

Responsible refugee agencies could be 'certified'

by Andrew Lawday

A new certification scheme could help to make humanitarian agencies more accountable to refugees and displaced people. Since the critical evaluation of the response to the Rwanda emergency in the 1990s, agencies have recognised weaknesses in both the accountability and quality of humanitarian programmes. But an 'accountability deficit' still plagues international aid responses to emergencies.

Looking through evaluations published in 2005 and 2006, it is clear that humanitarians still acknowledge a significant 'accountability deficit'. International NGOs took on fresh criticism for their performances in response to the Asian tsunami, despite efforts to address long-standing weaknesses. Yet the important United Nations-led humanitarian reform barely mentioned accountability to people affected. Donors remained in few evident ways accountable to beneficiaries. Disaster victims lacked any means to demand accountability from aid agencies or donors.

A recent survey by the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) found that senior managers, programme managers and policy advisers perceived accountability to disaster survivors to be still largely inadequate, though perhaps improving.

As António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, told UNHCR executives in 2005, "Accountability takes many forms, but our first responsibility is of course to the refugees, stateless, and internally displaced persons." In the *State of the World's Refugees 2006*¹, UNHCR recognised that accountability mechanisms had to be strengthened for displaced people. Internal accountability mechanisms in UNHCR offered neither adequate sanctions nor remedies when fundamental rights of refugees and stateless persons are directly violated.

The prevalence of poor accountability to disaster victims, it seems clear, leads to poor quality services. Indeed, any service risks being both inefficient and ineffective when there is an imbalance of power between the provider and receiver.

"I see *khawajas* (white people) come to the camp and go. NGO personnel also come to camp. But they rarely tell us what they are doing. I feel we are not important, so we do not work closely with these people."
Fatima Abdul Mageed
(65-year-old IDP in Darfur)

Awkwardly, many agencies account to donors at the expense of beneficiaries. Perhaps that follows from rising relief budgets. Bilateral humanitarian assistance from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC)² countries increased from \$7.3 bn in 2004 to \$8.4 bn in 2005 – a 15% increase in real terms, while international pledges to countries affected by the tsunami totalled \$14 bn. More than 50 donors have committed \$272 million to the newly expanded Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).³

Of course, the challenges of humanitarian accountability must not obscure the achievements. Most respondents to the recent HAP survey noted some improvements

in humanitarian accountability. HAP's field advisers have reported numerous good practices in accountability, transparency and complaints mechanisms in Pakistan, Sudan, Aceh and elsewhere. The Danish Refugee Council, for example, has developed a complaints handling system in the North Caucasus, where the agency provided food aid to over 200,000 mainly displaced people in Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. The system succeeded in improving food distribution, increasing dignity, trust and security. The International Rescue Committee, working with the Kenyan government and aid agencies, established a complaints mechanism to prevent sexual exploitation of refugees. Medair developed beneficiary feedback tools in Darfur, using household surveys, individual interviews and patient opinion polls to identify problems and assess impact. UNHCR developed a system for refugee participation in refugee camps in Sierra Leone and has produced a Participatory Assessment Tool on how to engage communities and individuals in assessment.

Such good practices seem to be the exceptions that prove the rule: humanitarian accountability is not systematically implemented by aid agencies, and it is not yet a standard operating requirement.

New initiative to measure accountability

That may change in due course. The HAP Standard in Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management, launched in Geneva in April 2007, is designed to help agencies systematically strengthen their accountability to disaster victims. HAP developed the Standard in consultation with humanitarians, disaster survivors and accountability advisers, and worked to ensure its universal applicability.

An important feature of the Standard is a certification scheme, which provides responsible agencies with the opportunity to have a formal audit of compliance conducted by a registered HAP auditor. The first two agencies to have been certified – the Danish Refugee Council⁴ and the Dakar-based Office Africain pour le Developpement et la Cooperation (OFADEC)⁵ – received the HAP Certificate at the Geneva meeting of HAP's 17 members in April. Several other HAP Members are expected to similarly seek certification.

The process of seeking certification itself offers an effective means, along with a positive incentive, for an agency to implement the Standard across their organisation.

"Becoming certified has been a challenging and worthwhile process that stretched OFADEC to improve its quality and accountability. It involved a certain amount of work and training for the agency as a whole. By the end of the process, we found it was definitely worth the effort to help us translate our own principles, standards and commitments into practice. And the process itself helped to build up trust." Mamadou Ndiaye, Executive Director of OFADEC

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association that aims to make humanitarian action accountable to intended beneficiaries. The 2007 Standard in Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management is available at: www.hapinternational.org. Aid agencies concerned with accountability and quality are invited to contact Sheryl Haw (shaw@hapinternational.org), the HAP Certification Manager, for further information.

1. www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/template?page=publ&src=static/sowr2006/toeceng.htm
2. www.oecd.org/dac
3. www.unfoundation.org/cerf/index.asp
4. www.drc.dk
5. <http://membres.lycos.fr/ofadec>



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The Refugee Studies Centre, with support from UNHCR, is mapping, at a global level, researchers, academics, teachers, advocates and practitioners who are associated with various institutions or working independently to protect the rights and lives of forcibly displaced persons. We hope

that upon completion this mapping exercise will help enhance collaborative linkages between academic institutions, humanitarian practitioners, policy makers and rights advocates working on issues of forced migration globally. We would like to know more about yourself, your organisation and its work.

We will include this information in a global database that will form the basis of this initiative.

We would be very grateful if you would respond to the questionnaire available online at www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/mapping.html by 15 August.

For further information, please contact Simon Addison (simon.addison@qeh.ox.ac.uk).