

Accountability Framework

There has been ongoing discussions about the “*accountability deficit*” within the aid sector, but what does this really mean in tangible terms? For Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) the definition of accountability is simply the responsible use of power. Power equating to the ability to make **decisions** based on available resources, skills and knowledge of staff and access to affected communities.

It is the making of decisions that affect others that therefore becomes a central part of accountability both for those making the decisions and to the people on whose behalf those decisions are being made.

An accountability framework is a comprehensive communication tool that captures the essential information for the affected communities (and other specified stakeholders) that lets them know:

- Who the aid agency is (an introduction)
- What it is able to do and how it goes about this (approach methodology)
- What it really believes in and thus what matters most when deciding what to do
- What are the minimum expectations of good practice that the agency commits to keep to in and through all its work

In sharing this information in a public and transparent manner those affected by disaster will be able to make better-informed decisions and choices, have clearer expectations and a level of predictability that positively impacts the aid outcome.

An accountability framework will also benefit staff and inter agency co-ordination by creating a baseline of good practice and approach methodology that will support training and briefing of staff as well as ensuring a form of complementarity to the work of others.

The minimum essentials to be included in an accountability framework are:

1. A set of definitions: every agency has its own jargon and understanding of key terms – it is therefore important to be clear what it means by terms used within the framework. For example – what does a “partner” mean for the agency?
2. Statement of commitments: against which standards, codes, principles and laws does the agency state it keeps to (internal or external)
3. Implementation mechanism: these are the processes and procedures the agency will use to apply the commitments made in the framework. For example, an agency may create standard operating procedures for enabling affected communities to participate in essential decision making stages in the project cycle
4. Baseline analysis: recognising that ongoing application and continual improvement are a key part of accountability – a baseline gives the space for the agency to state where it currently is in its attempt to apply the standards, codes and principles. This transparency helps to set a clear expectation for all.
5. Implementation plan: having analysed the baseline (or current status) of the agency against its commitments, the framework now outlines how the agency will improve by stating its end goal or quality objective in its application of each commitment, and how it will measure progress (i.e. progress indicators)

The accountability framework has created an overall picture of not only who the agency is, what its abilities are and how it works, but it has given a clear commitment

statement of the level of quality it aims to provide, why and how it will deliver this. In so doing the agency has also created the clarity needed for stakeholders to know what the agency is accountable for and thus if they need to raise concerns, seek redress or feedback to the agency they will be able to have a better understanding of what the agency can be held to account for. In other words the accountability framework is central to forming a structure for a complaints handling mechanism.

The concept of having an accountability framework has been developed through a broad consultation within the aid sector, drawing on the experiences of past emergency responses, lessons learnt from these and the inputs of over 96 aid agencies, including disaster survivors, aid practitioners and other quality initiatives. It was clear that a mechanism was needed to help create a structured and transparent approach to improving accountability to disaster survivors. The framework has the added advantage of creating a knowledge management tool that advises staff of their responsibilities in applying the various relevant standards and codes the agency has committed to, and gives clear monitoring and evaluating indicators to quality assure application and accountable impact.

Though initially developed for the humanitarian sector the concept is equally transferable to development as the same accountability needs exist. For agencies working with partners, the framework should include expectations for strengthening the quality of the partnership.

Aid agencies that have drawn up their accountability framework have recognised the significant value of such a management tool. As they adapt the framework and ensure it is made publicly available in the relevant and appropriate language and format that affected communities can access, they have noted an increased level of trust being developed. The accountability deficit is being filled!

Sheryl Haw
Chief Auditor, HAP International

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