Promoting Voice and Choice

EXPLORING INNOVATIONS IN AUSTRALIAN NGO
ACCOUNTABILITY FOR DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS

ACFID

Acknowledgements

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Preface

ACFID members define their development effectiveness as 'prompting sustainable change which addresses the causes as well as the symptoms of poverty and marginalisation – i.e. reduces poverty and builds capacity within communities, civil society and government to address their own development priorities'.

ACFID NGO Effectiveness Framework 2004

Australian international development and humanitarian NGOs have long affirmed their strong commitment to continual learning and improvement, evident through the establishment of the ACFID Code of Conduct, diverse training programs, publications, conferences and more recently with the NGO Effectiveness Framework.

This research paper represents the latest chapter in a body of work, led by ACFID's Development Practice Committee, (DPC) focused on Australian NGO program quality and effectiveness. Over the past 10 years DPC has engaged the sector in a series of consultations and discrete research phases to define our effectiveness and identify the principles, program strategies, standards of engagement and organisational management practices which underpin it.

Research completed in early 2009 examined how far ACFID member agencies have progressed in assessing and improving their development effectiveness and what contribution, if any, the NGO Effectiveness Framework has made to their practice.[2] Significant strengths and innovation were identified, especially in program management processes and systems such as in monitoring and evaluation, high quality assessments and evaluation research. Areas of inconsistent practice were also found, particularly around good gender analysis, and an increasing compliance focus which undermined the realisation of mutual accountability between partners, as well as learning, risk taking and innovation more broadly.

This next phase of research was prompted by the report's conclusion that: 'the challenges identified in the Australian NGO case studies are consistent with many of the issues identified more broadly in current literature for both NGOs and donors ... This suggests that further investigation exploring ways these challenges can be addressed in practice would be a useful process for both Australian NGOs and AusAID, as well as a valuable contribution to the broader aid community.'

The objective of the current research was to capture and share cutting edge practice in demonstrating Australian NGO effectiveness through innovative forms of accountability and social learning, in which the views of those who are ultimately meant to benefit were central. ACFID member agencies participated through submitting examples of their attempts to improve downward accountability.

The findings presented in this report will contribute to ACFID member agencies' journey of continual improvement of our collective effectiveness. It will do this through engaging with senior NGO managers and AusAID in the analysis of the findings, as well as contributing to the international work on CSO Development Effectiveness. The next research phase will be in partnership with an academic institution to undertake a more rigorous examination of a sample of the case studies and the organisational enablers and obstacles to improving our effectiveness.

Conny Lenneberg and Robert Yallop
December 2009

Promoting Voice and Choice

EXPLORING INNOVATIONS IN AUSTRALIAN NGO ACCOUNTABILITY FOR DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS BY CHRIS ROCHE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

John Keane in his recent grand history of 'The Life and Death of Democracy' suggests that we are now in an era of 'monitory' democracy. A post Westminster form of democracy in which 'power monitoring and power-controlling devices have begun to extend sideways and downwards through the whole political order'. He argues that this process also offers the opportunity, through experiments within civil society, of both deepening and globalising democracy.

Other observers suggest that accountability is fast becoming a dominant lens for thinking about progressive change in global politics. Addressing the accountability deficits created and magnified by contemporary globalisation is therefore seen as a primary requirement for a more just and democratic world.

At the same there is a growing critique of international aid which is gaining ground. At the heart of this critique is the contention that the aid system is not accountable to those it seeks to benefit, and that it distorts the accountability of governments to donors and away from their own citizens. This mirrors a critique of NGOs which has a long history.

If civil society is to counter this critique and fulfil its promise as a vanguard of new forms of democracy, how might Australian NGOs contribute? This review explores some case studies of what Australian NGOs are currently doing in this area and the literature on this topic, as a first step in promoting a debate on the question.

For ACFID and Australian NGOs, this research represents the latest of three phases exploring development effectiveness. The first phase of research (2002–03) led to the creation of the NGO Effectiveness Framework in 2004. A second phase considered the relationship between effectiveness and organisational dynamics (2005) and explored what steps agencies had been undertaking to promote effectiveness (2008). The 2008 research showed consistent evidence of progress and investment in effectiveness whilst also acknowledging a leaning towards compliance in these systems and tools. As a result it was agreed to narrow the focus of this most recent phase to consider innovations in accountability, in particular accountability to the individuals and communities the aid sector seeks to benefit. This research is seen as a scoping exercise that looks to describe what Australian NGOs are doing, rather than an in-depth evaluation of those initiatives.

Emerging Challenges

The case studies suggest that Australian NGOs are experimenting with new, and not so new, forms of 'bottom-up' accountability. Their combined experience helps paint a picture of the possible elements that might need to be combined to produce the kind of step change that is probably required for them to play a more strategic role.

But the examples mostly cover 'Single Loop' Accountability. The creativity and innovation that is occurring appears to be largely within the realm of improving existing practice and ways of working, rather than inventing very different ways of doing things, or radically changing how organisations function.

Most of the case studies are focused on improving participation or on improving learning, feedback and review processes. The two other dimensions of accountability– transparency and complaints and response – figure less, particularly in longer-term development or advocacy work. Few Australian NGOs seem to have clear prominent public policies regarding transparency or complaints procedures on their websites.

Some agencies seem to have made explicit attempts to include gender and power analysis in program design and evaluation, and include women's voices in these processes. In other agencies the approach to gender appears to be either implicit, or lacking. Gender equality does not seem to be 'mission critical' to accountability debates within, or amongst, most Australian NGOs.

It is important to think about what the sector might collectively do to advance a more radical accountability agenda. It is worth considering the establishment of better facilities for sharing case studies and innovations. The development of such a facility in Australia might then link to similar groupings elsewhere in the world working on these issues.

To develop more of an evidence base for these approaches, as well as the skills and capacities required, demands more effective collaboration with organisations with specialist research and training skills. Options here might include: undertaking more long-term and on-going research linked to ANGO accountability initiatives; undertaking pilots as policy experiments trialling specific approaches to 'bottom-up' accountability; developing policy related findings based on NGO experience; developing more targeted training, learning and research opportunities for ANGO and partner staff.

Australian NGOs need to recognise the highly strategic nature of the 'New Accountability' agenda. If this opportunity is to be seized this will require strong leadership in the sector and a more profound debate and exchange about how best to move forward.

1 Introduction

1.1. THE CURRENT ORTHODOXY AND CRITIQUES OF AID

There is a growing and renewed critique[3] of international aid which is gaining ground. At the heart of this critique is the contention that the aid system is not accountable to those it seeks to benefit, and that it distorts the accountability of governments to donors and away from their own citizens. This mirrors a critique of NGOs which has a long history[4], as well as some elements of the latest ACFID development effectiveness research.

In the context of the global financial crisis, climate change and the recent high profile critiques of aid, the task of building and sustaining domestic constituencies for international cooperation, and not just aid, is arguably critical.

There is also a growing, or perhaps renewed, recognition that the quality of aid and international co-operation is, to a large degree, shaped by domestic political processes in both 'donor' and 'recipient' countries.[5] The Evaluation of the Implementation of the Paris Declaration, for example, notes *'if the work of implementing Paris remains just a 'dialogue among technocrats' and is not built on growing political trust, the uneven pace of change and 'aid effectiveness fatigue' may begin to undermine and sap the effort'*.[6]

This debate has seen a growing link being made between questions of development and aid effectiveness, and accountability. In particular what some have termed 'social accountability' i.e. strengthening the voice and capacity of citizens to participate in exacting greater accountability and responsiveness from public official and service providers, is seen as key.

It is argued that social accountability helps to ensure that

> power-holders are more responsive to needs and demands of people, and this enables more effective public service delivery and policy design,

> rights-holders are empowered by the expansion of freedom, agency and choice, which are key elements of effective development[7], and in turn contribute to greater democratization,

> those that governments and aid agencies seek to benefit have a greater voice in determining the criteria for what makes for effective development,

> leakages, corruption and misallocation of resources is reduced.

This suggests that if we are to improve development effectiveness then, amongst other things, changing accountability mechanisms, engaging in domestic political change and constituency-building all need to be part of that strategy. This strategy needs to address simultaneously the political obstacles in 'donor' countries and organisations which make it less than effective, as well as locate aid within a broader paradigm of international co-operation. At the same time, it needs to strengthen the ability of communities in 'recipient' countries to hold their governments, aid agencies and private sector actors to account. This of course means recognising, and attempting to address, at least in some way, the power relations inherent between different actors.

This research focuses on one key element of this agenda namely how those that the aid sector seeks to benefit might hold aid agencies in general, and Australian NGOs in particular, to account.

3. See for example Moyo, D. (2008) 'Dead Aid', and Easterly, W. (2006) 'The White Man's Burden'.

4. Sogge, D. (1996) Compassion and Calculation; Terry, F. (2003), *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*; Wallace, T. and Chapman, J. (2006), *An investigation into the reality behind NGO rhetoric of downward accountability*, INTRAC, Oxford; Maren, M. (1997), *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity*; Hulme, D. et al. (1997), *NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?*, Palgrave Macmillan, London; Edwards, M. et al. (1995) *Beyond the Magic Bullet*.

5. See Lancaster, C. (2007) 'Foreign Aid: Diplomacy, Development and Domestic Politics'.

6. Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development Assistance Committee, (OECD-DAC), Evaluation of the Implementation of the Paris Declaration, Synthesis Report, July 2008, p. 33.

7. This is congruent with Amartya Sen's notion of Development as Freedom.

strengthening the voice and capacity of citizens

2 A Brief History of ACFID's Development Effectiveness Research

8. See: http://www.acfid.asn.au/what-we-do/docs_what-we-do/docs_ngo-development-effectiveness/ngo-effectiveness-framework_jun04.pdf (last accessed on 16 December 2009).

9. http://www.acfid.asn.au/code-of-conduct/code-of-conduct (last accessed on 16 December 2009).

10. Kelly, L. and Chapman, R. (2003) A Process to Define and Enhance NGO Effectiveness, OECD DAC Working Party on Evaluation Conference 'Partners in Development Evaluation', Paris, March 2003.

11. Accessible via: http://www.acfid.asn.au/what-we-do/ngo-effectiveness (last accessed on 16 December 2009).

2.1. PHASE 1: DEVELOPING THE EFFECTIVENESS FRAMEWORK

In 2002 and 2003, ACFID facilitated two conferences at which its member agencies shared case-study material from their programs that they considered illustrated aspects of best practice in development. The conferences and further research led to the development of an NGO Effectiveness Framework[8] comprising: the standards of engagement applied to program work; program strategies and policies, and shared principles (and detailed in the ACFID Code of Conduct[9]).

The framework was influential in many Australian NGOs and used for the development of program management systems and quality processes. It has been used as a basis for training and utilised for evaluations of NGO work (for example in AusAID cluster evaluations). It represents the only shared exploration of quality and effectiveness common to all Australian NGOs. Over forty-five ACFID member organisations participated in the original ACFID research, representing over 70 per cent of agencies accredited to ACFID at the time.[10]

2.2. PHASE 2: THE CONCERN ABOUT ORGANISATIONAL DYNAMICS

Since the research and development of the framework, many Australian NGOs have assigned staff and resources to further the development of effectiveness and quality in program work. However, the development of the effectiveness framework revealed a number of critical success factors that lay behind effective work.

Many of these factors relate to areas of organisational performance, not project performance or management. Therefore it was recognized that any process of examining effectiveness also needs to look at key areas of organisational performance. As a result of this concern, ACFID's Development Practice Committee (DPC) developed a pilot organisational assessment tool[11] which they hoped members would use for self-assessing performance, but also to encourage a more collective, sector-wide discussion.

For a variety of reasons – including the major disruption in the sector caused by the response to the Asian Tsunami – this process of action-research failed to really take off. It was therefore decided in 2008 that, in order to reinvigorate the debate in the sector, a survey of the ACFID membership should be undertaken in order to assess what the membership had been doing on questions of effectiveness, and how this might relate to ACFID's effectiveness framework (see Appendix 2 for the executive summary).

many Australian NGOs have assigned **staff** and **resources** to further the **development** of **effectiveness** and quality in program work

The findings of this research suggested that:

> There has been a strong emphasis on developing program management processes, systems and associated policies and procedures.

> There has been an increased investment in monitoring, evaluation and research staff resources and processes.

> It is challenging to apply the underlying principles of, for example, partnership, risk taking and innovation, or mutual accountability, in practice within systems that lean towards emphasising compliance rather than learning.

> Achieving consistent good practice in approaches to gender and power analysis remains a challenge. There is weak recognition of the impact that NGO leadership and organisational culture have on effectiveness in general, and on issues of gender inequality and power relationships in particular.

> It is important to explore further how Australian NGOs and AusAID can balance the management tension between *being* effective and *demonstrating effectiveness*.

2.3. PHASE 3: THE SEARCH FOR ACCOUNTABILITY INNOVATIONS

The survey thus revealed a mixed picture as to the degree to which ANGOs as a group have embedded agreed principles into their day to day practice, and the degree to which they are able to share and communicate the 'notable exceptions' to this. This is not least because of the well-documented challenges facing NGOs in meeting the demands of multiple stakeholders.

In light of this, and given some of the major concerns within the aid sector in general described above, ACFID agreed that the next phase of its development effectiveness research should focus more on capturing and sharing innovative practice. In particular, focusing on demonstrating effectiveness through different forms of accountability and social learning, in which the views of those who are ultimately meant to benefit are central (see Appendix 1 for the concept note that guided this research). This is seen very much as a scoping exercise that looks to describe what Australian NGOs are doing, rather than an in-depth evaluation of those initiatives.

capturing and **sharing innovative** practice

Given the challenge identified in the 2008 survey, in Australian NGOs applying principles in practice, it was decided that this phase would initially concentrate on firstly identifying practical examples and case studies of how civil society is starting to reframe and redefine accountability and effectiveness, and secondly exploring the organisational implications and practical steps needed to adopt such ways of working. It was felt this approach would provide more concrete guidance to Australian NGOs than more theoretical analysis.

3 Methodology and Conceptual Framework

3.1. METHODOLOGY

The research for this report was done in three weeks, spread over a twelve-week period. The process involved:

> reviewing submissions made by ACFID members in the previous phase of its Development Effectiveness Research and discussions with Rhonda Chapman, the researcher for that phase;

> solicitation of case studies and material from ACFID members of relevance to the focus of this research phase;

> identification and interviews with key informants in Australian NGOs, based on recommendations from ACFID, the research sub-committee of DPC and the relevance of submissions made in the previous phase of research;

> writing up case studies by the researcher, based on interviews and material submitted by ACFID members. These write ups were subsequently reviewed and validated by those supplying the information;

> undertaking a literature review by Daniel Bray, a post doctoral researcher in Melbourne University's Department of Politics (see Appendix 4);

> drafting this report using the case studies, the literature review and the results of previous phases of ACFID's research on Development Effectiveness.

There are clearly a number of limitations to this method. Firstly, although informants were asked to submit reviews or evaluations to provide a stronger 'evidence base' to back up assertions made in interviews, these were not available for all the case studies.

Secondly, the method relied to a large extent on contacting an initial list of informants – almost exclusively in ANGO head offices – and then 'snowballing' to whoever the key informant might consider to be a better-placed resource for the interviews. Clearly this technique is highly dependent on the knowledge, contacts and biases of the first informant.

Thirdly, there neither has been the time nor the resources to bring together key stakeholders to validate findings. The results and findings therefore need to be considered as tentative until this is done, and viewed as ideas and thoughts designed to generate further discussion and analysis, rather than be considered as definitive conclusions.

Finally, and perhaps most ironically, the voices of the communities and partners of Australian NGOs are largely absent from this review and from most of the material submitted. This is clearly a gap that needs to be filled if this phase of the research is to fulfil its promise.

Having said this, it was also clear that this method suited busy people who may not have had access to written reports on the specific topic under investigation in this research which could be simply submitted to the researcher. The interview process also enabled an exchange with the researcher which sometimes yielded a degree of tacit knowledge from informants. A number of informants expressed interest in maintaining a continuing involvement in this phase of the research.

3.2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to make sense of the case studies we adopted a very simple conceptual framework based on two main axes, or dimensions.

The first axis builds on the well known notion of 'learning loops'[12], which was recently used in the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) review of innovation by NGOs in the humanitarian arena.[13] In effect, we are suggesting that there are similar accountability loops.

Single-loop accountability describes those areas of feedback from partners or communities that are essentially about the projects or activities that an NGO might be engaged in. This is largely about whether planned activities are being achieved and 'course correction' to get back on track.

Double-loop accountability would describe feedback from, and engagement with, partners and communities on broader policies, practices or strategies. This might include community assessments of the degree to which an NGO is achieving the standards and norms it has developed, or is a signatory to, or it might include engaging in the determination and assessment of their advocacy or public policies, or long-term organisational planning and strategy.

Finally, triple-loop accountability refers to the assessment of the degree to which NGOs adhere to their core values and mission. This is the most fundamental level of accountability and goes to key ideas and beliefs about the world and the NGOs' place within it, as well as assumptions about how positive change occurs. This is the most challenging area of accountability as it is linked to the identity of an organisation.

Whilst the figure below suggests that there may be different levels, or venues, for looking at accountability issues it is recognised that this will vary with the size and complexity of the organisation. In addition, it is the case that the difference between these levels may not be as clear-cut as this diagram suggests. For example a discussion on the activities of an agency with communities and partners might well include feedback on overall strategies, assumptions about how change happens, or organisational values.

