to ensure that Board members, who did not know government accounting systems, had the skills and understanding to carry out their responsibilities.

An organisation called Littlefish helped the Board members by turning the financial reports they received from government into accessible, graphical formats. For example: they used a picture of a rainwater tank to depict the Health Board's bank account going up and down; they used bar charts to show expenditure versus budget; colours and sad faces to mark over expenditure on budget line items; and pictures for different actors: purchaser, provider, funder, etc.

Using this accessible information, the new Health Board worked to "stop leaks from the tank". They re-organised local service provision and improved the quality of health care available to local communities. Many Health Board members commented that this was the first time they were given a real opportunity to understand financial management and the roles and responsibilities of being a Board member.

Source: <http://www.littlefish.com.au/web/downloads/Katherine%20West%20Case%20Study%20Detailed.pdf>

5: Open information policy

Christian Aid has developed an open information policy, as a way of enhancing its accountability. The policy commits Christian Aid to provide information to all reasonable requests on the following six main areas: basic organisational information; governance; organisational policies; strategies and plans; performance and feedback; and finance.

The policy is based on the premise that being open is good practice – for Christian Aid to improve its performance and accountability, and for the people it works with to learn more about Christian Aid and what it does.

Source: http://www.christianaid.org.uk/Images/Want_to_know_tcm15-24754.pdf

6: Social audit

In October 2001 ActionAid and Collective Action for Drought Mitigation in Bolangir, India, organised a social audit in 9 villages of Jharnipalli. A social audit is a public examination of an organisation's finances, plans and outputs.

The process started with a street play to inform people about their right to information. Political support for the process from the District Collector allows government officials to open up their files. A team of volunteers reviewed these and then visited villages to verify whether reported work had actually taken place and whether local people had any evidence or suspicion of corruption. It was important to encourage villagers to participate without fear of recriminations. On the day, itself over 2,500 people gathered. For the first time local people were able to challenge government officials directly, exposing corruption and collusion.

Source: http://www.actionaid.org.uk/doc_lib/190_1_reflect_full.pdf Page W017

Involving people in making decisions

7: Coordinating calendars

In El Salvador, CIAZO produced annual calendars of their institution and matched these to the typical agricultural workloads of people in communities where they work. This laid out clearly that key moments of institutional planning happened at the same time when local people had the least time available to participate. A similar process was done with weekly and daily timetables, again showing that the time that staff visited communities rarely coincided with times when people were available. This reflection led to radical changes!

Source: REFLECT http://www.actionaid.org.uk/doc_lib/190_1_reflect_full.pdf Page W017

8: Community coordinated training

Traditionally, the NGO who is paying for the training takes the lead in planning it. ActionAid's Budalangi Development Initiative in Kenya decided to involve all local groups in planning future training. They let community members decide on the content and timing that would be most useful for them.

Local food security groups decided that crop husbandry training would be of great importance if it was conducted before the planting season. As a result, these groups were able to spread their trainings throughout the year and give them proper attention. Similarly, an exposure tour for members of a community based organisation was planned to suit their needs. *"We had time to prepare and plan our daily chores, unlike before when we were told to attend training the following day"*, says Lucy Ouma, the head teacher of Budalangi Primary School.

Source: <http://www.kenyalink.org/mwangaza/issue3.pdf>

9: Beneficiary reference groups

Tearfund as running emergency programmes in Northern Kenya for pastoralists affected by drought. The programmes stressed the importance of community participation. But they were challenged by villagers' reluctance to speak publicly, and by conflicts of interest among local committee members involved in identifying beneficiaries.

So, Tearfund established Beneficiary Reference Groups (BRGs) in ten communities. The BRGs were composed of respected youth, women, elders and church volunteers who were not part of any Tearfund committee. They act as their community's 'eyes', receiving local questions, feedback and concerns, and working with staff from Tearfund and other NGOs to address issues swiftly.

