**Accountability in humanitarian action: changes and challenges**

**28 November 2011 13:30-15:00**

**Gwyn Lewis** and **Brian Lander**, co-chairs of the Inter-Agency Sub Group on Accountability to Affected Population, speaking via videolink from Rome, opened the discussion by describing **the thinking and progress to date of the IASC on accountability to affected populations**. A workshop in July 2011 provided a forum to consult with organisations and review the potential elements for a common operational framework building on other mechanisms like the Sphere standards and Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP). Brian emphasised that the sub group aimed to create a practical framework and tool to be used by agencies at various program phases of their operations. Gwyn identified some of the **key challenges yet to be resolved**, grouped around three issues:
1. How to develop mechanisms which are appropriate for a given environment and effective as mechanisms for specific complaints, yet also reflect the interconnected nature of the humanitarian sector;
2. How to communicate effectively with communities, including by capitalising on new technologies;
3. How to implement and fund programmes that are flexible and can adapt to feedback or changing requirements.

She noted that there is recognition by donors, especially DFID and ECHO, that accountability needs to be more systematically built into programmes, but a lack of understanding about what that entails in practice.

**Paul Knox-Clarke**, Head of Research and Communications at ALNAP and co-editor of this issue of *Humanitarian Exchange*, followed with **a broad overview of accountability issues**. Suggesting that there had been progress on accountability practices since the 2003 issue of *Humanitarian Exchange* on accountability, he drew attention to the increase in evaluations for accountability purposes and efforts to increase accountability to affected populations (known as 'forward accountability'). Nonetheless, he emphasised that there is a general assumption that these measures have improved accountability in humanitarian action **there is little hard evidence to support this**.Reasons Paul cited for the strengthened focus on accountability were:
- Pressure upon donors, in the context of the financial crisis, to show they are spending public money wisely;
- Technology making humanitarians more accountable by making their actions more visible;
- Desire by humanitarian actors themselves to extend the accountability achievements of their predecessors.

Paul returned to a point raised by Gwyn and Brian's presentation, namely the idea that **new accountability mechanisms seek to take into account the fact that humanitarian action is the remit of a web of interconnected stakeholders**. He called for recognition that because humanitarian work is collaborative, agencies must work together around accountability issues.

The final part of Paul's presentation examined four of the **tensions that affect ideas about and policies for accountability**:
1. The tension between using money to do work and demonstrating that the money has been used well. As a factor in this, Paul drew attention to demands on the time of humanitarian field workers and the added burden that accountability reporting may represent.
2. The tension within organisations between the way things are done in the field and the way things are organised in the central office. This tension raises questions about the degree to which lessons learnt from feedback mechanisms in the field are translated into organisational practice, especially regarding forward or beneficiary-driven accountability.

3. Tensions created by the 'web' of accountability, which pulls in many different directions. Two sets of relationships are of particular interest. The first is the tension between accountability to affected populations and accountability to donors. There may be conflicts between responsibilities to fulfil the goals established in the log frame and recommendations or opportunities that emerge from the feedback of beneficiaries. The second relationship of interest is the triangular one between beneficiaries, their governments, and international actors. The potential for complaints mechanisms to gather information regarding criminal acts creates a dilemma for humanitarian organisations.
4. The tension between different motivations for accountability efforts. One of the reasons for undertaking accountability surveys is to improve the efficiency of humanitarian work (though more evidence of the link between accountability and improvements would be useful). But another reason is simply that it is seen as the right thing to do. This raises the potential for conflict between motivations when choosing the appropriate course of action. For example, encouraging empowerment mechanisms for marginalised groups may be the right thing to do, but making use of existing power structures may be the more effective thing.

However, Paul closed on a note of optimism by affirming the enthusiasm and innovation of the humanitarian sector and the possibility that these tensions will be resolved in the years to come.

After Paul's overview, **David Bainbridge**, International Director of Tearfund UK, provided a more detailed discussion of **Tearfund UK's experience with feedback complaints mechanisms**. His presentation was based on several years of Tearfund's accountability mechanisms and represented a synthesis of findings in programs run directly by Tearfund in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, and Afghanistan. David discussed the range of feedback received, which included complaints about the conduct of staff; complaints about leadership within the beneficiary community; requests for training or equipment related with the programme; requests for things outside the scope of Tearfund's activities; and positive feedback about programs.

Based on these experiences, David identified several challenges falling into two categories. Those identified as **community challenges** included:
- How to manage the expectations raised by the opportunity to provide input and the potential sense of disappointment in cases where expectations could not be met;
- How to manage feedback addressing issues beyond the organisation's control;
- How the insecurity of situations impacted upon staff's ability to follow up complaints;
- How a fear of losing assistance impacted upon the willingness of beneficiaries to give negative feedback (illustrated by the fact that Tearfund received no complaints at all in Afghanistan);
- How to collect feedback and respect confidentiality in communities with an oral tradition;
- How to manage feedback about community leadership, given that the presence of leaders may inhibit complaints and their conduct and that traditional dispute resolution mechanisms often work through the same leaders who may be the subject of criticism.