The second axis refers to different elements of accountability[14], notably:

> **Transparency:** the provision of accessible and timely information to primary stakeholders and the opening up of organisational procedures, structures and processes to their assessment.

> **Participation:** the process through which an organisation enables primary stakeholders to play an active role in the decision-making processes and activities that affect them.

> **Evaluation:** the ongoing monitoring of progress and provision of feedback to enable learning and adjustments that ultimately improve results.

> **Complaints and Response:** enabling primary stakeholders to seek and receive response for grievances and alleged harm. It enables stakeholders to hold an organisation to account for either its decisions or actions by querying these and requesting an investigation.

We use these two axes – one which describes the depth of accountability process and the other different elements of accountability – to describe where different case studies might be located within this scheme and what areas are less well covered. In each part of the case study section a brief assessment of how the case studies related to this framework is made.

12. Argyris, C. and Schön, D. (1978) Organisational learning: A theory of action perspective, Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley.

13. Ramalingam, B., Scriven, K. and Foley, C. (2009) 'Innovations in international humanitarian action', ALNAP's 8th Review of Humanitarian Action (chapter 3).

14. These dimensions are based on the One World Trust Accountability Framework, accessible via: http://www.oneworldtrust.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=70&Itemid=72 (lastly accessed on 16 December 2009).

Three different levels of accountability
(After ALNAP 2009)

ORGANISATIONAL → POLICY & PRACTICE → ACTIONS → PARTNERS & COMMUNITIES

Single Loop Accountability
For Actions, Activities

Double Loop Accountability
For Practices, Policies, Strategies, Norms

Triple Loop Accountability
For Organisational Values, Assumptions & Identity

4 Findings and Case Studies

15. See Davidson (2009), 'Taking the Initiative: Exploring Quality and Accountability in the Humanitarian Sector – An Introduction to Eight Initiatives' for an overview of these and other quality and accountability initiatives for humanitarian work.

16. See http://www. hapinternational.org/projects/ field/case-studies.aspx for a useful list of case studies and tools.

17. See 'Quality and accountability in the Nargis response', Report on the deployment of the HAP Field Representative to Myanmar, 7–25 July 2008.

18. Hedlund, K. and Myint Su, D. (2008) Support to local initiatives in the Nargis response: a fringe versus mainstream approach, Humanitarian Exchange Magazine Issue 41.

4.1. ACCOUNTABILITY AND HUMANITARIAN WORK

Key Points

> Establishing a venue for local and international agencies to debate and share issues related to accountability and performance was important in the Cyclone Nargis response.

> If accountability to local communities is to be effective it requires advocacy, networking and coordination if comprehensive solutions to issues raised are to be realised.

> Despite a great effort to improve accountability and the quality of humanitarian response the pressure on International NGOs still means that local actors can get bypassed.

There has been a wide range of attempts amongst International NGOs involved in humanitarian work to improve standards (through the SPHERE project), learning and evaluation (through the ALNAP) and accountability to 'beneficiaries' (through the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership – HAP International).[15]

HAP International is the humanitarian sector's first international self-regulatory body. The HAP Standard in Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management, is designed to 'provide assurance to disaster survivors, staff, volunteers, host authorities and donors that the agency will deliver "the best" humanitarian service possible in each situation.'

HAP offers its members compliance verification with the standard and associated capacity building services.[16] A HAP Certification scheme has been developed and an accreditation model established using HAP registered auditors. HAP also offers real time accountability assessments during humanitarian emergencies.

The Burnet case study offers some important insight into how International NGOs – many of whom are HAP members – interacted in different ways with local organisations during the response to Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar. An important lesson that emerged from the experience, and which was recorded by HAP in their reports[17] was that in a highly uncertain context like Myanmar, 'accountability and quality assurance need to be based on a flexible and easily adaptable

framework'. Agencies therefore needed to avoid focusing on specific mechanisms and instead look to integrate key principles into existing ways of working. For example setting up information boards is much less effective than working with communities to ensure that information is shared in languages, formats and media that are accessible and comprehensible. Similarly establishing suggestion boxes is less useful than asking communities about appropriate ways to handle concerns and address more serious allegations.

The establishment of the Local Resource Centre, which was supported by HAP, proved to be important in a context where a number of the International NGOs involved did not have a presence in the country prior to the cyclone. This was not least the case given that a number of observers – one of whom is the local program manager for the Local Resource Centre – reported that:

'[t]he majority of [International] NGOs chose direct implementation, waiting for permission to operate and then scaling up rapidly. There were many reasons for this, not least an unclear understanding of what local capacity did exist, and a clear humanitarian imperative to intervene. Under intense pressure from headquarters, amid 'sensationalist' descriptions of humanitarian conditions and with fantastically successful fundraising, at least early on in the crisis, demands to demonstrate and report on outputs were immense. This barely left room for staff to notice what communities were already doing for themselves, or to implement even the most basic measures of downwards accountability.'[18]

The work of the Local Resource Centre supported accountability process across all four elements described in the conceptual framework: transparency, participation, learning and evaluation, and complaints and response, all of which are central to the HAP standard. However, the depth of accountability was largely 'single loop' focusing on the delivery of humanitarian relief, albeit with some elements of research touching on some elements of the strategy of delivery, e.g. the establishment of community committees.

BURNET SUPPORT TO LOCAL RESOURCE CENTRE IN MYANMAR

Shortly following Cyclone Nargis, a large number of Myanmar NGOs along with some International NGOs set up the Local Resource Centre (LRC) to assist local organisations, communities and other civil society groups. Spearheaded by the Burnet Institute, the LRC was launched on 15 May, 2008 and aimed to:

1. Enable better coordination between local and international implementers;
2. Advocate on behalf of local groups and communities in cluster and hub meetings;
3. Ensure local organisations have access to capacity development, training providers, financial resources and information;
4. Assist in the development of collaborative responses to Nargis;
5. Encourage 'downward accountability', i.e. accountability towards individuals and communities that are the recipients of assistance.

Although the accountability focus appears as one distinct aim of the LRC, accountability relies on the other four aims in that issues of accountability that come to light require advocacy, networking and coordination if a comprehensive solution is to be realised. The LRC has addressed accountability in a number of ways but most substantially through the co-chairing of the Accountability and Learning Working Group (ALWG) that exists as part of the humanitarian response to Cyclone Nargis. Since 'accountability' is a new concept among humanitarian organisations in Myanmar, the participants in the ALWG decided that they should provide a forum in which agencies could share lessons learned from their own attempts to develop accountability mechanisms.

The objectives of ALWG were: to strengthen the existing accountability process of participating organisations; to be action oriented, i.e. individuals and organisations committed to taking practical steps towards accountability; for participants to share their experiences on accountability; and for accountability to be broadly understood and practiced within civil society.

As an example of a coordinated ALWG effort, LRC with the support of ALWG members (Paung Ku – a local grant facility, ActionAid and Save the Children) conducted research into the proliferation of community committees that were established by implementing agencies to deliver assistance. The result of multiple committees was leading to confusion and division amongst communities about how aid was received and who was benefiting. The research project was conducted in April, 2009 and the report was distributed among ALWG participants and the local and international humanitarian community in August, 2009. This report made specific recommendations as to the most effective ways in which to establish committees in the most accountable and impartial way. They included:

> Proper planning and implementation should include the active participation of the committee, the funding agency, and the community so that beneficiaries have a direct say in how projects are to be carried out,

> Targeting must be readily adaptable to the local context rather than follow standardised practices,

> Community involvement should be enhanced by promoting their participation at every stage of a project,

> Imparting correct information on the right to complain, and on what are appropriate problems to complain about, and how the complaints will be addressed, should be encouraged during accountability training,

> Committee formation should include training on leadership forms which promote consensus, consultation, and management skills,

> The participation of women in community activities should be continually encouraged and maintained,

> Creating a vision for the future, which includes serving the needs of the community after the life of the project, should be promoted through participatory learning approaches.

19. See for example Riddell, R. and Robinson, M. (1995) NGOs and Rural Poverty Alleviation; Acharya, S. and Thomas, L. (1999), 'Finding a pathway: understanding the Work and Performance of NGOs in Ahmedabad, India', Occasional Papers series, No. 22, INTRAC, Oxford; Smillie, I. and Hailey, J. (2001) Managing for Change: Leadership, Strategy and Management in Asian NGOs; Kelly, L. and Chapman, R. (2003).

20. AusAID (2009), Australian NGOs and Community Engagement Programs Performance Report 2007–09.

21. Rondinelli, D. (1993) Development Project as Policy Experiments: an adaptive approach to Development Administration, 2nd Edition; Easterly, W. (2006) 'The White Man's Burden: why the West's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good'.

4.2. BUILDING ACCOUNTABILITY INTO PROGRAM DESIGN

Key Points

> Communities need to be seen as 'primary stakeholders' from the outset not as 'beneficiaries'.

> Intensive engagement is the key to building trust.

> Regular moments for dialogue and reflection are important.

> Power and Gender analysis needs to be built into design.

For many years, evaluations and research on NGO effectiveness have confirmed a number of common success factors that underlie high quality development work undertaken by NGOs, even if there is also recognition that the evidence of generalised impact is weak.[19] These have included the importance of good quality gender and power analysis, genuine community participation, effective relationships, and ongoing learning and adaptation.

However, NGO program design has often tended to ignore this. The tendency has been either to adopt more linear and technocratic approaches to planning, or to eschew design processes altogether and be more reactive, seizing opportunities as they emerge.

This has led to an ongoing critique, particularly from AusAID, that Australian NGO design processes can be weak and can lead to a number of knock-on effects such as poor monitoring and evaluation, inadequate attention to gender relations and weak sustainability.[20]

However, Australian NGOs have been experimenting with approaches that have sought to build on the knowledge of 'what works' as well as avoid some of the well-known pitfalls of overly rigid approaches to planning and design.[21] The example of Caritas' approach to 'organic' program development illustrates this well.

In this approach the emphasis is on an intensive engagement with partners and communities over a prolonged period. This is accompanied by regular and ongoing processes of dialogue and discussion as the program is implemented. As in many of these types of processes, there is no explicit or systematic process by which the community or Caritas' partners are strengthened in their ability to hold Caritas to account. However, there is an assumption that the fact that there are regular opportunities for feedback and dialogue, and the establishment of relationships of trust over time, is a pre-condition for this sort of accountability to be constructed.

NGOs have been **experimenting** with approaches

CARITAS – ORGANIC APPROACH TO PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Caritas Australia has been working for several years on what they call an 'Organic approach' to program design. They have piloted this approach in the Philippines, in the Pacific and in their Indigenous Australia program.

This approach is seen as an alternative to log-frame type design. The organic approach focuses on working with partners and communities to identify changes that they seek -rather than identifying their needs – and how this can be achieved. Visualisation methods and the identification of areas or domains of change are central to this approach. It is an approach that promotes learning and adaptation and which enables project implementers to build on what's working, and change strategies that do not.

Caritas believes that using this approach needs long term commitment and involves some level of risks. Usually public supporters and Boards struggle to make sense of something that seems to be going on for a long time without simple indications of success. However, there is a firm belief that this approach is likely to have better and more sustainable results.

They also note that it requires good analytical and facilitation skills from staff and partners to undertake regular monitoring and reflection processes. It also assumes the flexibility and space to acknowledge both failure and success and to learn from both. This requires robust but trusting leadership and management processes. Staff believe that leadership in the organisation has been critical in establishing these pilots given the risks and commitment required.

This approach does not have an explicit emphasis on Caritas becoming more accountable to the communities it seeks to benefit. However, it is based on a notion that adopting more flexible approaches to program design, and more engagement with partners and communities, not only in the design process but also in monitoring, reflection and adaptation, is a key component in making communities more central to the development process. This is seen as a key pre-requisite to holding others to account in enabling or blocking their vision of change.

STRONGIM YUMI TUGETA – THE SOLOMON ISLANDS NGO PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT (SINPA)

SINPA is a program supported by AusAID and implemented by six Australian NGOs (Anglican Board of Mission/AngliCORD, ADRA, IWDA, Oxfam Australia, Save the Children Australia and Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA) and their Solomon Island partners (Save the Children Solomon Islands, Anglican Church of Melanesia, ADRA Solomon Islands, Live and Learn, Western Province Council of Women and Family Support Centre)

The intention of the program is to encourage flexible engagement in the area of livelihoods and health, and to explore what development approaches are effective in the Solomon Islands' context. The six individual SINPA projects, which collectively make up SINPA, are similar and at the same time contrasting. Their common intention is to flexibly explore Solomon Islands led community development processes in health and livelihoods, to do this using a 'strengths model' and in a way that is cognisant of power differentials and addresses gender inequity. Each NGO aspires to ensure increasing accountability to 'primary stakeholders' enabling Solomon Islands' voices to be heard and increasingly for interventions to be driven by Solomon Islands' perspectives.

The program represents an innovative approach to program design for a bi-lateral donor incorporating higher than usual degrees of flexibility in the design process; a greater concern with ensuring that 'Primary Stakeholders' (sometimes called 'beneficiaries') are key actors in the program; and an important emphasis on ongoing and inclusive reflection and learning.

There is also a greater recognition within the program of the importance of addressing unequal power relations at several levels: within communities and between men and women; between communities and 'outsiders'; and between local Civil Society Organisations, Australian NGOs and AusAID.

The program seeks to ensure greater accountability to primary stakeholders through: a systematic process of annual reflections involving primary stakeholders; the engagement of local peer reviewers or 'critical friends' who are knowledgeable about the context, independent of the program and not afraid to speak out; and the active engagement of AusAID staff in the reflection process. NGOs have also been encouraged by AusAID to explore innovative means of seeking ongoing feedback from communities about their performance (i.e. through video stories), as well as being given a strong message that they need to be realistic about the scale of what they are trying to achieve.

AusAID sees this approach as consistent with moving away from a 'contractual relationship' to a 'partnership relationship' as well as consistent with their interest in civic-driven development and creating demand for better governance. For Australian NGOs this program offers a significant opportunity to not only implement projects in ways that are consistent with the ACFID development effectiveness framework, but also to be part of modelling a different approach to how AusAID in particular, and bi-lateral donors in general, could and should work with civil society.

There is however concern that some Australian NGOs may lack the skills, experience or organisational support to seize this opportunity. There is a view that some may have become so used to a relatively bureaucratic approach to program design, monitoring and reporting, that supporting more organic process and ceding control may be too hard. There is equally a view that under pressure to spend more in line with increasing aid budgets and to prove tangible results in the short term, AusAID may conclude that this sort of approach may be too resource intensive and provide little 'evidence' of cost effectiveness.

These more 'organic' approaches to program design have tended to be undertaken by individual agencies often using their own core funding rather than funding from government or other restricted funds. This is in recognition of the risks outlined in the Caritas case study.

An example of a more systematic approach to embedding accountability into local operations has been piloted by 'Listen First', a collaboration between the Ireland based International NGO Concern and Mango, a UK-based outfit specialising in supporting the financial management accountability of NGOs.[22] This project used a framework[23] that is consistent with the HAP accountability standard, and is similar to the conceptual framework used in this study. Their website provides a lot of useful material on the practical challenges of adopting approaches which are consistent with greater accountability to local people and communities.

The new Solomon Islands NGO Partnership Agreement (SINPA) is a relatively rare example of a bilateral agency supporting a collective process to explore more flexible approaches to program design. This is, in part, a result of acting on findings of previous support to Community Development work in the Solomon Islands,[24] as well as a changing political and policy environment for AusAID which has seen a renewed emphasis on the significance of the role of civil society.

The program has recognised that the communities involved are the 'primary stakeholders' and there is an explicit intent that Australian NGOs and their partners should be accountable to them. As contrasted with the Caritas case, a systematic approach to multi-stakeholder 'annual reflections' has been integrated into the process.

The program is also a good example of an attempt to ensure strong gender and power analysis right from the outset. This was done by:

> recruiting a Solomon Island Gender Specialist who supported a clear gender focus in each of the individual designs;

> running a two-day workshop to sensitively explore issues of gender and power in Melanesian culture and to ensure some coherence between the designs;

> ensuring each of the SINPA partners are working with both men and women in order to address issues of gender inequity;

> building on, and learning from, the slightly different ways agencies are approaching gender issues i.e. through the family, involving male heads of household; through the Church and the Mothers Union in order to address issues of intra family violence; with men, women, families and communities to pilot appropriate strategies to address violence against women and change societal norms; or through a focus on access to, and control over, resources.

strong gender and **power** analysis

It remains to be seen if the institutional accountability demands placed upon AusAID staff will allow this experiment to be properly tested over a long enough period of time. Equally, it is as yet unclear if Australian NGOs involved in the program will be able to adjust to the opportunities that seem to be afforded by this initiative.

These two cases are largely focused on the participation and learning/evaluation elements of accountability at this stage. Arguably they are also mainly in the realm of single-loop accountability. However both are attempting to co-create programs and strategies with primary stakeholders and local partners, which will potentially allow double loop processes of accountability to be established. Furthermore the emphasis on prolonged engagement and trust building in both cases is potentially creating the environment for more fundamental and deeper accountability to be achieved over time.