Tearfund discovered that the BRGs played a pivotal role in enhancing participation and transparency during the emergency programme. Because the BRGs did not control resources, they could ensure that beneficiaries were identified fairly, and also support conflict resolution. And because BRGs were composed of community members, they allowed Tearfund to hear the views of the more vulnerable groups, as well as overall community feedback on how Tearfund was perceived.

Note: This example and the *Notice Boards*, *Suggestion Boxes* and *Beneficiary Accountability Officer* examples are all part of Tearfund's accountability system in Northern Kenya.

Source: <http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/tearfund-north-kenya-programme-increasing-levels-of-participation.pdf>

Involving people in making decisions

10: Planning local development

In El Salvador, a community group used a matrix to analyse the effectiveness of different government agencies and NGOs working in their community. The names or logos of the different agencies were written along the top, while criteria to judge them, chosen by participants, were placed down the side. The criteria included: level of efficiency; transparency; corruption; responsiveness to complaints; and attitudes to minorities. Each organisation was then judged against each criteria and examples were given in each case. The results and recommendations were shared with the agencies involved.

A key part of this process is for the facilitating agency to look at their own capacity to develop plans with local communities. CIAZO, an NGO network organisation in El Salvador, make an outline curriculum for themselves covering topics such as planning, management, negotiation, legal literacy, leadership and the environment.

Source: REFLECT http://www.actionaid.org.uk/doc/lib/190_1_reflect_full.pdf Page W009 & I006

11: Open monthly meetings

SNDT is a university-based NGO in India that works with the most marginalized dalit women 'ragpickers' whose livelihood involves scavenging waste from the streets of Pune City.

SNDT held monthly meetings with its staff and two representatives from each slum area where they were working (100 in all). All program and organizational issues were discussed in this forum. This open process allowed the tensions, from conflicts of interests relating to different values and priorities between SNDT and the 'ragpickers', to be managed, as decisions were made as equals rather than the NGO being perceived by the 'ragpickers' as being an 'outsider'.

This solidarity approach, with the NGO being seen as an 'insider', was an integral part of what SNDT saw as a 'just way' to act with integrity, and gain legitimacy with the women. SNDT still had the power to reject directions from the constituency on matters of values; such as when the constituents supported child marriages.

SNDT's approach enabled the women, over a ten-year period, to become unionized and gain legitimacy in the process of municipal waste management.

Source: <http://www.istr.org/conferences/bangkok/WPVOLUME/Kilby.Patrick.pdf>

12: Community recruitment of NGO staff

When recruiting new staff, ActionAid International Kenya (AAIK) invited community representatives to be involved in interviewing candidates.

Candidates were often surprised that they were interviewed by community representatives. But then they discovered that the representatives challenging questions about their project area made the interview relevant and rewarding. The representatives' observations and conclusions about candidates were given equal weight to those of AAIK's senior management.

Source: <http://www.kenyalink.org/mwangaza/2006/AAMwangaza250506.pdf>

Listening (feedback and complaints)

13: The 10 seed technique

The 10 seed technique is a simple and powerful way of collecting qualitative information, specially about people's perceptions. It allows a deep enquiry into underlying causes. A group of 8 – 10 people is given 10 seeds, and asked to put them into groups representing the issues being analysed. Once the seeds have been put in groups, the participants are asked to describe the reasons why they have distributed them that way. Further details can be sought about these reasons, with the same technique. Because the exercise is visual, and the seeds are limited to just 10, it can lead to lively discussions. Success depends on facilitators having an active listening attitude.

World Vision China used the technique to discuss birth control with a local community. They started by discussing the proportions of people who did and did not use birth control; and then went on to analyse types of birth control used; and related this to HIV / AIDS. *"The exercise enabled us to see that only 30% of the measures in use were condoms. ... Thus the exercise can also be the basis of discussions for modification of behaviour when the community 'discovers' how much at risk it is."*

The technique has been used in countless other participatory enquiries, including: migration patterns, analysing capacities & vulnerabilities, tensions in marriages, food security and many others.

