

# Accountability to disaster-affected populations

Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response

**The hardest aspect of accountability to disaster-affected persons seems to be managing the tensions between the timeliness and the quality of a response.**

There are many different stakeholders to whom an organisation is accountable. Sadly, accountability to donors, to the general public, to governing bodies and to headquarters (in the case of field offices) can easily 'squeeze out' accountability to affected populations unless active efforts are made to uphold it. Although all operations have financial or legal accountability requirements, there is no such obligation for accountability towards disaster-affected persons. There are standards that organisations can voluntarily commit to (such as the HAP Standard<sup>1</sup>) but there are no built-in sanctions if they choose not to do so.

The Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR)<sup>2</sup> carried out a Peer Review on 'Accountability to Disaster-affected Persons' in 2009 with three main objectives:

- to understand the range and diversity of approaches to accountability to disaster-affected persons
- to share best practices, challenges and learning in taking forward the adoption, integration and use of different approaches to accountability, and their relative effectiveness and practicality
- to inform decisions about prioritising and integrating the diversity of accountability approaches.<sup>3</sup>

## Managing accountability

From this Peer Review emerged a range of conclusions and recommendations. Organisations need to actually demonstrate that they value accountability – first through strong leadership commitment, and second by valuing and rewarding accountable

approaches, both at programme level and with individual staff. Accountability is strongest when the values of individual staff resonate with the values of the organisation.

One agency<sup>4</sup> offers regular, mandatory refresher training, which is widely appreciated as a way of reminding and encouraging staff to respect core organisational principles. Another agency reflects on elements of its own staff code of conduct and its principles in annual staff reviews, including: respect for others (victims, staff, outside contacts); sensitivity to cultural, social and religious environment; and respect for local standards of conduct.

Several organisations recognised the potential for the staff appraisal process to be used more strategically to monitor performance according to values as well as objectives. Performance appraisals that include measures that promote accountability to affected groups can provide a strong incentive to staff. One organisation included feedback from refugee committees as part of the performance review of staff members working in camps.

Accountability towards disaster-affected populations is about approaches to work and not a menu of 'accountability activities'. It is more a process than an end state – requiring a culture of accountability. That said, specific resources are required for staff time, the development of staff skills and specific processes such as complaints handling. Organisations need to plan for such costs and allocate resources accordingly, so that accountable processes feature throughout the project cycle.

Accountability has institutional and individual dimensions. A systems approach to accountability

is insufficient. It only takes an organisation so far down the road to being more accountable. Accountability is best addressed by inserting and embedding it in existing procedures and tools – to make it part of how an organisation works in all its facets, not just in programming.

Accountability towards affected persons is possible when the organisation is accountable to its own staff and members. Organisational cultures that tolerate abuse of power by management, or that fail to provide a trusted means of bringing grievances to the fore, are likely to undermine and impede efforts to promote accountability to affected communities.

## Changing the relationship with affected groups

Accountability cannot be pursued as a project; it requires organisations to work differently rather than do different things. It is about pursuing a process which changes the nature of the relationship with affected groups. For example, feedback and complaints mechanisms reduce the power disparity between the organisation-as-provider and individual-as-recipient. Such mechanisms need to be designed with input from affected groups, so that they are appropriate to the context; proactive efforts are needed to capture the perspectives of all sub-groups of a population.

The Peer Review observed informal complaints mechanisms in action in Ethiopia and Haiti. However, although the opportunity to lodge complaints was valued, organisations were making untested assumptions – firstly that all sections of a community know they have a right and means to complain, and secondly that the necessary processes would kick in once a complaint was received.

Organisations commonly use 'complaint' or 'suggestion' boxes.

Some individuals, however, do not trust the security of the mechanism and fear retaliation by the organisation through decreased support if they “complain too much”, or by the perpetrator if a complaint becomes known to them.

Although they can be a commendable means of enabling complaints about staff or services, boxes need to be used as one element of a broader feedback system. Proactive efforts are required to reach a wider cross-section of the population – those least able either to write or to have the means to pay someone to write a complaint, or to be mobile enough to post it, or to have the confidence to complain at all.

‘Participation’ of affected persons, as an element of accountability, is rarely fully realised. It tends to be limited to assessments and to be used as a way of extracting information and little effort is made to provide affected populations with feedback. Meaningful participation emerges from the two-way dialogue that characterises feedback procedures. It requires that affected persons are involved in key decision making, including validating operational successes and identifying failures.