22. More information is available on this initiative in Appendix 3.

23. Accessible via: http://www.concern.net/resources/listen-first-framework (last accessed on 16 December 2009).

24. Rhodes, D. (2007) Analysis of the 'Community Sector' in Solomon Islands; AusAID (2007) Solomon Islands Annual program performance update FY 2006–07

25. Quinn Patton, M. (1997), Utilisation Focused Evaluation: the New Century Text, p. 362.

26. Hunt, J. et al. (2009), Oxfam Australia Gender Impact Study.

27. Oxfam Australia, Sri Lanka 2007 'Mainstreaming gender in Oxfam Australia's Sri Lanka: Report on the visit of Juliet Hunt, Gender Consultant, 24th–30th February, Colombo'; and Oxfam Australia Sri Lanka '2007 Gender Review Workshop Report': May 14–15, 2007.

28. See literature review – Cornwall, A. and Gaventa, J. 2001a, p. 8.

4.3. ACCOUNTABILITY IN REVIEWS AND EVALUATIONS

Key Points

> Evaluations can provide a community with a voice and be a means to hold agencies to account.

> Cross checking and involving different groups within communities (i.e. women and men) is important to validate findings and surface differences.

> Conceptual frameworks and indicators for evaluation need to be contextualised and preferably be constructed and tested with communities involved.

Good evaluation is an important way of 'speaking truth to power'. Therefore in principle reviews and evaluations are potentially a key means by which those whom agencies seek to benefit can have a say, and – usually indirectly – provide feedback. Unfortunately all too often review and evaluation processes do not play this role. As Quinn Patton notes 'Speaking truth to power is risky – risky business. Not only power is involved, money is involved. The Golden rule of consulting is "Know who has the Gold"… Thus there is always the fear that "they who pay the piper call the tune" meaning not just determining the focus of the evaluation, but prescribing the results'.[25]

The Oxfam Australia case of a Gender Impact Study in Sri Lanka[26] is an interesting example of how evaluations can not only provide more marginalised groups with a voice, but also produce important learning and bring quite fundamental challenges to the surface. One of the more important aspects here is that seven months were taken to undertake pilot processes with women and men in communities before the main data collection period. This included preliminary research and enabled data collection methods and indicators to be comprehensively trialed.

This process drew upon previous monitoring and successes and challenges identified by Community Based Organisations in a gender review workshop held in May 2007.[27] Following this visit, the consultant developed the conceptual framework and methodology for the study – including indicators and impact assessment questions, and methods of data collection.

Another important aspect of this process was the emphasis put on cross-checking and triangulating findings, but using a range of methods as well as key informants. In particular, having men's Focus Group Discussions as well as women's was important to cross-check claims about changes in attitudes and behaviours and gender relations.

Well thought through, properly resourced impact reviews are an important tool in getting a more thorough and rigorous assessment of whether Australian NGOs are contributing to positive changes in people's lives. They also can be an important means of empowering communities to hold Australian NGOs and their partners to account. However, care in their design is required if they are not to become 'echoes of dominant discourses rather than alternative framings of policy issues'.[28]

This case is mainly focused on the learning and evaluation element of accountability. The focus on impact, and the process involved, means that it moved beyond a single-loop of accountability to raise serious issues and questions about Oxfam's strategy for gender empowerment in Sri Lanka.

well **thought** through, properly **researched impact** reviews are an **important** tool

OXFAM AUSTRALIA – WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN SRI LANKA

Oxfam Australia's Sri Lanka program has a particular emphasis on the promotion of gender justice and building 'active citizenship'. The program works with approximately 15,500 women and 2,600 men through 18 Community Based Organisations (CBOs) across seven districts.

A year-long Gender Impact Study was conducted in 2008 to examine the impacts of the program. Four well known dimensions of women's empowerment were used: internal empowerment, access to and control over resources and assets, strategic changes in household gender relations, and collective empowerment at the community level. More specific indicators for each dimension were used as a general framework for women to identify changes in their lives and tested over a seven-month pilot phase.

The methodology involved: participatory self-assessments by CBOs; workshops with staff from 17 of the 18 CBOs; focus group discussions with members from five CBOs (three in each CBO, including two women and one man); most significant change interviews with five women from each of the five CBOs; assessment of the impact and benefits of loans and house ownership-based on available quantitative data, two workshops with Oxfam Australia staff.

The study found that the program's impact on internal empowerment was strongest and most sustainable – 93 per cent of women interviewed and 68 per cent of focus groups participants identified increased confidence, knowledge or strength as their most significant change since joining the CBO.

Impact on income was important but deemed less significant – 31 per cent of women reported increased income as one of their most significant changes, while 68 per cent said their income had increased.

As regards collective empowerment many women reported taking action – individually or collectively – including claiming tsunami land rights and relief entitlements, and taking action on domestic violence and sexual harassment – over 40 per cent of women across the study had taken on a leadership role for the first time. However, impacts in the area of household and family gender relations were modest with most women saying their husbands had changed 'a little'.

The study revealed the importance of internal empowerment as a fundamental building block to achieve sustainable changes in gender. Ownership of assets and increased income may help women to claim their rights in the family, but only if the foundation stones of self-confidence, knowledge of rights and reliable support structures are in place.

Changing gender relations in the household requires a greater change in men's attitudes and behaviours. To that end CBOs and Oxfam Australia need to explore and reflect further on the most effective methods for directly engaging with men, by comparing the approaches used by different CBOs. Such methods include the effectiveness of all-male and mixed groups, using men as advocates for women's rights, and including gender training for men who are community leaders and in positions of authority in local organisations and institutions, particularly as advocates for the elimination of violence against women.

While a number of women have certainly increased their income, few have increased their savings or other assets substantially. Increases appear to be marginal in many cases, and are barely adequate to cover living costs, and are certainly not adequate to be able to build up their asset base to protect them from future environment or conflict-induced disasters. There needs to be a paradigm shift in Oxfam's livelihood program. Oxfam needs to set a new benchmark for what it considers to be an adequate return on women's labour – the Sri Lankan minimum wage.

Reference

Hunt, J. et al. (2009) Oxfam Australia Gender Impact Study.

29. Hailey, N. (2008), Strengthening Civil Society To Build Demand For Better Governance In The Pacific, Discussion Paper No.7, State Society and Governance in Melanesia, ANU; Allen Consulting Group (2009) 'Stocktake and analysis of social accountability initiatives in the Pacific' report prepared for UNDP Pacific Centre.

30. See: www.worldvision. com.au/Libraries/3_3_1_ Australia_and_the_ Pacific_PDF_reports/ Governance_Laying_the_ foundations_for_sustainable_ and_effective_development. sflb.ashx (last accessed on 16 December 2009).

31. See also Hughes, C. (2007) for a sobering analysis of this process in Cambodia.

32. See Houtzager, P. and Joshi, A. (2008), 'Introduction: Contours of a Research Project and Early Findings' IDS Bulletin Volume 38 Number 6, January 2008.

4.4. SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY TOOLS

Key Points

> Evaluations can provide a community with a voice and be a means to hold agencies to account.

> Tools used to hold governments, or other actors, to account, can be used by NGOs themselves.

> Information on entitlements, standards or performance is critical for communities to hold others to account.

> Trusted third party 'brokers' are often needed to mediate relationships between less and more powerful groups.

As the literature review at Appendix 4 notes, there is a burgeoning interest in social accountability processes and tools. Most of these have been developed with the aim of changing the relationship between citizens and – usually governmental – service providers. Others have noted that a range of social accountability initiatives is being supported by Australian NGOs in our region.[29] The Community Score Cards developed by CARE Malawi are a good example of innovations in this area, and World Vision further developed these as part of the Community Based Performance Monitoring tools[30] used in its Citizen Voice and Action program.

Whilst CARE is starting to use the Score Card process to get feedback on its own performance as a service provider, World Vision has deliberately sought to focus on government service delivery. People working on Citizen Voice and Action in the agency see it as a means of contributing to a changed mind-shift in the organisation towards more of a catalyst or broker type role, and away from 'implementation' or service provision. They are concerned, that if, for example, the program has a role in promoting accountability for World Vision's service provision work this would in some senses legitimise this role, and therefore not lead to a change in the role of the agency.

However, this still begs a question as to how agencies that undertake more capacity building, brokerage or advocacy roles – as opposed to service provision – might be held to account by communities they intend to benefit. As the literature review notes '[s]ocial accountability initiatives … promise increased development effectiveness, providing the twin benefits of improving outcomes for the poor and reinforcing the legitimacy of NGOs in domestic and international policy-making forums.'

What does, however, seem to be the case in agencies that are promoting these approaches to hold governments to account is that staff, communities and partners, as they become habituated to these processes, inevitably start to question not just why the same principles are not being applied to the Australian NGO, but how this might be done.

It is also increasingly clear that an overly technocratic approach to social accountability can de-politicise attempts to change power relations – see the literature review.[31] Indeed, there is a strong argument to suggest that what has been effective about social accountability processes such as participatory budgeting in Brazil, or the Right to Information Campaign in India, is the fact that they have grown from domestic pressures to politicise the technical processes of budgeting or information dissemination.[32]

What emerges from this experience is the importance of prior investments in relationships, and the provision of information on entitlements. A review of community-based performance monitoring practice by World Vision in India and Armenia recently identified the need for comprehensive rights education and awareness raising. World Vision in Peru, for example, have prepared a comprehensive civic education program, taking up to six months in the community before they initiate assessments of government services. The education includes information on what it means to be a citizen, participation, roles and responsibilities of government, delivery of public services, and community involvement in measuring performance of services.

These cases are largely located at the moment at the level of single-loop accountability as far as the Australian NGOs are concerned, with a primary emphasis on participation and evaluation. However, both cases indicate how the elements of information and transparency are increasingly recognised as being critical to the process.

CARE – PEOPLE IN PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SCORE CARDS

A participatory livelihoods assessment conducted by CARE Malawi has led to the creation of Village Umbrella Committees (VUC). The VUCs are made up of smaller issue-based subcommittees that are, in turn, made up of members of other committees and usually include women and the most vulnerable people in the community. People are selected for the umbrella group from the sub-committees. The umbrella committee reports to the Village Development Committee (VDC), which is the lowest of three tiers in the decentralized district structure created by the Government of Malawi in 1996.

By using a Community Score Card (CSC) monitoring tool, the umbrella committees have, successfully lobbied for increased resources at village level and provided the district authorities with a clear and open communication channel. This has allowed communities to interact with the decentralised government structures, thereby incorporating community perspectives in the district development system.

The CSC is a participatory, community-based monitoring and evaluation tool that enables citizens to assess the quality of public services. It is used to inform community members about available services and their entitlements as well as to solicit their opinions about the quality of these services. The process provides an opportunity for direct dialogue between service providers and the community through interface meetings. CARE Malawi has used the tool extensively in Dowa, Lilongwe and Ntchisi districts to start a dialogue between government and the local community, facilitated by the VUC.

The process seeks to promote transparency and accountability through joint and participatory planning and decision-making processes. The CSC is now being adopted by other NGOs, both in Malawi and beyond.

Greater engagement with the formal decentralised structures at district level has supported people to represent communities in district systems in ways that should lead to greater efficacy and increase sustainability.

CARE Malawi is also starting to use the score-card process in situations when it is itself the service provider. In the case of a seed-bank project communities are assessing amongst other things the quality of the seeds provided, the timeliness of the supply and the process of implementation. Currently there is no third party 'broker' who plays the same role that CARE Malawi does between communities and government service providers.

The fact that staff are already aware of the process, and community facilitators have played this role in relation to government services, has made this easier. However challenges still remain, notably when communities raise issues and concerns that are beyond the control of the staff and which relate to their need for other services or the performance of other providers.

Reference

Samuels, F., Sibale, B. and Selvester, K. (2009) 'People in planning in Malawi: Lessons from the APAC Programme in Eastern and Southern Africa', ODI Project Briefing No 18, January 2009.

an overly technocratic **approach** to social **accountability can de-politicise attempts** to change **power** relations

33. Eyben, R. (ed.), 2006, Relationships for Aid, and Wallace, T. (2006) The Aid Chain: Coercion and Commitment in Development NGOs.

34. See literature review p. 3.

35. Lister, S. (2000) 'Power in Partnership? An Analysis of an NGO's Relationships with Its Partners', Journal of International Development 12: 227–39.

36. Chambers, R. (1997), Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last, Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997, pp. 231–3.

4.5. ACCOUNTABILITY, PARTNERSHIP AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Key Points

> The views of communities in assessing capacity, performance and partnerships provide valuable alternative criteria and perspectives on effectiveness and partnerships.

> Staff in ANGOs and their partners need the personal and inter-personal skills, attitudes and behaviours to really listen to others, and to be open to feedback.

> Organisational Development processes need to build and reward these skills and behaviours.

> Shared identities and values usually make the establishment of mutually accountable partnerships easier.

The majority of Australian NGOs work with, or through, other organisations (often called 'partners') and/or members of their international networks. This complicates issues of accountability between these stakeholders and creates different and additional forms of power relations. Ros Eyben's *Relationships for Aid* and Tina Wallace's *The Aid Chain: Coercion and Commitment in Development NGOs*, highlight the dual, and often conflicting, pressures on INGOs to demonstrate effectiveness and accountability, while prioritising co-operative and collaborative relationships.[33]

It is therefore not surprising that many Australian NGOs have been reviewing their approaches to partnership and, within this, processes of accountability. This has been particularly the case within the large trans-national families like World Vision, CARE, Oxfam and the Red Cross.

In what seems to be a relatively rare example of communities and local stakeholders being engaged in assessing the capacity of the National Offices of International Agencies, the World Vision example offers a number of interesting lessons. It is of particular interest to note that there were a number of domains or measures of performance, or effective relationships, which were seen by communities to be important but were not in World Vision's original template for the assessment of National Office capability.

As suggested in the literature review, there can be a tendency in assessing capability or capacity to reduce this to narrowly defined, and objectively verifiable, managerial standards, whereas harder to assess relational behaviours are forgotten. This can have the effect of not only ignoring the things that are important for some stakeholders but also 'serve to consolidate the power of those who have the time and resources to validate their actions by improving their systems of management, reporting and auditing'.[34] This very much speaks to Sarah Lister's concern that the discourse of 'partnership' can serve to hide the fundamental power asymmetries within development activities.[35]

In order to address such concerns a number of agencies are recognising the importance of their own staff and organisational development. The Red Cross has developed an approach to organisational development that starts from the premise that sustainable development needs to be building on 'resilient communities'. This has been used as the basis to define what capacities National Red Cross Societies need to help build resilient communities and what capacities partner Societies need to best support them. This is similar to World Vision's attempts to construct more effective relationships between National and Support offices described above.

Other agencies have also invested in staff training and development recently. CARE Australia staff, for example, have been involved in an extended development training program of one day per month over ten months to develop a broader understanding of alternative approaches to looking at social change and associated program management processes.

Oxfam Australia, as another example, has invested in staff development through personal, inter-personal and leadership training over the last few years. The first stage of this was to build individual self-awareness and the ability to proactively respond to people and situations. In the next stage the focus was on improving the individuals' ability to interact with others, including becoming more able to recognize and value different ways of working and relating. This included an emphasis on the ability to receive and provide feedback.

All of this suggests that some Australian NGOs, at least, are starting to recognize (once again?) the importance of personal attitudes, behaviours and skills in creating effective relationships and becoming more open to feedback. This is noteworthy given, as Robert Chambers has noted in the past that 'the personal dimension is a bizarre blind spot in development.'[36]

WORLD VISION CAPABILITY ASSESSMENT PILOTS

World Vision has developed a new operating model, the Federated Network, that is designed to clarify, harmonise and align the relationships, responsibilities and accountabilities of programming partners within World Vision, i.e. offices in developing countries (National Offices) that manage programs, and offices in developed countries that provide funding, technical advice and support (Support Offices). The model aims to promote greater equity in entity relationships as well as strengthening accountability to communities, supporters and donors.

The model achieves this in part by making explicit the varied programming capabilities of National and Support Offices through a Capability Assessment. Based on the outcomes of the capability assessments, programming relationships between National Offices and Support Offices will be aligned and re-defined, with specific rules, responsibilities and accountabilities as they apply to different capabilities. This will help to mitigate any capacity gaps and ensure quality outcomes.

The capability assessment involves an independent multi-stakeholder review of National and Support Office capability based upon the results of a self assessment, five partner assessments and an external stakeholder assessment. Capability assessment tools have been developed based on four key arenas: results-focus; running; relationships and resourcing, and a number of more specific dimensions within these.

Pilot assessments have been undertaken with local stakeholders in two Southern African countries to improve triangulation of findings, and to promote downward accountability. In this process the 'measures of the measured' were applied to the measurer, in other words community stakeholders determined their own criteria for assessing the capability of the National Offices.

What these pilots revealed is that:

> Whilst in many instances, the measures of performance employed by community members are congruent with those applied by World Vision, some notable differences also emerged. Particularly around the values communities apply to World Vision's behaviour as an organisation. In both country studies high importance was placed on honesty, being treated with dignity, transparency in the organisation's decision-making, and 'life after World Vision' as key dimensions of capability and performance.

> These sorts of 'bottom-up' assessments are sound, and consistent with progressively redressing programme-related power asymmetries within the World Vision partnership and towards communities.

> The original assumptions about how this capability assessment might be best undertaken and using what criteria, were challenged by the pilot. In particular the need to ensure for both National and Support Offices, measures and ratings processes that are dynamic rather than a snap-shot. In other words, the importance of recognising and encouraging the embodiment of continuous learning and adaptation as 'normal'.

World Vision is currently reviewing its approach in the light of these findings.