Source: <http://www.rcpla.org/pdf%20download/Ten%20seed.pdf>

14: Listening project

In October 2006, CDA, a US NGO, helped a group of international NGOs in Ethiopia to organise a Listening Project (LP). Eight teams of "listeners" visited different areas and engaged in conversations with people at random – some of whom had received aid, and others who had not. The purpose of these conversations was to gain insights on the impact of aid.

The LP teams did not work from pre-set questions. Instead, they told people that they were interested to hear from them about how they saw aid efforts. They asked them if they would be willing to spend some time with the LP team, telling them their opinions and ideas. In this way, the LP teams opened conversations on people's issues of concern, without pre-judging the exact topics and directions. This approach enabled the people to take the lead in raising the issues that most concerned them.

Over the course of five days, the teams held over 100 conversations of varying length and depth with over 350 people including adult men and women; the elderly; youth; farmers and pastoralists; village officials, community leaders and those who felt marginalized. Many stories emerged about failures in NGO accountability and sustainability, and they were told by one group that: *"if we have a right to discuss, a right to say to the NGO we don't want this, our lives would be better."*

Source: Full details of exercises, tools and methodologies at <http://www.cdainc.com/> and http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/pdf/casestudy/lp_ethiopia_field_visit_report_english_Pdf.pdf

15: Satisfaction surveys

Medair had an emergency relief programme in West Darfur for 230,000 Internally Displaced People. Medair saw their situation as an opportunity to develop a clinic satisfaction survey for patients as a beneficiary feedback tool that could be used in other projects.

When leaving a Medair clinic, patients were asked to register their satisfaction level in three areas: staff conduct, drug explanation, and waiting time - by depositing a counter in containers with happy, neutral or unhappy faces. Feedback was gathered from 768 patients in 10 clinics. Medair discovered that:

- It was possible to discover valuable information about their programme's performance in a short amount of time; and
- Beneficiaries really appreciated being asked for their opinion. People understood that the survey was a sign of Medair's respect for them, and helped restore their dignity.

Source: <http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/mediar-darfur-feedback-tools.pdf>

Listening (feedback and complaints)

16: Suggestion boxes

An effective complaint and response mechanism needs to have different channels for individuals to use, and be able to deal with sensitive issues (i.e. complaints against staff behaviour, allegations of fraud etc) in a safe and confidential way.

To complement its Beneficiary Reference Groups (BRGs) in Northern Kenya, Tearfund set up five locked “suggestion” boxes hung on walls as an alternative channel to receive anonymous feedback. “Suggestion” was preferred instead of “complaint” which local people felt was too negative.

Over three months, Tearfund received 16 complaints via the boxes. These focused on a recruitment process which some candidates felt was unfair. This issue which would not have been brought up in a public meeting. Tearfund was able to clarify the recruitment procedure to the community and address concerns before they escalated.

Note: This example and the *Notice Boards, Beneficiary Reference Groups and Beneficiary Accountability Officer* examples are all part of Tearfund's accountability system in Kenya.

Source: <http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/tearfund-north-kenya-programme-suggestion-boxes-for-community-feedback.pdf>

17: Children's feedback committees

Following a survey that found orphaned children were often overlooked during beneficiary selection, and unwilling to complain for fear that food aid might be terminated, Save the Children (UK) established seven child feedback committees in northern Zimbabwe to provide children with a safe forum to voice their concerns. The children collected feedback, complaints and suggestions for improvements and elected a child representative.

To avoid bias from agency staff and community adults, child representatives communicated directly to someone independent. The independent person in turn reported to a board that had wider representation than just senior Save the Children (UK) staff, and had the mandate to redirect food aid operations in response to feedback from the children. As a result the board has heard about:

- the marginalisation of orphans by caregivers who prioritise their own children at mealtimes.
- guardians selling a portion of the rations to meet needs not related to family welfare.
- child abuse of children under the care of step-parents or other guardians

None of these issues were shared with the agency officers who conducted household verification visits, and the board believes that the child feedback committees generated information of a nature and quality not available from normal monitoring efforts.