One of the earliest lessons to come out of the Peer Review was that accountability to disaster-affected persons cannot be isolated from an organisation’s accountability to the other population groups it seeks to serve. This requires joining up the thinking, learning and practices across the development and disaster-response domains. Accountability as a process needs to be embedded in all phases of programming, especially emergency preparedness. In order to be accountable during an emergency response, the necessary foundations of dialogue, understanding and staff skills need to be laid beforehand. One agency recognises the importance of emergency preparedness planning for accountability during response, yet staff feel that the time constraints during the immediate ‘life-saving’ phase make full implementation of accountability principles impossible.

Though transparency is understood as a dimension of accountability, organisations find it challenging. The Peer Review suggested that

information should be shared unless there is a good reason not to, which would lead to stronger trust between organisations and affected groups.

Partnership and membership relations pose specific challenges to promoting and ensuring accountability to disaster-affected persons. There is an inherent tension between, on the one hand, working in a relationship based on trust and mutual respect and, on the other, working to ensure that the relationship results in a good quality (that is, accountable) response. Control and trust are often approached as competing concerns, yet examples demonstrate that trust can be built on shared control.

However, accountability cannot be delegated to partners. ‘Indirect accountability’ is no accountability in practice, without a clear and agreed demarcation of roles and responsibilities which are then monitored. Partners need to be involved in any accountability processes, should be held accountable for their actions and should trust the partnership relationship enough to share concerns heard from communities.

One agency has launched a ‘capacity development initiative’ to enhance members’ capacities in their programmes and activities, their internal organisation and their external relations. One of the first steps is self-appraisal, including examining a) transparency in relation to disaster-affected communities, b) participation of disaster-affected populations and their representatives in programme decisions and in giving their informed consent, and c) assessment of programmes and performance. The process guidelines identify community representatives as key stakeholders to be involved in the process.

In one case in Yemen, community representatives were invited to a senior programme review meeting where they gave feedback about what they felt were the strengths and weaknesses of the programme and what they thought should change in the future. In Colombia an agency has instigated follow-up monitoring visits six months after completion of emergency

interventions. These are used to assess with affected populations the appropriateness of the assistance provided and thereby improve on-going programmes. Another agency there undertakes the evaluation in three stages: first, communities are asked to identify what was good and bad about a programme; then the agency team undertakes a self-evaluation of the work; and finally the two are consolidated into an agreed overview analysis.

### Understanding

Two significant semantic hurdles emerged during the Peer Review process. Firstly, ‘accountability’ is not easily translatable from English, or becomes confused with legal, financial or even religious terms. Secondly, and more widespread, is the concern that ‘accountability’ has become a much-abused word which may mask poor understanding or misunderstanding among staff.

More generally, the very term ‘accountability’ is not well understood among staff of participating organisations, particularly at the level of country programmes. The term itself can frequently block individuals’ understanding, so that actual accountability is kept at a distance, as policy-level rhetoric rather than a responsibility that needs to be acted upon. This points to the need for incremental and practical guidance on how organisations can realise their accountability to disaster-affected persons – such as through complaint mechanisms, or the provision of feedback to disaster-affected persons on key decisions or learning, or their involvement in such stages.

Accountability requires organisations to change the way they work, by creating a different relationship with persons of concern where the aim is to diminish the power disparity between them. Learning from the Peer Review points to the need for attention to both policies/systems and attitudes/behaviours.

### Premature conclusions?

All nine organisations developed an action plan in response to the Peer Review and it is anticipated that it is in these action plans that the conclusions and the real impact

of the peer review will be seen – putting the learning into practice.

Although each of the nine organisations involved embarked on the Peer Review from a different starting position, there are a number of lessons that resonate with all of them:

- acknowledging, making visible and diminishing the power imbalance between organisations and disaster-affected persons
- involving affected persons meaningfully in key decisions and processes that influence their lives

- building relationships with affected persons that are characterised by dignity and respect
- sharing relevant information and communicating transparently (providing feedback to disaster-affected persons as well as consulting them)
- behaving with integrity, keeping to commitments made and engendering trust.

Individual staff make it possible for organisations to realise their responsibility and commitment to accountability towards affected populations. It is perhaps on their

personal commitment and drive that accountability to disaster-affected persons rests most securely.

This article was provided by SCHR ([schr@ifrc.org](mailto:schr@ifrc.org)) with the support of UNHCR (contact José Riera riera@[unhcr.org](mailto:unhcr.org))

1. Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management Standard (2007) <http://tinyurl.com/HAPstandard>
2. An alliance of major international humanitarian organisations aiming to support increased quality, accountability and learning within the humanitarian sector. SCHR uses Peer Review as a tool for facilitating learning within and between its members. UNHCR joined them in this particular Review.
3. The report of the peer review is available at <http://tinyurl.com/accountability-SCHR>
4. Examples are real ones from the report but individual agencies are not named here.