Reference

Fowler, A. (2008) Test of Capability Assessment Methodology Evaluation Report, World Vision internal report.

RED CROSS APPROACH TO ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent is made up of approximately 186 National Societies from less and more developed parts of the world. National Societies in developed countries support 'Host' National Societies in developing countries.

An Organisational Development (OD) approach to the building of National Society capacity has recently been developed. This approach seeks to develop harmonised support from partner National Societies across the Red Cross Movement, and to minimise the potential negative impacts of partnering, which may include duplication and parallel structures. The aim is to encourage a Host National to ensure the voices of volunteers and members (from vulnerable communities) are the key drivers of programmes, services and policies.

This initiative arises from a 'Sustainable Programming Forum' co-hosted by the Australian Red Cross held in Brisbane in December 2008 which brought together senior counterparts from host and partner National Societies in the region and staff from ICRC. The starting point for sustainable programs is seen to be 'resilient communities' who are, amongst other things, able to:

> Adapt to, withstand and recover from shocks that make them vulnerable,

> Be aware of their own risks, vulnerabilities and capacities and are able to act on these,

> Access information that helps to improve their own health and wellbeing,

> Participate in decision-making that affects all aspects of their lives and have a voice and influence decisions that affect them.

The OD approach then goes on to determine what the characteristics that a local branch and National Headquarters of the Red Cross would need to develop in order to support communities to become resilient. This includes noting that '[a] strong National Society listens to the voice of volunteers who themselves come from vulnerable communities and asks them to give ideas for services and programmes that communities need', and recognising that '[a] strong National Society encourages vulnerable people to also become members so their voices enrich the policy making process.'

Partnership within this approach recognises that it is important to work within the existing capacity of a (Host) National Society and to ensure, as much as possible, ownership of the process. A number of negative indicators of partnership between host and partner National Societies are also delineated, notably that the host National Society is distracted from listening to its volunteers and members about real needs in communities and replacing this 'bottom-up' planning with more partner driven ideas based on external funding availability.

The Red Cross note that one of three major challenges it faces is to find the right human resources to strengthen this organisational development and new approach to Partnership in the Movement. In particular they note it requires specific competencies in both host and partner societies which include those outlined in the table below. In addition to people, the other two components include ownership and ensuring a bottom-up component.

Staff in host societies need to:

> understand local community development

> build domestic institutional strengths rather then simply manage externally funded grants

> be aware of, and champion, gender and diversity issues

> be willing to accept different ways of working

> be sympathetic to community driven processes

> have participatory approaches and experience at community levels

> be willing and able to 'speak up' when things aren't going well

> be willing to learn and to share learning

> be willing to share cultural knowledge with resource persons and delegates from outside

> have profiles that are compatible with the role and relationship building approaches required

> be culturally sensitive to working with international resource persons and delegates

Staff in partner societies need to:

> be culturally sensitive, adaptable and have cross-cultural coaching and mentoring skills

> have appropriate knowledge and understanding of the Movement

> have appropriate knowledge, skills and experience in community level as well as institutional capacity building and OD

> have experience in programme, change, and relationship management

> be open-minded, flexible, and empathetic

> demonstrate good communication and problem-solving skills

> be adaptable and capable of working within complex social and cultural environments

> understand and respect social traditions

> encourage mobilisation of local human resources rather than always assuming the international delegate system is the solution

37. Sen, A. (2006), Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny.

38. See for example Participatory Learning and Action 59 – Change at hand: Web 2.0 for development.

39. See literature review.

An aspect of partnership and mutual accountability that may not be as debated is the importance of shared identities. It is increasingly recognised that we all have multiple identities (based on gender, sexuality, race, nationality, class, religion etc.)[37] and in many ways, partnerships are often based on at least some of these, i.e. between womens' organisations, organisations of People Living with HIV/AIDS or organisations sharing the same faith.

As the example of the Scarlet Alliance's relationship with Friends Frangipani described above illustrates, these bonds of shared identity can provide an important foundation that then allows for processes of accountability to be more easily built.

This does not mean that partnerships based on shared identity are not immune from relational problems. Indeed, within the HIV and AIDS community there are certainly examples of groups based in developed countries who believe they have much more to teach communities overseas than they have to learn, and for whom mutual accountability is unimportant. However, common identity and solidarity is often a solid basis upon which to make other things happen.

In many cases Australian NGOs are not directly working with primary stakeholders. It is therefore often the case that the challenge they confront is how to construct partnerships, in ways that, at best, reinforce their partner's accountability to local communities, and, at the very least, do not skew accountability away from communities and towards them. These cases provide different examples of what might be needed for these partnerships to model this approach.

The Friends Frangipani example touches on the specific information and complaints elements of accountability, whilst the Red Cross case explores how an Organisational Development process might be constructed to support deeper levels of accountability, than activities. The World Vision example illustrates how reviews and capacity assessments can build in the views of communities and local stakeholders that touch upon double and triple loop accountabilities.

4.6. ACCOUNTABILITY, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL NETWORKING

Key Points

> The views of communities in assessing capacity, performance and partnerships provide valuable alternative criteria and perspectives on effectiveness and partnerships.

> Empowering communities and partners to tell their own stories has great potential to improve transparency.

> This can also provide them with the ability to publicly sanction poor performance or behaviour.

> Social Networking also has the potential to connect different stakeholders, and help to align what are sometimes conflicting perspectives on effectiveness.

There has been an explosion of interest in the potential of new technologies, and in particular social networking tools, to provide channels for alternative 'voices' to be heard.[38] From an accountability perspective, these tools offer the potential for those with least power in the 'aid chain' to tell their story and potentially – perhaps for the first time – to sanction poorly performing aid agencies. Given that International NGOs in particular are sensitive to reputational risks,[39] arguably such technology might redress the balance between NGO stakeholders, allowing the amplification of the concerns of those with the least power.

As the Australian Business Volunteers (ABV) case shows, providing partners with the infrastructure and skills to communicate, even if this was designed for a different purpose, can have a number of unintended side effects. Indeed, like all effective processes of empowerment, the strengthening of partners in this way has the effect of relinquishing control, whether wished or not.

an explosion of **interest** in the potential **of new technologies, and in particular** social networking tools

Promoting Voice and Choice Exploring Innovations in Australian NGO Accountability for Development Effectiveness

SCARLET ALLIANCE AND FRIENDS FRANGIPANI

Scarlet Alliance is the Australian national peak body for sex worker organisations and individuals. Scarlet Alliance has a long history of working closely with sex worker organisations in the Asia and Pacific regions and in the development of alliances and networks.

In Papua New Guinea, Scarlet Alliance has, since May 2005, been supporting Friends Frangipani, an autonomous PNG sex worker community network, to develop self-determined responses to HIV/AIDS and human rights. As a membership organisation Friends Frangipani has elected provincial representatives to form a nationwide Executive Committee to oversee the governance in the organisation.

As part of the partnership work, Friends Frangipani have developed policies and procedures for the governance and management of the organisation. This includes a customised Membership Information and Complaints Policy, which has been a key step in enhancing communications and accountability between the representatives and their membership. The policy has helped formalise and direct communications between the nationwide membership, staff and the Executive of Friends Frangipani. For example, the policy outlines that if members have a concern relating to their local representative, they are entitled to raise this with another Executive Committee member based in another province, for a hearing with the Executive. The policy has assisted concerns, misunderstandings, and complaints to be resolved in an improved, constructive and organised way, enabling the Executive to promote organisational accountability, and diminishing a tendency for individual blaming and shaming.

In addition, the policy has indirectly reflected an aspiration of the partnership between Scarlet Alliance and Friends Frangipani to enable meaningful dialogue between the two groups. Over time, Scarlet Alliance is encouraged to see the Executive Committee engage in 'grievance' processes to resolve concerns that may arise in the course of the partnership. Through the development of the five-year partnership, Scarlet Alliance has witnessed increasingly organised autonomous communications from Friends Frangipani about their needs, wishes and concerns within the partnership. This is a sign of increased confidence and trust within the partnership, heralding a key development for Friends Frangipani to act as an autonomous entity.

This culture of accountability also means that Scarlet Alliance's decision-making and processes are also under scrutiny. The Scarlet Alliance believes that this sort of mutual accountability and openness, whilst not without its problems, is made easier by the fact that they share an important respect for the identity of sex workers. They argue that this is liberating, refreshing, and empowering, as there is no need for either party to justify the fact they are sex workers, which is often the case in relationships with others who do not share that identity.

40. See David Roodman's blog for an interesting exchange on How Kiva Really Works.

41. See Rugendyke, B. and Ollie C. (2007) Speaking Out: Australian NGOs as advocates, in: Rugendyke, B. (2007) NGOs as Advocates for development in a globalising world.

42. See for example Kaldor, M. (2008) Globalisation and Democracy; The Next Billion – The Rise of Social Network Sites in Developing Countries.

43. See for example Hambly Odame, H. (2006) Introduction: Gender and ICTs for development: setting the context in Cummings, S., van Dam, H. and Valk, M. (2006) Gender and ICTs for Development – A Global Sourcebook.

The second effect is a much greater level of transparency. This has the potential of making the gritty reality of the challenges of development work to become much more widely known and thus help to lessen the rhetoric-reality gap. As such, this might in turn lead to a much more informed public in donor countries who are at the same time more realistic about the effectiveness of aid, and more aware of the broader structural forces that keep people in poverty or undermine their human rights.

There are a large number of organisations who are taking advantage of this technology and using it in imaginative and innovative ways. The work of Global Voices on-line, Global Witness, and Ushahidi illustrate the possibilities of providing groups and communities with the ability to tell and communicate their stories, provide feedback on elections, publish evidence of human rights abuses, empower female activists, debate how they might act as part of a Diaspora, or monitor the performance of governments and aid agencies, through participatory processes and on public forums such as the world wide web.

There is also a growing number of agencies developing new forms of fundraising by making more direct connections between 'investors' and 'producers' such as Kiva. Indeed Kiva, which started in 2005, is now facilitating over US$ 75m of loans from 500,000 people to some 180,000 entrepreneurs.[40]

Australian NGOs have embraced this technology for advocacy[41] and for fundraising. However, there seem to be fewer deliberate attempts to open up the possibility of supporting communities or partners to use these spaces in ways that allow them to provide feedback on Australian NGO performance untrammeled by the mediating role of agencies' marketing or program departments.

ActionAid's 'Project Toto' is perhaps an exception. However it is also interesting to note that in some ways the organisational imperatives of the agency, as it sought to launch itself in Australia as a new and different NGO, were very much aligned with a risk-taking ethos.

New media and technologies are seen by some observers as an important means by which different channels of communication can be opened up. This can contribute to greater democracy and connect people in ways that allow traditional hierarchies to be challenged and/or by-passed.[42] They note that the growth of ownership of mobile phones in some of the most challenging environments in the world indicates both the potential as well as the value that is placed upon access to information, and the ability to communicate.

Others suggest that the digital divide (which is often highly gendered) and the ongoing monopolisation of global media into fewer hands, mean that for the poorest access and the ability to really voice their concerns will always remain highly constrained.[43]

These cases give some useful pointers to how 'double' or 'triple' loop accountability, with a particular reference to transparency, might be achieved.

ACTIONAID – PROJECT TOTO

ActionAid Australia was launched on 1 June 2009, thus completing the transition from Austcare to ActionAid. In the lead up to the launch they contacted a Public Relations company to assist them with an associated awareness raising campaign. However the proposals from the PR firms were disappointing and therefore more innovative alternatives were sought.

This led, through a social media contact, to a discussion with Australian based bloggers about what they most wanted to hear about, and **Project Toto** was born. In essence the request was for more transparency and unfiltered reality, and less of the usual 'natural narcissism' of NGO communications departments.

In the first phase this involved sending a well-known Australian blogger to Tanzania to blog about what he found, and also to build the skills and capacities of local staff and partners to tell their own stories. Thus what had started out as a classic communications project started to morph into something else, as engagement with the program on the ground progressed.

However, this first attempt was not as successful as hoped in part because although the blogger was well known amongst the aficionados of social media in Australia, this did not garner much interest amongst ActionAid's potential constituency for poverty alleviation, or amongst the mass media. Secondly the blogger did not really have sufficient time to undertake adequate capacity building work with local people.

The next stage of the project therefore is more clearly focused on searching for an outreach blogger to *'help give poverty a voice … by using blogs, Twitter, Facebook … to help locals harness the power of social media to secure their human rights.'* A much greater focus will be on building the capacity of local ActionAid staff who will, in turn, play a capacity building role with local partners and communities.

ActionAid recognises that in many ways this approach fits with the image they want to portray as a somewhat more radical agency, which seeks to demonstrate innovation, and be different in the Australian NGO marketplace. In many ways they had little to lose as a new agency seeking to make its mark and with no history, as ActionAid, in Australia. They also recognise the potential – and the risks – associated with empowering others to tell their stories.

It was therefore important for staff to work closely with their Board so that they were supportive of, and comfortable with the process. This meant in particular helping to familiarise them with the technology that was involved and drawing upon experience from others – including from Amnesty International Australia – which emboldened them to undertake this experiment.

ABV AND THE ORIENTAL NEGROS CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY NETWORK

The Oriental Negros Children's Advocacy Network (ONCAN) based in Dumaguete on Negros Island, in the Philippines, was established in July 2007. It was formed to create a child advocacy network from 23 individual NGOs and Local Government Units (LGUs), all of whom are dedicated to the care and protection of children-at-risk, and in particular to raise community awareness of children's rights and child protection legislation.

The Australian Business Volunteers (ABV) provided a volunteer to assist ONCAN with the development of the network into an effective advocacy and capability-building agent for issues involving children-at-risk in the community. In particular this assistance involved supporting an organisational assessment and review, and the development and implementation of a new strategic plan.

One key strategy in the plan was the development of more effective Public Relations and improved sharing between members. This would promote ideas about how to pursue more innovative and effective ways to increase community awareness of children's rights, and child protection legislation. As a result it was decided to create an ONCAN website including a facility for blogs.

Whilst not designed with the particular purpose of promoting greater accountability and transparency the blog section however does offer an insight into the lived experience of the organisations that make up the network, the role that volunteers are playing and the struggle to get funding out of large international donors in Manila.

This is an example of how the introduction of means to support communication can have interesting, if unintended, effects, but also how opening up a window on the daily reality of organisations and their experiences can promote transparency; a key element of accountability. This offers the possibility for supporters of ABV, for example, to understand what it actually does in much more tangible terms. Given the relative cost of new technologies and social networking the ability to do this is now possible for even quite small organisations with the right sort of support and infrastructure.

4.7. ACCOUNTABILITY, SENIOR MANAGERS AND BOARDS

Key Points

> Engaging Senior Managers and Boards in building a commitment to 'bottom-up' accountability processes is important in creating an 'enabling environment'.

> Space and support need to be provided for a mutual learning approach to be developed with staff, partners and communities if concepts of accountability are to be understood and appropriately contextualised.

> Collapsing hierarchy can be achieved by bringing power-brokers in organisations face to face with communities, partners or 'front-line' staff through, for example, 'reverse' evaluation processes.

A number of the previous case studies have referred to the importance of dealing with the asymmetric power relations between Australian NGOs and the partners or communities they work with. They have emphasised the importance of developing different approaches to program design and management, improving staff skills and capacities, and providing the least powerful in the process with greater opportunities, spaces and capacities to voice their concerns and opinions more easily.

However, we also know that if organisational and developmental imperatives[44] in Australian NGOs are to be balanced – and the voices of those these agencies seek to benefit are to play a genuine and central role in this – then senior managers and Boards have to embrace this approach and lead the necessary organisational changes that are necessary to make this happen.

The Oxfam Australia case study illustrates how one agency has sought to work closely with its Board in order to align its reporting and plan priorities with such an approach. Interestingly, the case also points out that, whilst this change was important, the process of then engaging staff and partners in a more robust and fundamental debate on what such changes meant, in their context, has proved to be equally important. This again illustrates the importance of processes of internal support for staff and building their skills to relate to others in new ways.

The Oxfam example confirms conclusions in the literature review notably that '[a]ccountability is a process that must be initiated and negotiated through dialogue between 'partners' to ensure effective development performance. This dialogue ensures that accountability mechanisms are appropriate to the specific contexts in which they must operate and avoids relying on standard accountability templates handed down by donors that do little to change the lives of poor people.'

Working through different levels of organisational structures can be time-consuming and confront pockets of inertia. Sometimes collapsing power hierarchies can be important. The ABM case study of a 'reverse evaluation' process is a good example of this approach.

Like the example of World Vision's capability assessment when community perspectives were brought into the process, this case which brought partner voices into their Head Office, and gave ABM an alternative perspective on their ways of working.

These cases provide some insights into some of the organisational pre-requisites that may need to be in place for 'deeper' levels of accountability to be achieved. ABM provides a specific example of how an evaluation process might be used as an opportunity for double or triple-loop accountability.

Reversing power differentials in this way requires leadership and a degree of organisational maturity and self-confidence. Robert Chambers again puts his finger on the issues when he notes:

'... the question "Whose reality counts?" can be answered more and more with "Theirs". The issue is whether we, as development professionals, have the vision, guts and will to change our behaviour, to embrace and act out reversals, and ... as leaders, to promote and sustain decentralization, democratic values, tolerance, peace and the equitable rule of law...'[45]

44. Edwards, M. (1996) International Development NGOs: Legitimacy, Accountability, Regulation and Roles (London: Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector).