Source: <http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=2640>

Listening (feedback and complaints)

18: Community complaint systems

World Vision's Sri Lanka Tsunami Response Team developed a series of pictorial community complaint cards (examples below) to help staff and local people design a locally appropriate complaint and response mechanism.

The rationale was that picture cards were engaging, and can make complex ideas easy to understand and work with. In community meetings, World Vision staff explained the meaning of each card, and asked participants to link the cards with arrows to show how their current complaint system worked. The cards and linking arrows were then used to discuss and design a system that enabled community members to complain or give feedback easily about World Vision's work.

World Vision field staff who were initially reluctant about a complaints system were won over to the idea because the cards helped them structure the community meeting. The cards acted as prompts for the staff, increasing their confidence, and as a result the community better engaged with the process.



Note: This example and the *Handling Complaints* example are both part of World Vision's Sri Lanka Tsunami Response Team complaints handling mechanism.

Source: <http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/wv-sri-lanka-community-complaints-handling-cards.pdf>

19: Review meetings

In 2006, ActionAid International Afghanistan (AAIA) conducted a Participatory Reflection and Review Process (PRRP) as part of its commitment to improving its accountability, learning and planning. The aim of the PRRP was for AAIA staff, partners and beneficiaries to reflect upon the effectiveness and shortcomings of its rights based poverty eradication programs in 2006 and plan for 2007.

The PRRP took six days in total. A two days meeting in each of the Jawzjan and Balkh Program Support Units and two days at the national level where wider reflections on the programs were made. Each meeting involved communities' representatives, stakeholders, partners, government officials and staff members. Participants worked in small groups, expressing honest and critical reflections and identifying the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of AAIA's programmes. They then used these to make recommendations for AAIA's future work.

Participants highlighted AAIA's contribution to different processes, such as the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), its work with 2000 women, its emergency work to provide shelter, water and latrines and its work with demobilized child soldiers. They also identified gaps in communication and staff management that hindered programme implementation, together with suggestions on how these gaps could be filled.

Source: <http://www3.actionaid.org/afghanistan/images/PRRP%202006.pdf>

Staff attitudes and behaviours

20: Training under a tree

In Kenya, ActionAid International, held a staff participatory rural appraisal (PRA) training session under a tree in Bar Okwiri village, a remote rural community in Usigu Division of Bondo District near Lake Victoria.

The organisers were initially nervous that staff participants would be reluctant to go to such a training venue. The food was cooked by village women and eaten communally, and the training was facilitated by community resource people. But staff feedback was very positive:

“Against our expectation that the ... training was to be conducted in a classroom setting, the process was quite unique. The learning was done in a community setting; under a tree, using local resources for facilitation. The two weeks training was interesting, participative and practical and very enriching. It was very unique. We interacted with community members, learnt their culture, language and ways of life. It is only that the time was too short.”

Source: <http://www.kenyalink.org/mwangaza/2006/AAMwangaza250506.pdf>

21: Immersion

‘Witnessing the life of a family that has no assurance that it can survive until the next harvest, going to bed at 8pm because there is no light and nothing else to do and talking with parents and children who have no expectations that government will improve their lives, had a remarkable effect upon me.’

The Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India organises immersions for its staff (and visitors) as part of their induction and orientation. Staff spend a few days living and working with host families in a poor community, and then have an opportunity to self-reflect on the experience afterwards - both on their own, and in a facilitated group.

It helps staff understand the lives of SEWA members and what keeps them poor as well as their strengths and strategies. SEWA management use immersions to maintain SEWA’s pro-poor organisational culture.

Sources: <http://www.livelihoods.org/lessons/docs/IMMERSIONS2.pdf>

<http://www.sewaresearch.org/pdf/researches/member/FINAL-WORD-BANK-BOOK.pdf>

http://www.ids.ac.uk/UserFiles/File/publications/policy_briefs/PB22.pdf

22: Handling complaints

As part of its community complaints system in Sri Lanka, World Vision created a Community Complaints Fact Sheet to help staff manage complaints well.