Issues identified as **staff challenges**, which were particularly affected by attitudes and values, included:
- A reluctance to seek out feedback based on a tendency to interpret complaints as a criticism of staff performance;
- A tendency to focus on hardware elements in feedback mechanisms (complaints boxes, sign boards) without reflecting fully on the aim of such accountability mechanisms;

- A lack of consultation with communities about their preferred way to give feedback, and a tendency to automatically apply techniques successful in one location to other situations where they may not be useful;
- A lack of support from senior leadership, crucial to success of accountability mechanisms;
- Uncertainty about the best organisational model to adopt, whether accountability should be among each staff member's responsibilities or be assigned a dedicated position;
- Challenges related to the large geographical areas often covered by programs and the difficulty of seeking feedback widely in these areas.

David concluded by providing a series of **recommendations and areas requiring attention** in order to improve accountability practices. These reflected a mix of the community and staff challenges identified and included:
- Giving more attention to accountability issues during staff induction;
- Making greater efforts to highlight accountability as part of line management priorities;
- Ensuring that appropriate structures and capacity are used to address accountability practice; in this context David mentioned the promising trials in north Kenya in which community reference groups rather that Tearfund itself have been collecting feedback;
- Establishing feedback and complaints systems for staff that can mirror beneficiary feedback systems;
- Ensuring feedback is responded to in a timely fashion, which sustains and reinforces accountability practices and improves relationships between organisations and beneficiaries;
- Clarifying the scope and nature of feedback sought, to build relationships of trust and encourage greater honesty in beneficiary responses.

In making the latter point, David discussed the difficulties of managing complaints in contexts where **people may not have any other outlet in which to voice their grievances**. Tearfund staff have emphasised people are unlikely to stop giving voice to broader concerns, even those beyond the scope of an organisation, if responding to this organisation is the only opportunity they have to do so. Remaining sympathetic to this situation while also gaining more relevant feedback is one of the challenges of accountability.

At this juncture **Jennie Richmond**, Head of Humanitarian and Disaster Risk Policy Group, DFID, offered her discussion of the presentations. She emphasised the **potential conflict** between the need to act quickly in situations of humanitarian emergency and efforts to adopt more consultative approaches to planning. She highlighted the theme of **balancing donor accountability and beneficiary accountability**, with the different priorities each approach to accountability may entail. She also alluded to the democratisation of the media as a transforming force within humanitarian contexts and a factor for greater scrutiny.

A key subject of Jennie's discussion was **recent leadership and innovation on accountability issues**. She recognised the significance of the IASC sub group as a practical project and as an indicator of changing attitudes. The **UK government and DFID have also made efforts to improve accountability**. Lord Ashdown's Humanitarian Emergency Response Review (June 2011) included accountability as one of its seven key themes, which has renewed emphasis on accountability within DFID and has already had an impact on practice. The current government's general commitment to increased transparency as a dimension of accountability has also influenced DFID's humanitarian practice. For example, every project funded now has documentation available online. DFID is keen to learn from their partner's experience of accountability practices and is increasing staff resources to help improve and promote discussion of accountability issues.

Points raised in the question session and addressed by various speakers included:

- **Preparedness and flexibility** – to questions on the themes of forward planning and in-mission reactiveness, speakers agreed that more information on accountability preparedness would be useful. They also agreed on the importance flexibility and the willingness to change project log frames when information coming from the field suggests a new or unexpected dynamic is operating.
- **The morality of accountability** – to the question of whether accountability should be undertaken for its own sake or because it may improve value for money, Brian acknowledged the potentially heavy financial burden of accountability systems but insisted that the investment was justified by improvements to practice. Gwyn also insisted that engagement with affected communities was the lynchpin of the idea of humanitarian action and essential to the effective performance of the humanitarian system as a whole. Jenny acknowledged the subjectivity of this issue and described DFID's approach as combining a desire to improve performance as well as the moral desirability of dialogue with the people you are trying to help. She suggested that both of these aspects justified attention to accountability, regardless of whether the emphasis was on efficiency or morality.
- **Attitudes to established power structures** – following a question on whether it is possible or even desirable to side-step community power structures when seeking feedback, David summarised the dilemma as being how seriously we take our responsibility to target the most vulnerable and marginalised groups within a community. He emphasised the differences in contexts, acknowledging that in some cases power structures are immovable but in others humanitarian agencies may contribute to renewals of power dynamics. As an example, he cited the case of a village chief in Sierra Leone who was removed by his own community for inadequate leadership. A key factor in this issue is the length of time an organisation spends on the ground: longer missions offer greater possibilities for integrating feedback into community relationships.
- **Available frameworks and possible innovations** – From the floor, **John Mitchell**, Director of ALNAP and co-editor of this issue of *Humanitarian Exchange*, drew attention to ALNAP's Balance Score Card as an accountability framework for the humanitarian system. Brian pointed out the possibility that different mechanisms might be required for feedback, which can take many forms and may be positive, and complaints, which often require confidentiality and usually need to be handled individually. He said that the idea of a humanitarian ombudsman had surfaced in discussions about accountability mechanisms and may be of use. Gwyn emphasised that acknowledging the multiplicity of actors is essential to creating a functioning framework for accountability.