45. Chambers, R. (1997), Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last, Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997, pp. 231–3.

OXFAM – GETTING THE BOARD ON BOARD

In 2004 Oxfam Australia established a sub group of its Board to work with management in order to improve understanding on how best the Board should meet its responsibilities in monitoring the performance of the organisation and to develop key principles to guide this.

A key part of this process involved assessing the degree to which existing processes met three different types of accountability: principal-client or upward accountability; peer or lateral accountability; and what is sometime called 'voice' or downward accountability. The result was a greater shared agreement that the organisation needed to do more to improve accountability to those it seeks to benefit. This led to changes in reporting to the Board, including a greater emphasis on learning from specific case studies, as opposed to aggregated quarterly reports, and a greater accent on establishing clearer mechanisms for communities and partners to have access to complaint and redress procedures.

In Oxfam's subsequent strategic plan 'the empowerment of communities to hold us and others to account' became one of the central commitments that was publicly made. In some cases this has involved having to take a step back with partners and communities in order to revisit what both parties mean when they talk of accountability and concepts like active citizenship.

In the Pacific, for example, this approach became necessary after it was recognized that 'training' of staff to embed accountability in country programs was simply not working. What was needed was to take a step back and first develop a common understanding about what accountability means in a Pacific context. This meant engaging in a more profound discussion with Oxfam staff and partners on values. This debate and discussion was important in strengthening mutual understanding and increasing ownership of an agreed set of 'Pacific values'

identified among program staff and partners, which cascaded from a regional dialogue, through country level discussions between staff and partners, to the community level.

Once this was done the process led more easily to the identification of a common understanding of what active citizenship and accountability might mean in the Pacific and that can be used to support processes to hold institutions and power holders to account in appropriate and context specific ways. This in turn helped to open the thinking of staff, and the space they felt they had, for developing more thoughtful and deliberate accountability processes. This included a complaints and response mechanism in their Solomon Islands Gizo program which receives and addresses community feedback and complaints.

Generating shared understanding between management and the Board on different approaches to accountability has been an important element in creating an 'enabling environment' for the adoption of more innovative ways of developing mutual accountability with partners and communities. However this is a necessary but not sufficient condition.

It cannot be assumed that either field or head office staff have the space and time to reflect on the underlying principles of accountability or how they can be applied into practical ways of working. The space needs to be created to employ a mutual learning approach with staff, partners and communities and this needs support.

As one staff member noted *'If these concepts are not understood by staff and they themselves do not therefore believe in the value of Oxfam's approach, how can they be expected to advocate with the communities they work with? If they haven't internalised the concepts themselves then the way they apply these concepts to their work will be token and jeopardise efforts to meaningfully implement a program and enact change.'*

ABM AND 'REVERSE EVALUATION'

As part of the on-going partnership between the Anglican Board of Mission (ABM) and the Episcopal Church in the Philippines (ECP), the Rev. Brent W. Alawas and Floyd P. Lalwet were invited to visit ABM and facilitate an assessment of its organisational capacity. The assessment exercise, which took place in 2007, reciprocated similar reviews previously done by ABM staff on the organisational competencies of the ECP.

The exercise used the McKinsey Capacity Assessment Grid, a tool developed by the consulting firm McKinsey & Company designed to help non-profit organisations assess their organisational capacities. It was a participatory exercise based on the self-diagnosis of ABM staff, and one board member, who were asked to rate the organisation on a number of elements. The staff did the ratings individually and the process therefore captured the variance between different staff opinions.

The exercise revealed areas of perceived strength and relative weakness as assessed by staff. One area of particular importance raised by the process was the relatively lower ratings on the Mission and Vision elements of the assessment when compared, for example with the HR, Systems or Infrastructure elements.

This then allowed an analysis of these ratings which explained some of these findings notably:

> there are a number of staff who had just joined ABM and had yet to go through a more in-depth learning experience on the broader ABM Mission and Vision;

> there is some difference in understanding Mission and Vision between the staff and the Board, i.e., staff understands that ABM as an Australian Church agency exists to serve partners; while there is a view within the Board that ABM exists to serve the Australian Church;

> the significant growth of ABM's Community Development Program over recent years has been made possible by increases in AusAID funding. This may give the impression to staff that ABM development program is more AusAID fund-driven than mission-driven.

Whilst this exercise to a large extent confirmed what ABM staff already knew, and were indeed in the process of addressing, it helped ABM to gain a greater understanding of the importance of how their internal dynamics affected their program work. It also enabled both agencies to learn from each other, as well as deepen their partnership. As the Capacity Assessment report concludes:

'Finally, through this assessment exercise, ABM and ECP have leveled off expectations on organisational competencies and capacities. Taking the partnership to a higher level, we can now demand from each other the establishment of standards of capacity that both of us should aspire for as well as the sharing of learnings in the road to attaining these standards.'

importance of dealing
with the asymmetric
power relations

5 Conclusions

46. Ramalingam, B., Scriven, K. and Foley, C. (2009) 'Innovations in international humanitarian action', Chapter 3 of ALNAP's 8th Review of Humanitarian Action.

47. See for example World Vision's use of complaints cards in Sri Lanka and CARE's complaints mechanism in Cambodia.

48. See for example Oxfam and AustCare material on information boards, and Save the Children's poster informing staff, partners and visitors of their code of conduct.

49. See http://www.csi.edu.au/latest-csi-news/pwc-transparency-awards/

5.1. IT'S MOSTLY SINGLE LOOP ACCOUNTABILITY

The ALNAP review of innovation in humanitarian work[46] notes that its very nature requires a high degree of ingenuity and creativity. The study also suggests that the fact that evaluations don't necessarily capture this innovation, and tend to repeatedly find the same shortcomings, does not mean that there is no successful learning and adaptation happening. The conclusion is rather that the creativity and innovation that is occurring is largely within the realm of improving existing practise and ways of working, rather than inventing new ways of doing things or radically changing how organisations function. In other words, it is largely single loop learning. The authors of the ALNAP review suggest that this tendency is, in part, due to a greater 'culture of compliance' and the 'rigid contractual nature of aid relationships', which inhibits 'generative learning'.

This initial review would suggest something similar. Most of the examples presented are arguably about exploring incremental improvements to existing practices. However there are some cases that are starting to look at more double and triple loop accountability.

5.2. PARTICIPATION AND EVALUATION AT THE FORE

Most of the case studies are mainly focused on improving participation in various ways (e.g. through design or evaluation) or on improving learning, feedback and review processes at different levels. There is, in addition, some attention paid to staff and organisational development processes, which is key given the critical role of attitudes, behaviours and capacities play in enabling or blocking change. The two other dimensions of accountability described earlier – transparency and complaints and response – figure less. There are certainly examples of Australian NGOs adopting complaints procedures,[47] and information sharing activities[48] during humanitarian disasters as the Burnet case reveals. Recently, Australian International NGOs have also done well in 'Transparency Awards' for their Annual Reports.[49] However there seem to be fewer examples of this sort of approach in longer-term development or advocacy work. Few Australian NGOs seem to have clear public policies regarding transparency or complaints procedures on their websites.

There also seem to be very few examples of the kind of financial transparency with communities and partners of the type that the UK based NGO Mango has been promoting through its 'Who Counts' campaign.

5.3. GENDER AND ACCOUNTABILITY

UNIFEM's landmark report 'Who Answers to Women?' Gender and Accountability', provides a comprehensive overview on both the theory and the practice of gender related accountability issues. It suggests that a lack of accountability to women in many cases explains more about the non-achievement of gender equality commitments than other factors. The report notes that it has been advocates of gender equality who have often been at the forefront of efforts to democratise power relations in private and informal institutions as well as in the public sphere.

Some of the case studies above have made explicit attempts to include a gender and power analysis in program design and evaluation, and include women's voices in these processes. In others, the approach to gender is either implicit or lacking. One does not get the feeling that, in the word of the authors of the UNIFEM report, that gender equality is 'mission critical' to accountability debates within, or amongst, most Australian NGOs. This is a concern for two reasons. Firstly, and most fundamentally, development cannot be deemed effective without progress on gender equality. Accountability systems must therefore 'make the advancement of gender equality and women's rights one of the standards against which the performance is assessed'. Secondly, as the UNIFEM report reminds us the experience of struggles for gender equality at a personal and public level, within organisations and on an advocacy level offers a number of important lessons for embedding accountability and effectiveness in agencies.

5.4. CORE ELEMENTS OF A REVISED APPROACH?

This review of current Australian NGO practice helps paint a picture of the elements that might need to be combined to produce the kind of step change that is required. The summary of these elements in the table below should be seen neither as a linear sequence, nor as a package that Australian NGOs should uncritically adopt in its entirety. Rather, it is a possible starting point for agencies interested in taking this agenda forward in a more comprehensive manner. In some agencies, for example, successfully trialling some concrete methods may be a more effective starting point to convince senior managers to promote change than a direct approach to the Board.

However, it is suggested that for those agencies that are interested in developing double and triple loop accountability and learning processes, considering a comprehensive organisational approach is necessary.

Core Elements of a Revised Approach for Australian NGOs?

> Working with Boards and senior managers to reframe accountability, promote transparency, understand power and gender relations and prioritise investment in this area. This includes helping to create the space and leadership for this to happen.

> Investing in Organisational Development (OD) approaches. Determining desired capacities, attitudes and behaviours based on core values and mission and commitment to being accountable to the men and women who are our 'primary stakeholders'.

> Promoting personal, inter-personal and leadership skills amongst staff, consistent with an overall OD approach and a commitment to equality and openness to learning.

> Developing contextualised approaches to accountability and participation that build on local understanding, social relations and values.

> Developing approaches to partnership and effective relationships including empowering partners and those with the least voice to tell their story.

> Trialling specific gender sensitive tools and methods with front line staff and partners to build mutual accountability using a range of methods and technologies, including complaints processes.

> Making a commitment to review the success of these approaches, through ongoing evaluation and learning and adapting management systems accordingly, then sharing lessons transparently.

These elements are consistent with those promoted by the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP). It would be worth exploring if the process of accreditation promoted by HAP, and the approach of adopting common standards, has broader application outside of the humanitarian domain.

considering a comprehensive
organisational approach
is **necessary**

50. See: http://quality.bond.org.uk/ (last accessed on 17 December 2009).

51. See: http://www.bond.org.uk/data/files/bond_csos_effectiveness_survey_report.pdf (last accessed on 17 December 2009).

5.5. SHARING APPROACHES AND INNOVATIONS

It is clear that the general public in Australia often do not distinguish between the actions of different aid agencies. The actions of one agency can affect the sector as a whole. Similarly, overall critiques of 'aid' have an impact on individual donors and agencies. It is also the case that norms and conventions of the sector shape the behaviour of individual agencies. This can be positive (the ACFID Code of Conduct being a case in point) or negative (the ongoing and usually unhelpful public statements by most agencies arguing how little they spend on administrative overheads and how their assistance always 'works').

It is therefore important to think about what the sector might collectively do to advance a more radical accountability agenda. One thing it may be worth considering is developing better facilities for sharing case studies and innovations in this area. The Listen First research project undertook a search for material on NGOs' downward accountability which noted how few practical examples were available on the internet, outside of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership. The ALNAP report on innovation in humanitarian action suggested that it may be useful to consider the development of 'common information products – such as case study templates and databases', noting that this has helped to capture innovations and communicate them' in other sectors. The report goes on to argue that the humanitarian sector should 'establish a cross-sector mechanism or intermediary to facilitate innovation processes, focusing initially on innovation capture and exchange'.

The development of such a facility in Australia might then link to similar groupings elsewhere such as the UK NGO umbrella group BOND's quality group[50] which is doing similar work (and indeed is developing an Effectiveness Framework). It is interesting to note that a survey of BOND's membership[51] on effectiveness issues in September 2008 revealed over 50 per cent of the respondents felt that BOND should be advocating for changes in official donor practices, second only to it providing practical advice and capacity building, as a key means to improve effectiveness. This was seen as a key means to start to redress the balance towards greater accountability to primary stakeholders.

Developing a more rigorous evidence base for these approaches, based on fuller case studies and meta-analysis of them, is an important starting point for advocating for such changes in donor practice.

5.6. PARTNERING WITH UNIVERSITIES OR RESEARCH INSTITUTES

To develop more of an evidence base, as well as associated skills and capacities, will require more effective collaboration with organisations with specialist research and training skills. Options here might include:

> undertaking more long-term and on-going research or action-research linked to Australian NGO accountability initiatives. Following, for example, something like the SINPA program over its life-time would produce solid findings about the interaction between Australian NGOs and AusAID as well as between Australian NGOs, their local partners and communities

> undertaking pilots as policy experiments trialling specific approaches to 'bottom-up' accountability, this could be similar to the Listen First project, or something like the Straight Talk initiative which brought Indigenous Australian women face to face with Parliamentarians, or could trial particular technologies such as the Wireless Africa initiative supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

> developing policy related findings based on NGO experience, pilots and associated research to guide Australian NGO and bi-lateral agencies approaches to accountability

> developing more targeted training, learning and research opportunities for Australian NGO and partner staff in the different areas suggested in the core elements above.

more effective **collaboration** with organisations with **specialist research** and **training skills**

5.7. THE NEW ACCOUNTABILITY AGENDA AND INTERNATIONAL NGOS

Daniel Bray's literature review (see Appendix 4) notes a number of key issues in relation to current thinking on accountability. Firstly, accountability is fast becoming the dominant lens for thinking about progressive change in global politics. Addressing the accountability deficits created and magnified by contemporary globalisation is increasingly seen as the primary requirement for a more just and democratic world. However channels of accountability are increasingly blurred and distorted.

Secondly, despite having 'more accountability than ever before' in the form of laws, standards, audits and targets, organisations are increasingly unclear about who should be held to account and how. Existing accountability mechanisms are unable to ensure that those with the power to affect our lives are held accountable for their actions.

Thirdly the 'new accountability agenda' is concerned with developing innovative responses to these accountability deficits. It involves experiments in accountability politics that provide disenfranchised groups with 'opportunities to operationalise rights and to shift the terrain of governance from technical solutions to a more immediate concern with social justice'.[52] These 'bottom-up' processes in which active citizens hold governments to account are seen as key to better development outcomes in the interests of people living in poverty.

As far as civil society organisations and NGOs are concerned, Bray's review notes that they are increasingly taken to task for their lack of accountability to the people they claim to represent. As NGOs have become involved in the provision of services, concerns have been raised about whether they have the same incentives to respond to public demands and complaints in the way expected of states. Furthermore, the higher profile of NGOs, as advocates of the poor in international policy processes, has also thrust issues of NGO legitimacy and accountability into the spotlight. In this light, NGOs are often viewed as powerful actors capable of influencing the lives of ordinary people, while evading the reach of conventional state-based accountability systems.

Social accountability initiatives that provide opportunities for local people to participate in holding NGOs to account, can therefore provide the twin benefits of improving outcomes for the poor and reinforcing the legitimacy of NGOs in domestic and international policy-making forums. In addition they provide the skills and capacities to also hold others to account.

Bray concludes by noting that a number of commentators suggest that NGOs are in a good position to take the lead in developing effective systems of learning and accountability. This, he argues, must involve NGOs taking an entrepreneurial and activist approach to their accountability. NGOs have a particular responsibility to lead by example in this area and 'shine as beacons of legitimacy and accountability'. Clearly, social accountability initiatives have the potential to reshape accountability relationships in many development contexts, but it is likely that progress will come through innovation and experimentation, not one-size-fits-all prescriptions.

John Keane in his recent grand history of 'The Life and Death of Democracy' suggests that we are now in an era of 'monitory' democracy. A post-Westminster form of democracy in which 'power monitoring and power controlling devices have begun to extend sideways and downwards through the whole political order'.[53] He argues that this offers the opportunity, through experiments within civil society, of both deepening and globalising democracy.

If civil society is to fulfil this promise then it needs to be at the vanguard of this process. Australian NGOs are starting to contribute to this by recognising this agenda as a critical part of their mission. However, if the sector is to realise this potential more radical innovations and more fundamental changes will be needed before, in the words of Mahatma Ghandi, we become the change we want to see.

Australian NGOs need to recognise the highly strategic nature of the 'New Accountability' agenda. If this opportunity is to be seized this will require strong leadership in the sector and a more profound debate and exchange about how best to move forward. It is recommended that ACFID seeks to facilitate this discussion as soon as possible. The interest generated by this study suggests that there is a real desire, and momentum, in the sector to have this debate and to consider some of the ideas proposed above.

52. Goetz and Jenkins 2004: 3.

53. Keane, J. (2009) 'The Life and Death of Democracy' p.xxvii.

Appendices

54. See for example Dambisa Moyo (2008) Dead Aid, and William Easterly (2006) 'The White Man's Burden'.

55. Sogge (1996) Compassion and Calculation, Terry, F. (2003), Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action, Wallace, T. and Chapman, J. (2006), An investigation into the reality behind NGO rhetoric of downward accountability, INTRAC, Oxford., Maren, M. (1997), The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity, Hulme et. al. (1997), NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?, Palgrave Macmillan, London, Edwardas et al. (1995) Beyond the Magic Bullet.

56. See for Lancaster, C (2007) 'Foreign Aid: Diplomacy, Development and Domestic Politics'.

57. See Goetz and Jenkins (2005) 'Reinventing Accountability: Making Democracy Work for Human Development'.

58. Hirschman (1970) Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States.

59. See Cornwall, A. (2008) Democratising Engagement: What the UK can learn from international Experience, Demos, for a good example of this.