With a sub-title of: “Accountability is Everyone’s Business”, the Fact Sheet describes what a complaint is, the benefits gained from good complaint management, and what to do and not do when receiving a complaint.

The aim of the Fact Sheet is to encourage staff to exhibit good behaviours when receiving complaints – listening, empathising and showing understanding – based on a positive attitude that complaints can lead to better accountability, performance and development.

Note: This example and the *Community Complaints Cards* example are both part of World Vision’s Sri Lanka Tsunami Response Team complaints handling mechanism.

Source: <http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/wv-sri-lanka-community-complaints-fact-sheet.pdf>

Staff attitudes and behaviours

23: Different donor rules

Wildlife Fund Thailand (WFT), an NGO in Thailand, received funding from donors who required WFT to consult with villagers on a regular basis as a condition of their financial support. The donors also allowed some flexibility in how their funds were spent.

The fishing area of a coastal village within WFT's program area was under threat from destructive fishing methods used by visiting fishermen. WFT supported local fishermen's efforts to organise and protect their fishery.

A study of this project attributes a large part of its success to the donors' requirement for consultation, as this had the effect of empowering the village community. There was already widespread support for protecting the fishery, and the village's elite, who were all fishermen, were aware that WFT had to consult them. By being empowered and organising village meetings and public and private discussions with WFT on their fishery, the village elite consciously influenced WFT's successful work in their village.

Source: http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/working_papers/wp149.pdf

24: Beneficiary accountability officer

Tearfund recruited a Beneficiary Accountability Officer for its emergency response programmes in North Kenya as part of its overall efforts to share information, engage communities in decisions and provide channels for feedback and complaints.

The officer was responsible for Tearfund's local accountability. He supported all Tearfund staff to integrate accountability practices into their work, from the guards and cooks (who may be the first point of contact for many in the community), to the sector coordinators (who need to factor additional activities into proposals, budgets, field visits etc).

The position was supported by:

- commitment from senior managers who helped explain the Officer's role to staff, to prevent the perception that the Officer had a policing/enforcement role.
- a dedicated budget for accountability activities like community meetings, establishing committees or reference groups, information notice boards, staff training, etc. Tearfund suggests that an "Accountability and Quality" budget line in all programmes of around 2% - 5% of total budget.

Note: This example and the *Notice Boards*, *Beneficiary Reference Groups* and *Suggestion Boxes* examples are all part of Tearfund's accountability system in Northern Kenya.

Source: <http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/954-tearfund-north-kenya-programme-approach-to-improving-accountability.pdf>

Staff attitudes and behaviours

25: Accountability at the heart of systems

In response to perceptions of excessive bureaucratic reporting requirements that added little value to programmes, ActionAid introduced its Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS).

ALPS is different from other systems as it is based on principles regarding the rights of the poor to criticise and influence poverty eradication efforts. Instead of information flowing only upwards in the organisation, and requests and guidelines flowing downwards, ALPS opens formal channels for *direction* to originate from the poor as well as from management.

In order to do this, the system requires that staff at all levels dedicate time to transparency, learning, and negotiation with partners, the poor and one another. ALPS then builds on this reflection by allowing for a wide diversity of interpretations to suit different contexts:

- Where ActionAid funds community organisations, ALPS may include Participatory Review & Reflection Processes with poor people, staff, and government representatives to review what has been done, what has been learnt and what will be done differently in future.
- Where a programme supports anti-poverty advocacy efforts by social movements, there may be joint action-learning activities.
- Inside ActionAid itself, it could lead to new transparent and reflective approaches to managing meetings or staff appraisal systems.

Each of these will lead to different ways of ensuring change happens after reflection and that the organisation and its partners are held to account.

Source: <http://www.actionaid.org/main.aspx?PageID=261> and Scott-Villiers, P. 2002. "The Struggle for Organisational Change: How the ActionAid Accountability, Learning and Planning System Emerged." *Development in Practice*, Vol. 12, Nos. 3-4, 1 August, pp. 424-435.