



Accountability – a long but necessary journey

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Today, many humanitarian agencies have set up systems that enable their end-user stakeholders to submit feedback, including formal complaints. Their purpose is to remove the real and perceived barriers to giving the intended beneficiaries of humanitarian action a real say in it. This is a core part of a larger project of accountability and setting of standards.

"I am missing one of the six-month Cash Relief payments. I went to the bank on five consecutive days but there was nothing. Please tell me what the solution is." (IDP in Mogadishu)

This is one of 350 examples of feedback received by text by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in Somalia.

It has not always been the case that agencies even thought about giving recipients of aid a say. The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership's first accountability perceptions survey in 2005¹ found that no fewer than 58% of the 320 respondents in the humanitarian sector rated agencies' accountability to the intended beneficiaries as 'low'. This was in stark contrast to their rating of the accountability to official donors. Here, just 5% rated it as 'low' – accountability to those who pay obviously comes more naturally. Moreover, the respondents also had low expectations about the sector's ability to improve its overall accountability, predicting no or little improvement in 2006.

As the head of an organisation which aims to ameliorate and resolve problems related to forced displacement, I have a particular interest in making sure that we are accountable not just to those who fund our work but in particular to all the refugees, IDPs and other people affected by migration and conflict whom we try to assist.

When I first got involved in the integration of refugees in Denmark in 1980s, 'accountability' was about accounting to the government for every penny spent, rather than a matter of quality. Gradually, quality became part of accountability but it remained an 'upward' relationship: i.e. to the donor paying for the action. I saw the same when discussions about the Humanitarian Ombudsman project took place in the 1990s.

In the Humanitarian Accountability Project, which succeeded the Ombudsman Project and in 2003 became the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), we spent much energy discussing what standards humanitarian NGOs should be measured against. My initial position was that a humanitarian NGO, as a value-driven civil society organisation, should only be measured against its own proclaimed values and standards; this would enable civil society to judge it without compromising diversity. However, later we realised the need to define minimum standards which would apply to all HAP members and become a cornerstone in a certification scheme, that is, external verification alongside the individual organisation's own values.

Of course, we also had long discussions about the value of certification. Some held the view that certification

would not result in or even contribute to good quality and accountability. Others thought that it would not be feasible to implement in the large humanitarian network organisations, while others were anxious about how they would deal with certification in their collaboration with their local partners.

These questions are still going around but progress has fortunately been made in the sense that many NGOs have shown the way and overcome some of the practical challenges.

Where are we now?

In HAP's latest accountability perceptions survey in 2011, of 756 respondents only 16% gave a low rating for accountability to intended beneficiaries and 3% for accountability to official donors, compared to the 58% and 5% of the 320 respondents six years earlier. The same improving trend, although less steep, was seen for accountability to host governments and to private donors. Something has happened, at least with our perception of our practice.

This reflects the reality that accountability has, at last, come to be embraced as a concept in our sector by donors, UN, scholars and NGOs.

My main concern now is how and whether all the professed accountability commitments actually affect humanitarian practice and, indeed, what accountability will mean in the future. In his contribution to FMR's 25th Anniversary collection, Antonio Donini points to three challenges to humanitarianism:

- the emergence of sovereignty and nationalism-based discourses
- protection not being integrated in humanitarian action
- the current categories of refugees, IDPs and economic migrants no longer fitting the reality

As value-based NGOs which together deliver a sizeable part of the world's humanitarian assistance, we wish to influence the debate about how these challenges are resolved. In fact, it is a precondition for maintaining our relevance when others – host governments, funders and the media – will try to determine what that relevance is. But will others listen when we are not clear about what standards we use and when we have not convinced them that we do indeed practise what we preach? In other words, that we are accountable, not just to ourselves but to recognised principles and standards and to those whom we aim to assist.



Inexperienced organisations will continue to come into the sector. Even the experienced organisations will continue to deliver mixed quality and their coordination be affected by the absence of a joint frame of reference. People's lives and dignity will be affected because of want of professionalism and accountability.

Many humanitarian standards

In the absence of universal criteria for access and quality, governments in many countries affected by disaster and displacement will unilaterally define their own criteria for provision of humanitarian assistance, domestic as well as foreign. This can be a step forward but the risks are obvious: it will lead to significant differences, which will undermine global humanitarian quality and preparedness.

A recent international study commissioned by the Joint Standards Initiative² identified no fewer than 71 different quality and accountability initiatives related to the humanitarian sector. This suggests that there is an encouraging movement out there to define what good humanitarian work is and is not. The flip side is that the many – more or less competing – initiatives signal confusion about what good humanitarian work is.

The Joint Standards Initiative responded to a call from many humanitarians to consolidate standards that many of us refer to, in this case HAP, Sphere and People in Aid. We need that consolidation, not only to make life easier for our field workers but also to provide a clear quality standard that affected populations, host governments and donors can demand of us. Endorsed by the Humanitarian Standards Forum in Geneva on 27 June 2013, the resulting Standards Project will try to reach out to even more stakeholders in order to develop a common verifiable humanitarian standard within a standards 'architecture' that includes relevant technical standards. This is a welcome development. If it is successful, it may be embraced by other humanitarian actors, host governments and donors. A great achievement – but not enough.