APPENDIX 1

CONCEPT NOTE FOR NEXT PHASE OF DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS RESEARCH

Chris Roche, Oxfam Australia, 22 July 2009

1. The Future of Aid

There is a growing and renewed critique[54] of international aid which is gaining ground. At the heart of this critique is that the aid system is not accountable to those it seeks to benefit, and that it distorts the accountability of governments to donors and away from their own citizens. This critique mirrors a critique of NGOs which has a longish history,[55] as well as some elements of the latest ACFID development effectiveness research.

In the context of the global financial crisis, climate change and the recent high profile critiques of aid, the task of building and sustaining domestic constituencies for international cooperation, and not just aid, is arguably critical. Furthermore, this constituency arguably needs to be able to make the links between human development, human security and climate change, and push for progressive foreign policies which also take a holistic view of these issues.

There is also a growing, or perhaps renewed, recognition that the quality of Aid and International Co-operation is, to a large degree, shaped by domestic political processes in donor countries.[56] The Evaluation of the Implementation of the Paris Declaration, for example, notes *'if the work of implementing Paris remains just a 'dialogue among technocrats' and is not built on growing political trust, the uneven pace of change and "aid effectiveness fatigue" may begin to undermine and sap the effort'.*

This all suggests that if we are to improve development effectiveness then changing accountability mechanisms, engaging in domestic political change and constituency building all need to be part of a strategy which explores ways to improve aid quality. This strategy needs to simultaneously address the political obstacles in 'donor' countries and organisations which make it less than effective, as well as locate aid within a broader paradigm of international co-operation. At the same time, it needs to strengthen the ability of communities in 'recipient' countries to hold their governments, aid agencies and private sector actors to account. This of course means recognising, and attempting to address at least in some way, the power relations inherent between different actors.

There is a view that the growing use of social accountability mechanisms combined with the imaginative use of social networking tools, and the generation of peer-to-peer communications could play a transformatory role in developing a new future for aid. Not least because this approach offers the potential to build more effective linkages between civil society organisations and community groups in both donor and recipient countries, thus shortening the accountability chain between, in old parlance, 'tax-payers' and 'beneficiaries'[57] and in so doing build stronger international networks for change.

There is an increasing number of examples, such as the work of Global Voices on-line, Witness, and Ushahidi which illustrate the possibilities of providing groups and communities with the ability to tell and communicate their stories, provide feedback on elections, publish evidence of human rights abuses, empower female activists, debate how they might act as part of a Diaspora, or monitor the performance of governments and aid agencies, through participatory processes and on public forums such as the web. This, in some contexts, can provide men and women who are often the 'objects' of development with the ability to become its subjects and to publicly sanction poor behaviour and performance of aid organisations and their governments. This provides them with what Albert Hirschman[58] described as the 'voice' option which they so often lack.

Arguably these sorts of processes have the additional effect of building social relations and constituencies for international development that are based not only on compassion but, also on social and economic ties that are less vulnerable to the vicissitudes of nature, politics or the latest media story. In so doing we can then envisage a Future For Aid that is in fact a Future of International Co-operation, and is fundamentally about how, in an inter-dependent world, those interested in social justice and sustainability will need to work together, and learn from each other. It is a shift away from concepts of aid being about the rich world sending money to 'them' so they can become more like 'us'. Rather it is a move towards respectful mutual learning and exchange, joining up the struggles for transparency and accountability, as the basis for renewed forms of co-operation and development.[59]

If International NGOs are to contribute to creating this kind of vision for change, then they will need to be part of a vanguard piloting and experimenting with ideas, processes and relationships that are at the cutting edge of development thinking and practice. In so doing they can illustrate and exemplify what the future might look like in practice rather than striving to be exemplars of mainstream development orthodoxy.

2. The next Phase of the Development Effectiveness Research

ACFID's development effectiveness research to date has identified the commonly held principles and agreed critical success factors that Australian NGOs believe underpin effective development. The latest exercise has, however, revealed a mixed picture as to the degree to which the sector as a whole has embedded these principles into their day to day practice, or is able to share and communicate the 'notable exceptions' to this.

In the light of this, and the above analysis, it is suggested that the next phase of this research should focus more on capturing and sharing cutting edge practice in demonstrating effectiveness through innovative forms of accountability and social learning, in which the views of those who are ultimately meant to benefit are central. This would include, but not be limited to, the work of Australian NGOs and their partners.

This should result in a) identifying practical examples of how civil society is starting to reframe and redefine accountability and effectiveness, b) elaborating the organisational implications and practical steps needed to adopt such ways of working, c) profiling this type of work and how it might contribute to a broader shift on aid policy and international cooperation.

ACFID will undertake a scoping exercise on this topic and seek to prepare a long-term proposal that could be used for applying for an Australian Research Council (ARC) linkage or Australian Development Research Awards (ADRA) research grant, which would provide greater rigour and depth to the research.

This scoping study will do the following:

1. Test whether there is a sufficient body of innovative practice within the Australian NGO community for the study to draw upon. This would be done by discussions with key informants in a representative sample of Australian NGOs, and consultants engaged with them, based on size, thematic specialisation and would cover secular and faith based agencies. From this a long list of potential case studies to be explored in more depth would be developed. Ideally this would include collective experiences such as the Churches' Partnership Program, the new Cooperation Agreement process in the Solomon Islands, or in Australia civil society work such as Make Poverty History. It will be important that any documentation of the case studies includes a description of the practical steps and enablers that have contributed to successful innovation and effective practice. If the scoping exercise reveals that there is an insufficient body of practice to draw upon, then arguably the next phase of research would need to look more profoundly into why this is the case.

2. Elaborate and model an engagement strategy which would a) seek to ensure that senior managers are aware of and supportive of, the research and committed to adopting changed practices which emerge from it, and b) ensure that a representative sample of ACFID members would be committed to engaging in and learning from the process. The methodology of how the scoping study is done would also attempt to develop this engagement as it progresses.

3. Locate this work in the broader literature on social accountability and NGO experience from outside Australia as a means of benchmarking Australian NGO experience as well as broadening the canvas of ideas and inspiration about what may be possible

4. Result in a proposal with an academic institution for an ARC or ADRA grant to undertake a longer term and more rigorous examination of a sample of the case studies and the organisational enablers and obstacles to adopting changed practice.

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APPENDIX 2

A SURVEY OF AUSTRALIAN NGOS ON DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS

Rhonda Chapman, April 2009

Executive Summary

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) recently commissioned a small research project to assess the efforts Australian non-government organisations (ANGOs) were making towards assessing and improving the effectiveness of their development activities. The aim of the survey was to identify measures adopted by ANGOs in recent years as part of global efforts at improving aid effectiveness. It also asked whether these measures were guided or influenced by the previous ACFID work on NGO Effectiveness conducted in 2001–04. This report describes the findings of this investigation and makes recommendations for more detailed research arising from the results.

The investigation was conducted as a desk-based analysis of survey responses and examples of work voluntarily submitted by ANGOs. Twenty-two ACFID members responded to an email survey and submitted examples of case studies, reports and tools which they considered demonstrated their efforts towards improving the effectiveness of their work. Despite the limitations of the research scope and methodology, the results indicate trends and common approaches adopted by ANGOs and also provide examples of the wide range of approaches and tools utilised by the ANGOs. The findings illustrate the efforts of the ANGO community to identify and understand where they can demonstrate good practice, their progress towards enhanced effectiveness, and areas that continue to present challenges in development practice.

The progress most evident in the case studies relates to program management. The analysis suggests that the majority of participating ANGOs have invested substantially in program management processes and systems. These typically relate to monitoring and evaluation, high quality assessments and evaluation research. Many ANGOs have created positions or teams of staff responsible for program quality and effectiveness, and many have also invested in developing systems and processes for monitoring, and ensuring quality and effectiveness. While the specific approaches and tools vary significantly across the examples, concepts such as human rights, participatory approaches and gender equity are common themes found in the principles articulated as the basis for these frameworks.

A number of issues emerge as presenting challenges to ANGOs or as gaps in their progress towards improved effectiveness. Most commonly, the greatest challenge is related to the nature of relationships with development partners such as local NGOs in-country and how these relationships are invested in, nurtured and managed. Learning, risk taking and innovation were often referred to as integral to NGO program management systems, particularly as underlying principles; however, these appear to be inconsistently applied in practice. In the same way, many of the program management models make reference to mutual accountability between the ANGOs and partners but lean towards emphasizing compliance to AusAID and ANGO accountability requirements in practice.

Other areas that appear to present challenges in achieving good practice are consistent approaches to good quality gender analysis in all areas of program and organisational management; management practices that demonstrate a genuine commitment to the mutual accountability that is often referred to in guidelines and frameworks; incorporating power analyses as an integral part of relationship management; and recognizing the impact that NGO leadership and organisational culture have on effectiveness.

It is worth noting that the challenges identified in the ANGO case studies are consistent with many of the issues identified more broadly in current literature for both NGOs and donors (Eyben, 2006; Taylor and Soal, 2003; Riddell, 2007). This suggests that further investigation exploring ways these challenges can be addressed in practice would be a useful process for both Australian NGOs and AusAID, as well as a valuable contribution to the broader aid community.

Perhaps one of the more immediate areas for research emerging out of this scoping study and current literature (Hillhorst, 2003; Eyben, 2006) is exploring how ANGOs and AusAID can balance the management tension between *being* effective and *demonstrating effectiveness*. Related to this is the impact of organisational culture and leadership on program effectiveness. There are issues common to both these themes – for example, how to achieve the appropriate balance between donor and community driven activities. Related to this is the apparent disconnect between a focus on aspirations for program effectiveness and the push towards the implementation of compliance and top-down accountability requirements.

APPENDIX 3

THE LISTEN FIRST RESEARCH PROJECT

The Listen First research project, carried out by Concern and Mango from 2006 to 2008, aimed to develop practical ways for NGOs to manage their accountability to the people they aim to serve. It focused on working with NGO staff to develop strong relationships and dialogue with their intended beneficiaries, and partners. The management tools and approaches were developed and refined during the research project.

Framework

The 'Listen First Framework' (see below) sets out how four principles can be put into practice, throughout projects. The principles are:

> Providing information publicly (transparency)
> Involving people in making decisions (participation)
> Listening (feedback and complaints)
> Staff attitudes and behaviours

The framework provided a shared set of expectations about what accountability means for staff, partners and managers. It is directly compatible with HAP's 2007 Standard.

Three processes

The approach uses the framework to structure three central processes:

1. Workshops for staff to discuss and assess current levels of accountability, and to identify improvements for their specific context.

2. Research into local communities' views of how accountable staff are in practice, and how useful they find the NGO's work. This is split by gender.

3. Summary reports for managers to understand the level of accountability achieved in different projects. These can be quantified.

Findings

The research showed that staff found the framework relevant in different countries and cultures. So did local communities. But it was also challenging for staff. It was hard work to listen really well to local people, especially when field staff had so much more power than them, or did not speak the same language. Staff were also pulled in different directions, for instance, by commitments to donors or managers.

The research did not answer all the questions it raised. Further work is needed to develop the approaches further, and tackle important tensions.

Attitudes matter most

The most important factors for improving this accountability were the attitudes of field staff and managers.

Field staff were more accountable when they really believed that local people had the ability and the right to make decisions about improving their lives. Their managers' attitudes played a big role in making space for this, as everyone was already very busy with many different priorities.

Because every situation was different, standardised tools always had to be adapted to each local context. If they were not, then there was a risk they did not improve accountability. They could even make existing power dynamics worse.

So, the research developed methods for encouraging staff and managers to reflect on their current practices, and identify their own improvements.

It also developed ways to hear directly from intended beneficiaries, and to present their views, in a simple and standard way, to managers.

General policies

However, some general policies could also be applied in most situations, to encourage staff to achieve good practice. They included:

> An open information policy
> Informing partners and beneficiaries about contact details, project plans, and their rights (in relation to the NGO)
> Focusing staff attention on building dialogue and trust with partners and local people
> Paying careful management attention to the attitudes and values of staff
> Holding regular reviews with all stakeholders every 6 or 12 months (including the poorest and most marginalised people)
> Collecting systematic and regular feedback from partners and local people

Detailed findings are available in the reports which can be found on the project website.[60]

60. http://listenfirst.org (last accessed on 17 December 2009).

The Listen First Framework 1

	Sapling	Maturing	Flowering	Fruit bearing
Providing information publicly	NGO staff provide key informants with basic information about the NGO and its goals and work. Most information is about a programme's specific aims and activities. Most information is provided verbally and/or informally. It is generally provided at the beginning of projects, and may not be updated often.	Information about the NGO and its work is made publicly available to local people and partners. This includes contact details for NGO staff, programme aims and activities, timescales, selection criteria (where appropriate), and some budget information. The methods used for sharing information are chosen by the NGO (e.g. meetings, information sheets, notice boards, radio, posters, newspapers etc).	Full information about the programme is made publicly available to local people and partners. It includes a budget, showing all direct costs. Information is regularly updated, e.g. with reports of activities carried out, expenditure made and changes to activities or budgets. The methods and languages used are easy for local people to access. Specific efforts are made to provide information to women and the most marginalised people (including people who are illiterate).	Full programme and financial information is published, in ways that are easily accessible for all local people (including women and men). Information is published systematically, including all budget and expenditure information for direct and indirect costs. Updates and progress reports are published regularly. Ways of publishing information are discussed with local people. NGO staff check if information is relevant and understood, particularly by excluded groups.
Involving people in making decisions	Local people and partners are informed about the NGO's plans, throughout the project cycle. Proposals & plans are mostly written by senior/technical NGO staff. Plans are discussed with key informants in the community. NGO staff assume that key informants represent poor and marginalised people. There is limited analysis of who holds authority in the local community and how.	Local people and partners are consulted about the NGO's plans. They provide information which NGO staff use to make key decisions about their work, at all stages of the project cycle (e.g. planning, designing, reviewing and evaluating activities). NGO staff consult women and men separately. They identify the main social groupings in the community, including the most marginalised, and consider their priorities. They identify the local institutions responsible for delivering services, and also discuss plans with them.	Decisions are made jointly by NGO staff and local people and partners. Local people contribute equally to making key decisions about the programme, throughout the project cycle, including planning the budget. NGO staff make sure they work with individuals and organisations which truly represent the interests of different social groups, including the most marginalised people, and women as well as men. They help individuals reflect on their current situations and make sure they feel free to contribute to discussions and decisions.	Local people and partners take a lead in making decisions, drawing on the NGO's expertise as relevant. The work is owned by them; the NGO plays a supporting role. NGO staff check that the work truly reflects the priorities of the poorest and most marginalised people (including women as well as men). Conflicts between different interest groups in the local community are recognised and tackled using mechanisms that local people respect. The work strengthens connections between groups.

The Listen First Framework 2

	Sapling	Maturing	Flowering	Fruit bearing
Listening, feedback & complaints procedures	NGO staff encourage feedback from local people and partners. Most feedback is provided verbally and/or informally. Informal opportunities are made during staff's day-to-day activities. There are no formal systems for encouraging feedback, or for recording and monitoring complaints.	Staff make opportunities to hear feedback and complaints from local people and partners. Local people are provided with formal systems for feedback and complaints, e.g. complaints boxes, phone lines, feedback forms, meetings with managers and written reports. All complaints receive a formal response. Staff and managers spend time in local communities, and ask for informal feedback from local people and partners (including women and men).	The NGO actively encourages local people to give feedback and make complaints. Formal systems are provided that are safe, easy & accessible for local people to use (including women and men). They are in local language(s), and are promoted to local people. All feedback, complaints and responses are recorded. The NGO regularly monitors how satisfied local people and partners are with their work (e.g. using feedback forms, focus groups or surveys). Staff carefully create informal opportunities to hear from different people.	Feedback and complaints systems are designed with local people. They encourage the most marginalised people to respond, and cover sensitive areas like sexual abuse. They build on respected local ways of giving feedback. The NGO regularly monitors satisfaction levels. All feedback, complaints & responses are recorded, and they inform project activities. Staff and managers set targets for the time they spend in local communities, and monitor their performance. They may employ staff to liaise with different social groups.
Staff attitudes & behaviours	Staff understand that respect for local people and partners is important. They avoid superior attitudes (even when local people are not present). Some training is provided on participation and facilitation skills from time to time. Staff take time to speak to local people. The information they provide is not formally included in project implementation or review processes.	NGO staff are always polite and patient with local people and partners. They try to understand local social expectations. They mostly speak local language(s). NGO staff go out of their way to make marginalised women and men feel relaxed. They fit into people's daily lives, and respect their time. E.g. meetings are held at times and places convenient for local people. Staff receive systematic training on participation, facilitation skills and associated attitudes and behaviours. Managers check that staff work with these attitudes.	Every part of the NGO's work helps local people and partners build up their self-confidence and self-respect. NGO staff avoid telling local people what to think or do. They approach their work as helping local people to analyse and tackle their own issues in their own ways. Staff receive systematic training in participation, facilitation skills and social exclusion, particularly for working with marginalised people. Key attitudes and behaviours are on job descriptions and personal objectives. Staff have time and space to support local people's ways of working, and to reflect on their attitudes and behaviours.	Staff invest time in building up equal relationships of mutual respect with local people and partners. They actively promote dialogue, and encourage reflection on each other's experience. Working together with local people, they develop new options for action (by local people and themselves). They do not impose their own ideas. NGO managers take a lead in creating an open, listening culture. They provide inspiration, training and support to staff. They manage and monitor performance in this area. Managers Listen First to their staff, and regularly make time to reflect on their own attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Daniel Bray

I. Introduction: Development INGOs and the New Accountability Agenda

Accountability is fast becoming the dominant lens for thinking about progressive change in global politics. Specifically, addressing the accountability deficits created and magnified by contemporary globalisation is increasingly seen as the primary requirement for a more just and democratic world. Under conditions of increasing interdependence, channels of accountability are increasingly distorted as governments become embedded in complex networks of global governance involving relationships with a variety of international and non-state actors. That is, 'blurred lines of authority, competing jurisdictions and shifting social expectations have produced messier and denser webs of accountability between states, market actors and civil society' (Newell 2006: 45). As a consequence, despite having 'more accountability than ever before' in the form of laws, standards, audits and targets, people are increasingly unclear about who should be held to account for problems like crime, unemployment, climate change, disease and poverty (Burgis and Zadek 2006: 2). The underlying theme in academic and activist circles is that existing accountability mechanisms are unable to ensure that those with the power to affect our lives are held accountable for their actions. Constitutional checks and balances and the sanction of the ballot box do not seem to make governments live up to their promises. Corporations seem unaccountable for the social and environmental harms they produce in their pursuit of profit. And civil society organisations are increasingly taken to task for their lack of accountability to the people they claim to represent. For pro-accountability activists, this breakdown in legitimate and effective accountability threatens hard-won democratic advances and compounds social, environmental and economic problems in every part of the world.

