ACCOUNTABILITY - HOW ARE WE DOING?

INTRODUCTION

The idea of this study emerged when several members of francophone aid NGOs found that they had the same difficulties putting accountability into practice. They therefore felt that it was important to analyse what has become of this multi-faceted concept, which is both omnipresent theoretically, and difficult to grasp in practice.

This review was carried out by Groupe URD in connection with an experience-sharing group involving several non-governmental organisations: Action against Hunger (ACF-France); Handicap International / Humanity & Inclusion (HI); Solidarités International (SI) and Terre des hommes - Lausanne (TdH-L). It was funded by the French Development Agency, the Monaco Department of International Cooperation and Fondation de France as part of the ‘Learning and Innovating to Improve Crisis Response’ project.
THEORY AND APPROACHES

DEFINITIONS AND COMPONENTS

The study analyses the definitions of accountability used by certain aid organisations and identifies the similarities and differences between these. It shows that the concept of accountability remains unclear in the majority of definitions. Though based on the common foundation of the responsible use of power, they translate this in a variety of ways: donor compliance, ‘safeguarding’ staff and aid recipients or the participation of affected people. A number of different terms are used, such as compliance, accountability to affected people, communication with communities, community engagement, participation and safeguarding. Several related themes emerge, such as protection, and particularly Protection against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), the ‘Do No Harm’ principle, inclusion and non-discrimination, though there is no consensus about how exactly they are related to accountability.

REFERENCE FRAMEWORK AND ACTORS

There are many parallel and paradoxical reference frameworks that are specific to the aid sector (particularly humanitarian aid). Indeed, there has been increasing demand in recent years for joint or integrated accountability mechanisms, for reinforced safeguarding measures and greater operationalisation of accountability in the field.

KEY MESSAGE №1

‘Accountability’ – a term that lacks clarity: the need for increased appropriation by organisations

Despite the existence of standard frameworks, there is a tendency within the sector, including among the participating NGOs, to promote unclear terms without providing a definition or an operational vision. Given the imbalance between donors and affected people in terms of influence and power, using such a broad term runs the risk that it will be interpreted to the advantage of donors alone.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND PRACTICES

THE INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH TO ACCOUNTABILITY

Among the participating NGOs, accountability has become institutionalised without becoming a strategic priority in itself. Setting up complaints mechanisms is generally a priority for organisations, particularly because it is often required by donors and it is a concrete and visible action. The tendency is more to provide numerous tools and methods to implement accountability rather than to accompany a change in culture. This strategy is viewed favourably when it clarifies the rules and the products expected by the teams, but it creates frustration when it appears to increase bureaucracy. The study also shows the low number of lesson learning exercises which would help to clarify the relevance and durability of the accountability systems in place.

KEY MESSAGE №2

Commitment by management: greater effort needed to marry accountability to affected people and organisations’ management model

In organisations that have grown and developed a lot in recent decades, it is not easy to reconcile a results-based management model and accountability to affected people. The main way that progress is made in terms of accountability is to comply with donor rules or with internal procedures.

REVIEW OF FIELD PRACTICES: RELEVANCE AND GOOD PRACTICES
Among the country offices that took part in the study, the majority have an accountability framework, but there is no consensus about what these frameworks should cover. Almost all the offices studied have created specific positions dedicated to accountability or Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL), particularly senior staff in charge of creating systems. According to the MEAL staff we spoke to, the expectations in terms of accountability vary a great deal: from contractual quantitative monitoring targets to efforts to maintain motivation among programme staff. Roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined: for some, accountability should be promoted at the highest levels of the organisation, while for others, it should be everyone’s responsibility.

Participatory approaches vary from one office to another. Among the most significant are: group or individual interviews carried out during initial assessments, the use of socio-anthropological studies to understand societies, the collective definition of beneficiary selection criteria, capacity building workshops with beneficiaries and advocacy led by beneficiaries. However, the majority of respondents do not feel that participatory approaches are entirely satisfying as an aspect of accountability. The understanding and operationalisation of accountability are sometimes limited to a utilitarian approach to participation.

Two thirds of the offices interviewed have a complaints and feedback mechanism. The communication channels that are put in place most often are reasonably formal: suggestion boxes and hotlines. Our analysis and similar studies suggest that it is necessary to rethink the use and combination of communication channels, and notably to give priority to face-to-face exchanges when this is possible.

**KEY MESSAGE N°3**

**Accountability frameworks: good practices exist but relevant systems need to be created**

The sector has enough standards and norms but NGOs have difficulty defining an accountability framework and the form that this should take. In addition, when frameworks exist, evaluating their relevance and implementation is not easy. As part of a MEAL approach, accountability can bring certain difficulties, as it can obscure other important areas of aid (safeguarding and participation) and there is a tendency to adopt a ‘kit’ approach.

**KEY MESSAGE N°4**

**Understanding better in order to implicate more**

The reasons for the slow progress on the ‘participation revolution’ are not only to be found within organisations. Contexts are complex and require a precise analysis of power relations. Organisations would gain from focusing more on understanding cultures and contexts via socio-anthropological analysis, and less on establishing ready-made tools.

**UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITY OF BARRIERS**

The main barrier to the operationalisation of accountability could be in its definition. It does not have a clear end and therefore has no precise meaning, each of the individuals interviewed seeming to have a different understanding – which we could qualify as partial – of what it means to achieve accountability, whether in terms of organisation or in terms of change (see full figure on p.26 of the report). Different ideas that emerged were:

- MEAL, technical and programme staff collaborate more;
- Complaints and feedback mechanisms are clear and function properly;
- Staff have indicators to measure accountability established by the affected people;
- A basic level of active participation is in place;
- Programmes are decided by the local people, etc.

What is more, barriers to accountability are to be found at different levels (individuals, teams, contexts, affected people, projects, donors and organisations), such as the adoption of a paternalistic approach (the question of attitude and posture), lack of mutual trust, an increasingly technical approach, the complexity of needs and
insufficient understanding of the context. The interviewees described blockages that are rooted in the history and culture of the humanitarian and development sector, that require a global approach and that the MEAL approach on its own cannot overcome.

**KEY MESSAGE N°5**

**Move on from the debate between ‘common sense’ and a technical approach: propose realistic alternatives, particularly in relation to interpersonal maturity.**

Staff are more concerned about the excessive demands of financial and administrative reporting, and measuring outputs and outcomes, than about new ways of interacting with affected people. The latter should be further explored and tested, either internally, or with the help of specialised organisations. Techniques from participatory management and participatory democracy should also be explored.

**CONCLUSION**

**What do we need in order to improve accountability to affected people?**

With the aim of reinforcing the transparency of aid and combating corruption, the sector has established rules – often initiated by donors – which have been adopted internally by organisations. Given the competing priorities between, on the one hand, compliance with these rules, and on the other, the participation of affected people, it is difficult for operators to satisfy all the demands that are made of them. Increasingly technical, administrative and financial procedures and an increasingly technical logical framework have taken precedence over building relations of trust. The vague use of the term accountability maintains a closed situation where there are more and more rules and tools, which do not always make sense, while little time and few resources are allocated to interaction.

**KEY MESSAGE N°6**

**Donors should continue to promote bold initiatives to remove a certain number of systemic barriers**

As they are at the end of the chain, the participating NGOs cannot remove the obstacles to more accountable and participatory aid: providing greater budgetary flexibility, simplified logical frameworks (adaptable results and activities, no more than five contractual quantitative indicators, a change-oriented approach and qualitative methods encouraged) and regular interaction with the project team to understand the constraints involved and the progress being made. This could help to build relations of trust (internally and externally).