Accountability deficit

Humanitarian principles are about the rights of affected populations and our commitment to promote them. How we are accountable to the people we claim to assist is therefore fundamental. Several studies have shown that affected populations have less confidence in humanitarian agencies' accountability to them than we ourselves have. Numerous studies have also shown that affected populations – across religions and cultures – have more or less the same expectations from those who wish to assist them. This is fundamentally to our advantage.

As NGOs, we can sometimes be closer to the affected populations than anyone else, particularly when local authorities are unable or unwilling to

protect their rights or listen to them. People supported by us have very little power in their relation with us, unlike donors who can withdraw their support. We must give that power to them. We cannot claim to help people if we are not accountable to them. We cannot claim to strengthen people's resilience if we disempower them by not involving and listening to them. And we cannot claim to do good-quality work if it is not tested against affected populations' knowledge and feedback. These are the ethical, empowerment and quality dimensions of beneficiary accountability.

Effective accountability to those whom we claim to assist assumes that we provide them and other relevant stakeholders with the means to hold and make us accountable to them: we must provide the information that is relevant to the specific stakeholder; we must provide a framework that ensures stakeholders' participation and feedback, including complaints; and we must be willing and able to demonstrate how we learn from the feedback we receive. If we can bring about effective accountability to those we claim to assist, it provides a quality check for all our activities, not just of those few activities that are formally evaluated.

Verification of accountability

Some humanitarians believe that we can deliver good accountability, and be trusted for it, by using internal quality-control measures. Some fear that external certification of humanitarian agencies could be abused by donors or host governments to discipline or even exclude organisations. This same fear existed in the early days of the Sphere Project.

The fact is that the pressure for disciplining the humanitarian sector will only grow. We can ignore it but we cannot avoid being affected. I believe it is better to try to seize the initiative. I do not think that assurances



Participants in a resilience project implemented by Ukamba Christian Community Services in Makeni County, Kitui, Kenya take part in opinion-ranking exercises as part of research by Christian Aid, HAP and Save the Children into accountability mechanisms. Research results at <http://tinyurl.com/Improving-impact-2013>



about internal quality-control systems will be enough. First, I know from the DRC's experience how difficult it is to really prioritise quality development, competing as it does with the pressing humanitarian demands of the day. We need a push – at all levels – to help us do what we say we will do. Second, our arguments carry less weight when they can be dismissed as subjective.

Since 2007 we have subjected DRC's international activities to external verification of compliance with the HAP Standard in Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management. During those six years we have managed to significantly strengthen the quality of our work and almost triple our activities. I do not think this would have been possible without the stick and the carrot provided by the certification. Yes, it has required a significant investment to do it. And yes, this will continue to be the case for some time because we are not yet where we should be. But the investment is not the modest cost of the certification as such – it is in the quality improvement that we want to make.

It has become natural for all of us to subject our books to external financial audits. So why not also have external audits of the quality of our work? In the end, what matters to affected populations is not what we spend but the 'volume x quality' of what they get. DRC chose to be certified under the HAP Standard because of its strong focus on accountability



Participants in a child protection and non-formal education project implemented by Save the Children International in Meiktila, Myanmar.

to affected populations but other certification regimes might also have helped us do the trick.

A way forward?

I believe that we humanitarian NGOs need to do two things:

- Promote the status of humanitarian standards: ideally, one basic humanitarian standard, perhaps with progressive steps, but we could live with a few co-existing 'big' standards
- Subject ourselves to external verification of our compliance with the standard we have chosen.

External verification of organisations' use of and compliance with the standards will make more convincing cases about what standards work well. This will support further convergence in the longer term. I am not particularly concerned that the Standards Project may result in DRC's certification in future being under a new standard. It will contain the same basic elements, and certified we must be.

We NGOs can do a lot and many of us will. But the humanitarian sector needs both a push and support to accelerate its accountability and quality development. Government and institutional donors should send a strong signal that they want us to deliver good-quality assistance that is accountable to its end-users – and that they want external verification of it. But they must also recognise that they must help cover the modest additional cost of ensuring good quality and end-user accountability; this investment will be offset many times over in better value for money.

Finally, was the complaint from Mogadishu resolved? Yes. It was forwarded to DRC's Mogadishu team which investigated the case and found that the complaint was justified; the missing money was subsequently transferred to the beneficiary and improvements were made to our procedures. This is most unlikely to have happened 25 years ago.

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The Danish Refugee Council is one of FMR's longest-supporting donors.

An issue of FMR on accountability was published in August 2000 and is online at www.fmreview.org/accountability-and-displacement

1. HAP accountability perceptions survey 2011. Figure 2. Cross-year comparison of perceived accountability rating to four stakeholder groups. See also 2013 Humanitarian Accountability Report online at www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/2013-har.pdf
2. www.jointstandards.org/