The 'new accountability agenda' in development debates is concerned with developing innovative responses to these accountability deficits. It involves experiments in accountability *politics* that provide disenfranchised groups with 'opportunities to operationalise rights and to shift the terrain of governance from technical solutions to a more immediate concern with social justice' (Goetz and Jenkins 2004: 3). In these debates, the idea of 'social accountability' has gained prominence as academics and activists attempt to envisage a more direct role for ordinary people in demanding accountability across a more diverse set of jurisdictions. That is, social accountability is concerned with the so-called 'demand-side' of good governance; strengthening the voice and capacity of citizens (especially poor citizens) to participate in exacting greater accountability and responsiveness from public officials and service providers (Malena et al. 2004: 1). The rise of this approach over the past decade has put accountability at the centre of development discourses. As Peter Newell (2006: 37) points out, the 'idea that accountability is central to ensuring the political and market institutions respond to the needs of the poor has acquired the status of a "given" in mainstream development orthodoxy.'

Much of the literature on social accountability is concerned with encouraging civic engagement and involving ordinary citizens in the oversight of *governments*. In the field of international development, the rationale behind this approach is that the failure of state-led development can be ameliorated through the actions of an informed and engaged citizenry that knows its rights and requires governments to uphold them. In other words, fostering 'bottom-up' processes in which active citizens hold governments to account is seen as the key to better development outcomes in the interests of the poor. As such, states remain the predominant reference point in debates about accountability and development (Newell 2006: 41).

However, as development projects on the ground have shifted away from states in recent decades, accountability demands are also increasingly made of non-state development actors, particularly NGOs. The growth of NGOs, especially in the South, has been fuelled by the perceived failure of state-led development approaches and the belief among donors that development NGOs are more cost effective than governments in providing basic social services, are better able to reach the poor, and are key players in democratisation processes (Lewis 1998: 502; Ebrahim 2003: 813). Crucially, as NGOs have become involved in the provision of services (such as health and education), concerns have been raised about whether they have the same incentives to respond to public demands and complaints in the way expected of states (Newell 2006: 44). The higher profile of NGOs as advocates of the poor in international policy processes has also thrust issues of NGO legitimacy and accountability into the spotlight (Hudson 2001). In this light, NGOs are often viewed as powerful actors capable of influencing the lives of ordinary people while evading the reach of conventional state-based accountability systems (Goetz and Jenkins 2004: 1). In more vitriolic terms, *The Economist* (quoted in Slim 2002) has framed the issue in this way: 'The increasing clout of NGOs, respectable and not so respectable, raises an important question: who elected Oxfam, or, for that matter, the League for a Revolutionary Communist International?... In the West, governments and their agencies are, in the end, accountable to voters. Who holds the activists to account?' NGO have long been *agents* of accountability involved in holding governments to account or building this capacity in local communities. Today, they are also very much the *objects* of accountability for donors, recipients, and themselves (Ebrahim 2003: 814–15).

International NGOs working in the development field have long recognised these accountability issues. Indeed, a significant part of the calls for NGO accountability have come from within the sector and have been based on a growing recognition that NGOs are not sufficiently answerable for the outcomes they seek in their interventions (Bonbright 2007: 7). Since the 1990s, on paper at least, policy makers and resident researchers have recognised that to be credible and legitimate NGOs had to meet two main requirements: (1) they had to justify the voice with which they spoke in their campaign materials, press conferences and private lobbying; and (2) they had to establish the effectiveness of their development activities in slums, villages and refugee camps around the world (Slim 2002). The issue of performance effectiveness, in particular, has become increasingly important to NGO legitimacy as more people contest the claim that NGOs are more participatory, less bureaucratic, more flexible, more cost effective, and have a greater ability to reach poor and disadvantaged people (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001a: 13; Ebrahim 2003: 813). Indeed, Richard Mulgan (2000: 90–91) suggests that one of the reasons why non-state actors are often more efficient than governments is that they are not subject to the same levels of accountability. In any case, it is clear that NGOs are no longer able to base their legitimacy on good intentions or their status as value-driven organisations – performance is what matters in today's development agenda. As Henry Shue (2006: 5) writes, 'a "well-intentioned" organisation that constantly fails at what it is doing is an incompetent organisation that should be de-funded and put out of its misery, not honored for having tried hard.' Social accountability initiatives that provide opportunities for local people to participate in holding NGOs to account promise increased development effectiveness, providing the twin benefits of improving outcomes for the poor and reinforcing the legitimacy of NGOs in domestic and international policy-making forums.

In this context, the theme of the remainder of my review is that we need a *political* rather than a *bureaucratic* approach to NGO accountability. Specifically, I suggest that any approach to accountability must recognise that INGO interventions in local communities alter existing power relationships. Crucially, this can sometimes lead to the further disempowerment of local people, especially in situations where NGOs are far more accountable to donors than local people. Despite the value placed on 'partnership', the general trend in Northern NGO (NNGO) interaction with Southern NGOs (SNGOs) and local communities has been an asymmetrical power relationship that involves a largely one-way transfer of money and expertise from North to South (Malhotra, 2000: 658; Lewis 1998: 505). The problem of NNGOs 'capturing' the agenda and taking over the voice of SNGOs is well-known (Slim 2002). In this context, Sarah Lister (2000: 235) argues that the discourse of 'partnership' merely serves to hide the fundamental power asymmetries within development activities. As such, when NNGOs seek to be more accountable to local people, or build the capacity of local people to hold their own governments to account, we must recognise that they are implicated in reshaping circuits of power in those communities. We must recognise that the ability to demand and exercise accountability implies power (Newell 2006: 38). From this perspective, the powerlessness associated with poverty makes accountability difficult: 'being unable to effectively demand accountability is both a part of being poor and one of the reasons why poor people stay poor' (Goetz 2002: 11). According to David Bonbright (2007: 12), the problem with INGOs in these development contexts is that they are too powerful relative to local people and too weak relative to donors.

These asymmetrical power relationships create a situation where the needs of donors are driving an 'accountability industry' that favours bureaucratic and technical measures of compliance, including the use of log-frames, certification systems, complex reporting requirements, rating systems and codes of conduct (Jordan 2005: 11–12). Without taking into account the deeply political nature of accountability and the broader impact of NGOs on a community's human development, accountability is reduced to compliance with the narrowly defined financial and technical rules set by donors, which can serve to consolidate the power of those who have the time and resources to validate their actions by improving their systems of management, reporting and auditing (Newell 2006: 38). Politicising accountability means that the focus of accountability initiatives is placed on building more equal relationships with local people in order to foster a process of local self-empowerment that allows poor people to hold NGOs and other actors to account. While there may always be political hierarchies of some kind, accountability is an essential part of creating checks and balances that ensure the less privileged and powerful can challenge and reshape the dynamic of social power (Bonbright 2007: 2). For NGOs, this accountability agenda is framed by a mindset of performance rather than compliance (Burgis and Zadek 2006: 54). Accountability is a process that must be initiated and negotiated through dialogue between 'partners' to ensure effective development performance. This dialogue ensures that accountability mechanisms are appropriate to the specific contexts in which they must operate and avoids relying on standard accountability templates handed down by donors that do little to change the lives of poor people.

My review consists of three parts. In the first part, I outline the way in which voice has become a central concept in the literature on accountability and discuss the implications for development NGOs. Next, I provide a summary of social accountability initiatives that might serve as a guide to improving NGOs accountability and the role of NGOs in helping local communities to hold other actors to account. In the final section, I analyse the promises, problems and pitfalls for INGOs in taking a social accountability approach. I conclude by suggesting that NGOs must be leaders in experimenting with new accountability initiatives if they seek to foster the transformative learning and empowerment necessary for promoting progressive change at home and abroad.

II. Voice and Social Accountability

According to Burgis and Zadek (2006: 6), accountability is about holding people to account for their impacts on the lives of people and the planet. When it works, it means those impacted have the right to be heard and their views taken into account. It also means those with power have the obligation to listen and respond. And, crucially, it means there are adequate sanctions to enforce these rights and obligations (Burgis and Zadek 2006: 6). In slightly more academic terms, Goetz and Jenkins (2002: 5) distinguish two basic forms of accountability: *answerability* and *enforceability*. Answerability entails providing information about one's actions and justifications for their correctness. Enforceability involves having to suffer penalties from those dissatisfied with the actions or with the rationale invoked to justify them (Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 5; Mulgan 2000: 87). In the public sector, answerability requires public officials to actively inform and explain what they are doing and justify themselves to citizens in plain language, not merely 'leave their ledgers open on their desks so that passersby can catch a glimpse of their reports' (Ackerman 2005: 4). Elections, of course, are the main mechanisms of enforcement for political representatives, but public enforceability more broadly entails 'the capacity of accounting agencies to impose sanctions on power holders who have violated their public duties' (Schedler 1999: 14).

In public choice terms, accountability is a 'voice' rather than an 'exit' option (Mulgan 2000: 88; Hirschman 1970). It assumes that the client or citizen needs to engage in dialogue with a particular agency rather than simply seeking a formal alternative to the agency or making do with an informal substitute. In governance terms, 'voice' is understood to describe 'how citizens express their interests, react to government decision-making or the positions staked out by parties and civil society actors, and respond to problems in the provision of public goods such as education and health services, infrastructure or defence' (Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 9). In the development sector, a lot of effort has been made by NGOs to listen to the voices of the poor and socially marginalised in order to foster participation and accountability. But many of these attempts to elicit the voices of ordinary people are 'conducted on terms dictated by the organisers. They are by "invitation only". They are the powerless answering to the powerful' (Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 10). In this situation, the participation of the poor is a 'sham ritual', functioning as little more like a feel-good exercise for both the local community and the NGO (Ebrahim 2003: 818; Najam 1996: 346). In terms of accountability, Najam (1996: 346–47) argues that the sham of participation translates into the sham of accountability because unlike donors, local communities cannot withdraw their funding; unlike governments they cannot impose conditionalities.

Genuine accountability in development contexts reverses this relationship, making the powerful answer to the poor and marginalised in whose name they act, *under threat of sanction* (Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 10). From this perspective, voice is an integral part of accountability: 'for there to be answerability – the obligation for power-holders to justify their decisions and action – someone has to be asking the questions' (Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 9). The main implication for NGOs working with poor and socially excluded groups is that ordinary people must be endowed with a genuinely 'questioning voice' for there to be meaningful accountability. This requires 1) communities to have knowledge of their rights and responsibilities; 2) access to information to be able to assess if they are being met; 3) mechanisms and institutions in which to ask questions and make accountability demands; and 4) the availability of credible grievance and redress mechanisms that lead to demonstrable remedial action (Roche 2007a: 21; Roche 2007b: 5–6). This last point is particularly important: 'the voicing of preferences or judgments divorced from the necessity of consequent action is akin to shouting in the void' (Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 9). More broadly, thinking about accountability in this way means recognising that the opportunity to express voice is no longer at the discretion of the service provider – citizens are not only 'users and choosers' of services, but also as 'makers and shapers' who claim the basic right to shape social policy and social provisioning (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001a). In this way, voice is not only about interrogating power-holders about their actions, or rendering judgments about sanctions; the capacity for expressing voice and the interplay of *many* voices 'is the means by which societies evolve the standards of justice and morality against which the powerful are held accountable'(Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 9).

This constructive role for voice has been particularly important in the push for 'social accountability' in the development sector. Malena et al. (2004: 3) define social accountability as 'an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e. in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organisations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability.' There are three main arguments for a social accountability approach (Malena et al. 2004: 4–6). First, social accountability leads to *improved governance* by enhancing the ability of citizens to move beyond mere protest and engage with bureaucrats, politicians, and NGOs in a more informed, organised, constructive and systematic manner, thus increasing the chances of effecting positive change. In this sense, they provide extra sets of checks and balances on the proper conduct of public agencies (Newell 2006: 48). Second, social accountability contributes towards *increased development effectiveness* by promoting improved public service delivery and more informed policy design. Social accountability mechanisms can help to overcome perennial development problems like the misallocation of resources, leakages/corruption, weak incentives, information asymmetries, or a lack of communication between service providers and recipients. Third, social accountability initiative can lead to *empowerment, particularly for poor people*, by expanding freedom of choice and action. Social accountability mechanisms are aimed at enhancing the voice of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups so that they are empowered to demand and achieve greater responsiveness from service providers. In this light, the social accountability approach promises much for INGOs because their legitimacy rests on performing effectively and accounting transparently (Edwards and Hulme 1995: 6; Atack 1999: 858). Specifically, the social accountability approach reveals that these two sources of NGO legitimacy can be mutually reinforcing.

The problem for NGOs, of course, is that they have accountability relationships with a variety of different stakeholders (I shall return to this problem below). This problem is further complicated by the fact that these different stakeholders may have very different perspectives on what it means to be accountable and what makes a quality relationship (Eyben 2005: 100). Therefore, an NGO will find it extremely difficult to be perceived as legitimate by all its differently positioned stakeholders at all times: an NGO that endeavours to become more legitimate in the eyes of the World Bank, may not improve its legitimacy in the eyes of its Southern partners (Hudson 2001: 332).

As such, NGOs (or any other actor) cannot achieve a final end-state of legitimacy through the reform of structures or procedures – when thinking about NGO legitimacy we must ask the crucial questions 'legitimate to whom?' and 'legitimate for what?' (Lister 2003: 178). This suggests that the first step in any accountability process is to map and analyse an NGO's various stakeholders in a given situation, and then find ways to prioritise the stakeholders in some way (Slim 2002). This is not an easy task. Indeed, many of the concerns expressed about the weak accountability of NGOs relate to the difficulties they face in prioritising and reconciling 'upward' accountabilities to trustees, donors and host governments, and 'downward' accountabilities to their partners, beneficiaries, staff and supporters (Edwards and Hulme 1995: 9–10). However, given that the values of development NGOs centre on the empowerment of and partnership with the poor, it is their relationships with local people and Southern partners that ought to take precedence in their development activities (Hudson 2001: 332). Importantly, the prioritisation of the poor in NGO accountability may have broader legitimising consequences. For example, embracing a primary political responsibility to local communities might allow NGOs to be more widely regarded as rightful participants in the shaping of global governance (Hudson 2001: 332).

These questions of legitimacy also suggest that NGO accountability is a process that involves inclusive dialogues with multiple stakeholders (Bonbright 2007: 6). It is best understood as 'inclusive dialogues that allow diverse parties to do the hard but important work of forging consensus about what success should look like and then agreeing on the pathways we will walk together to realise that success' (Bonbright 2007: 15). This idea fits with the literature on deliberative democracy in the sense that accountability involves the deliberation of citizens and experts in order to yield better answers to common problems (Ferejohn 2006: 7). And it questions the emphasis placed on the technical approach to measuring and reporting that often dominates NGO accountability work. In the end, social accountability is aimed at reaching out to the poor with the support they need to initiate their own accountability actions and ensuring that accountability mechanisms are designed in the interests of the poorest (Malena et al. 2004: 5–6). In this way, the social accountability approach promises a more active and engaged civil society and more responsive and effective service provision (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001b: 32).

III. A Review of Social Accountability Initiatives

In this section, I provide a list of the most prominent accountability mechanisms that have involved NGOs in the literature under review. Most of these relate to the use of social accountability mechanisms in holding governments to account. In the next section, I explore the promises, problems and pitfalls of these accountability mechanisms from the point of view of development NGOs.

There is an array of different accountability mechanisms that NGOs have employed in recent decades. These include: reports and disclosure statements; performance assessments and evaluations; social audits; certification and self-regulation; strong oversight boards that are independent from management and include key stakeholders affected by the organisation's operations; complaints procedures oriented toward internal and external stakeholders; conflict of interest policies; officers to make sure the organisation pursues only those opportunities that speak directly to the core values or mission; whistleblower protection policies; ombuds functionaries who can respond to concerns from external stakeholders (Jordan 2005: 10; Ebrahim 2003). Where these mechanisms have involved accountability to external stakeholders, it is donors and host governments that have been the primary actors demanding accountability. Social accountability mechanisms that involve demands by the poor are much less common.

Social accountability initiatives come in many forms depending on the context in which they are used. There are four types of initiative that have been documented to date (McNamara 2006: 5):

1. Giving citizens power over service providers either through individual choice of providers or collective control over provider activities.

2. Providing citizens with information to allow them to compare services delivered with resources promised or with service in another area. This may be undertaken by civil society or by governments. The most common mechanisms are Participatory Budget Analysis and 'freedom of information' reforms.

3. Participation in decision-making by citizens so that their preferences for services and their views on service quality can be heard by the government. The most common mechanism is Participatory Budgeting.

4. Monitoring of service delivery. These mechanisms include Participatory Budget Expenditure Tracking, grievance procedures, surveys of service access and quality, social audits, citizen report cards, community score cards.

In the literature under review, the type 4 is by far the most used initiative, which highlights that social accountability initiatives have been stronger on answerability than enforcement (Newell 2006: 50). But the relative lack of mandatory sanctions does not render them insignificant – they may still have important material consequences (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2002: 227). In addition, there are examples of social accountability initiatives from most parts of the developing world, although such initiatives are largely absent from countries without at least a formal commitment to democracy (McNamara 2006: 7)

Budget Analysis, Budget Monitoring and Participatory Budgeting

> **India:** Budget Analysis of multiple levels of government on behalf of the poor led by Samarthan Centre for Budget Studies, the Consumer Unity and Trust Society (CUTS) in Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu People's Forum for Social Development (TNPFSD) and the Centre for Governance and Accountability (McNamara 2006: 9–11).

> **Indonesia:** Budget Analysis of the North Sumatra provincial budget by Forum Indonesia uintuk Transparansi Anggran (FITRA) and gender budget analysis by Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia (KPI) (McNamara 2006: 11)

> **Indonesia:** Budget Analysis of Housing in Bandung (NcNamara 2006: 28–29).

> **Nepal:** Training in Budget Analysis conducted by the Citizens' Poverty Watch Forum (CPWF). Largely unsuccessful due to domestic political crises (McNamara 2006: 11–12).

> **Philippines:** Gender Budget Analysis in Bacolod City in Negros Occidental province by Development through Active Women Networking Foundation (DAWN) (McNamara 2006: 11).

> **Marshall Islands:** Gender Budget Pilot funded by the Asian Development Bank with technical support from the University of South Australia (McNamara 2006: 12–13).

> **Brazil:** Participatory Budgeting now takes pace in 250 municipalities (McNamara 2006: 9–11).

> **Malawi:** Budget Monitoring. Surveys were conducted by various CSOs to monitor actual outputs against revenue (NcNamara 2006: 17).

> **Peru:** Participatory Budgeting. In 2003 40 percent of regions completed participatory budgets and were included in the national budget for that year (McNamara 2002: 20–21).

Government Administrative Reform
> **India:** 'Right to Information' movement led by The Workers' and Farmers' Power Organisation (MKSS) in Rajasthan (NcNamara 2006: 8–9).

> **USA:** Administrative Procedures Act obliges federal agencies to publish proposed rules and decisions and open them up for 'public comment' for at least 30 days before they take effect (Ackerman 2005: 18).

Report Cards
> **India:** Citizen Report Cards pioneered by the Public Affairs Centre (PAC) in Bangalore to measure access to services and perceptions of quality. These surveys have transferred to other parts of the country (NcNamara 2006: 14; Ackerman 2005: 14).

> **Nepal:** Bharatpur Report Card conducted by Participatory and Holistic Approach to Development, and Transparency International in 2000. They uncovered systemic corruption. (NcNamara 2006: 14).

> **Sri Lanka:** Report Card without Impact. The Colombo Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) ran a report card survey in 2001. It uncovered that most people do not complain to officials because they considered it pointless. (NcNamara 2006: 15).

> **Philippines:** Manila Report Card on Public Services. The PAC report card methodology was used for nine municipal areas in Manila commissioned by the Asian Development Bank and conducted by the Development Academy of the Philippines (NcNamara 2006: 15).

> **Solomon Islands** Report Cards and Surveys were conducted by the Solomon Islands Development Trust on education, health and utilising resources and accessing markets.

Citizens' Juries
> **India:** Andhra Pradesh Citizen Jury on Rural Development 2001. The jury consisted of 20 small farmers, traders, food processors and consumers and were asked to consider a number of different scenarios for agricultural

development. The jury then presented its findings to the government (NcNamara 2006: 28).

Social Audits
> **Pakistan:** Social Audits have been conducted from 2001 by the National Reconstruction Bureau and Community Information and Epidemiological Technologies (CEIT) International (NcNamara 2006: 14–15).

> **India:** Informal Vigilance Committees set up by the Action Committee for Rationing (RKS) to conduct social audits (Ackerman 2005: 16).

> **India:** Social Audits were conducted by ActionAid in Orissa in 2000 to review its emergency work (Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 50).

Surveys
> **Cambodia:** Survey on Corruption was conducted in 1998 by the Centre for Social Development (CSD) (NcNamara 2006: 18).

> **Sri Lanka:** Temporary Housing Survey (Roche et al. 2005).

> **India:** Bangalore Children's Survey of Roads was conducted by children aged 12–14 to generate information on road quality as well as improve civic awareness (McNamara 2002: 27)

Committees, Boards and Councils
> **Chad:** Independent Accountability Board. The World Bank is insisting on the creation of an accountability board to oversee oil revenues. The board will include several representatives from civil society (Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 53).

> **Bolivia:** Local Vigilance Committees. Community based organisations are empowered to scrutinise the municipal government's use of assets and income (Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 67).

> **Sri Lanka:** Gender Watch (Roche et al. 2005: 4).

> **El Salvador, India and Indonesia:** Community School Management involves the participation of the community in the hiring of teachers and monitoring school performance (McNamara 2002: 21–22).

> **Bangladesh:** Health Watch Committees consisting of local residents that monitor the performance of state health services (McNamara 2002: 25)

> **Brazil:** Health Management Councils are made up of representatives of CSOs including regional health movements, patients' associations and unions (McNamara 2002: 26).

Community Scorecards
> **Gambia:** Community Scorecard Pilot Project focussing on the health and education sectors to combine input tracking and service monitoring (McNamara 2006: 17).

Participatory Poverty Assessments
> **Laos:** Participatory Poverty Assessment conducted by ActionAid: <http://www.mekongwetlands.org/Common/download/Laos_PPA_Final_w_cover.pdf>

> **Vietnam:** Participatory Poverty Assessment conducted by ActionAid: <http://www.actionaid.org.vn/Web/JobsDetail.aspx?zoneid=9&subzone=20&distid=334&lang=en-US>

> Ugandan Participatory Poverty Assessment Process conducted in conjunction with local governments and NGOs have led to changes in policies and priorities in national and local budgets (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001a: 17)

Other Monitoring Mechanisms
> **South Africa:** Real-time Monitoring of Accountability. The Pubic Service Accountability Monitor (PSAC) keeps track of individual cases of misconduct and corruption and the reactions of the government departments to these cases, and monitors the performance of individual department's compliance with regulations and disciplinary procedures (Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 73–75).

> **Vietnam:** Participatory Video (Roche 2007b: 1–4).

> **Bangladesh:** Websites on Infrastructure Projects were created in 2003 that disclose information on technical and financial aspects of infrastructure development (McNamara 2002: 27).

Other Relevant Standards, Codes of Conduct and Certification
> **Philippines:** The Philippines Council for NGO Certification (PCNC) provides a service to help NGOs assess, and if necessary, improve their internal governance and management arrangements, and in certifying NGOs that meet specified standards. Although the PCNC was initially formed to protect the special tax status enjoyed by NGOs and to encourage donations to NGOs, it has also begun to exert a policy influence at the national level (Ebrahim 2003: 821)

> **United Kingdom:** Humanitarian NGO Accountability has involved a Code of Conduct; a Humanitarian Charter and a set of technical standards; a new emphasis on the quality and transparency of evaluations; an active learning network involving gathering information and sharing lessons learnt from humanitarian operations (ALNAP); initiatives to explore quality models and professional accreditation; and a not-quite Ombudsman called the Humanitarian Accountability Project to act as an impartial and independent voice for those affected by disaster and conflict (Slim 2002; Ebrahim 2003: 821)

> International Accountability Charter for international NGOs being developed by Civicus, the global civil society coalition (Burgis and Zadek 2006: 20)

> Keystone Standard of Reporting requiring civil society to include the voices of those most affected in their public reports (Burgis and Zadek 2006: 22).

> Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (Ebrahim 2003: 821; Roche 2007a).

IV. Key Issues for Development NGOs

This final section maps the most important promises, problems and pitfalls of social accountability for development NGOs. It also addresses some general problems that NGOs face when thinking about how to build robust and effective accountability relationships.

The Critical Factors for Successful Social Accountability Initiatives

Early experience with social accountability mechanisms has shown that many of the mechanisms highlighted in the previous section have the potential to produce significant operational results (improved performance, the introduction of corrective measures) as well as process outcomes (institutional, behavioural and relational changes) (Malena et al. 2004: 12). Experience also suggests that these mechanisms work best when they are integrated into a social accountability system that creates synergies and creates an enabling environment that enhances and extends the impacts of each initiative – in Peru, for example (Malena et al. 2004: 12; McNamara 2002: 20–21; Ackerman 2005: 29). However, most successful social accountability initiatives have been far from systematic. They have been opportunistic responses to particular situations, but their success has been due to a few general factors (taken from Malena et al. 2002: 12–14):

> **Political Context and Culture:** The feasibility and likelihood of success is highly dependent on whether the political regime is democratic, basic civil and political rights are guaranteed and whether there is a culture of transparency and probity. More broadly, Newell (2002: 49) argues that they are limited to places where the state tolerates forms of protest and criticism; where a free media exists; and an accessible and functioning legal system operates. This does not mean that social accountability initiatives should not be tried where these elements are lacking, but it does highlight that accountability procedures cannot be realistically expected to be uniform across a wide range of NGO activity. Accountability methodology will often have to be developed imaginatively on the ground in many contexts where 'off the shelf' mechanisms may be unworkable (Slim 2002).

> **Access to Information:** Availability and reliability of public documents is essential to building social accountability. The quality and accessibility of such information is a key determinant of the success of social accountability mechanisms.

> **The Role of the Media:** In many countries, independent media is the leading force in informing/educating citizens. Monitoring government performance and exposing corruption. A common element of almost all social accountability initiatives is the strategic use of both traditional and modern forms of media to raise awareness around public issues, disseminate findings and create a platform for public debate.

> **Civil Society Capacity:** The level of organisation of CSOs, the breadth of their membership, their technical and advocacy skills, their capacity to mobilise and effectively use the media, their legitimacy and representivity and their level of responsiveness and accountability are all central to the success of social accountability initiatives.

> **State Capacity:** Social accountability initiatives make little sense where the state machinery has collapsed or is entirely ineffectual. A functioning public administration that has some capacity to respond to citizen demands is therefore a prerequisite.

> **State-Civil Society Synergy:** Ultimately, the success of social accountability initiatives depends on some form of effective interaction between civil society and the state. Meaningful results are most likely to be achieved when citizens, politicians and bureaucrats all have the incentive to act.

> **Institutionalisation:** While *ad hoc* or one-off social accountability initiatives can make a difference, experience shows that their impact is greatest and most sustainable when social accountability mechanisms are institutionalised. However, Ackerman (2005: 19) suggests there is such a thing as 'over-institutionalisation' where the state has the power to divide, co-opt and control civil society. Institutionalisation must always aim at empowering existing societal actors to make their voices heard and to apply sanctions on misbehaving or ineffective governments.

The Problems and Pitfalls of Social Accountability

There are a number of problems and pitfalls of social accountability initiatives that NGOs must consider when thinking about whether to adopt them, or how to implement them on the ground:

> NGOs might see their role in social accountability initiatives as helping citizens speak 'truth to power'. However, NGO biases might subtly determine what 'truth' is. When seeking feedback on their own performance and the performance of others, NGOs might be tempted to select the views that accord with their own values. This may produce 'echoes' of dominant discourses rather than alternative framings of policy issues (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001a: 8). In aid-dependent societies, honest feedback may be hard to get (Eyben 2005: 104).

> Development NGOs must also recognise that participation is a difficult and time-consuming process for the poor (Atack 1999: 862). There are limits to putting the onus of vigilance on those who have the least time for, and the most to lose from, challenging the local power-holders on whom they depend for employment or patronage (Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 69). Citizen monitoring requires a level of organisation and persistence that is often beyond many communities who are involved in consultation exercises (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001b: 35).

> Social accountability might leave the local structures of social power untouched if established elites and patriarchies are the only participants. The question that must be asked is: will political voice be used to promote the common interest? (Edwards and Sen 2000: 609). There is also the real danger that activists seeking the empowerment of the poor might become co-opted into political systems that preserve the status quo (Burgis and Zadek 2006: 31)

> There are also a number of risks for NGOs in being completely transparent to all stakeholders. Transparency can undermine the role of NGOs in progressive change in some countries. As Lisa Jordan writes: 'If you're working under a regime that isn't open, you are expected to follow Western standards of accountability. But if you're completely transparent and your goal is to bring about more democratic governance, you could be shut down immediately' (quoted in Burgis and Zadek 2006: 19). Complete transparency to donors might also threaten NGO funding. As Wallace and Chapman (2003: 14) point out, 'in spite of donors saying they encourage reporting on failure and learning from experience, UK NGOs cite too many examples where their funding has been threatened because of talking too openly about problems'. Publicising failures also threatens to tarnish the public reputation of NGOs, which can have important legitimacy consequences.

> Finally, we have the problem that excessive monitoring and reporting erodes trust and paralyses organisations in a straitjacket of paperwork (Burgis and Zadek 2006: 33). This is especially the case if a bureaucratic, procedural, target-setting mindset is applied to social accountability and there is not a negotiated process of what is to be measured (Jordan 2005: 9). As Slim (2002) argues, an overly business-like application of quality and standards could distort relationships of solidarity, accompaniment and solidarity between NGOs and poor people.

Accountability for Organisational Learning

Adopting a social accountability approach means viewing accountability as an opportunity to learn rather than, in essentially negative terms, as a check on the misuse of power. In this light, accountability is 'the means by which we can plan, implement, monitor, assess and learn how to solve our most important problems' (Bonbright 2007: 3). When designing accountability mechanisms we must recognise that accountability for control, with its focus on uncovering malfeasance and allocating 'blame', can conflict with accountability for improvement, which emphasises managerial discretion and embracing error as a source of learning (Newell 2006: 51). In order to encourage this learning culture, donors need to make funding less contingent on simplistic assessments of success, and more closely linked to criteria of capacity-building and learning (Ebrahim 2003: 818). In this vein, Rosalind Eyben (2005: 99) argues that donors might be able to enhance their performance more through improvising rather than through greater efforts at strategic control, and that they can do this responsibly by strengthening their accountability to all stakeholders in the aid system by *investing in relationships*. The arguments for taking a learning approach are well understood: 'the issues of development are complex, the problems challenging and difficult to address, the constraints of poor contexts often militate against even achieving the activities planned (Wallace and Chapman 2003: 10). Much of the rhetoric around development work focuses on learning and the learning organisation, but often upward accountability requirements to donors undermine these goals in practice.

The Problem of Multiple Stakeholders

Developing an accountability system for NGOs means tailoring different accountability relationships to different stakeholders. The problem for NGOs is that donors are increasingly demanding quantitative measures of financial accountability involving strategic plans, detailed reporting, and tight and difficult-to-change budgets (Wallace and Chapman: 2003: 6). This financial reporting is onerous and privileges larger NGOs that have the capacity to meet the standards of donors (Wallace and Chapman 2003: 13). These bureaucratic accountability mechanisms are time-consuming and expensive (Jordan 2005: 9; Ebrahim 2003: 822). This means that a significant amount of time and money spent reporting to donors is taken away from helping the poor. Tight budgets and pre-determined goals also discourage innovative and experimental projects, especially for smaller NGOs.

All too often this upward accountability to donors takes priority over downward accountability to the poor. Furthermore, these techniques of financial accountability are often passed downward when NGOs themselves become donors for their Southern partners (Wallace and Chapman 2003: 8). This risks distorting the relationship of trust and partnership with the local people. And it means that NGO downward accountability often remains underdeveloped (Ebrahim 2003: 824). Due to competition for limited amounts of donor money, NGOs also tend to engage in 'promise inflation' and become defensive and secretive about their problems and failures (Wallace and Chapman 2003: 8). This means they are susceptible to reputational losses when these promises are not realised in practice. Ultimately, a bureaucratic approach fixed on compliance with pre-determined goals undermines investment in longer term development relationships. This is lamentable because aid is better delivered where long term relationships of trust have been developed on the ground (Roche et al. 2005).

V. Concluding Remarks

As a final word, I want to echo David Bonbright's sentiment that NGOs are in the best position to take the lead in developing effective systems of learning and accountability. Crucially, this must involve NGOs taking an entrepreneurial and activist approach to their accountability (Bonbright 2007: 15). As Hugo Slim (2002) argues, as groups that make it their business to demand accountability in others, NGOs have a particular responsibility to lead by example in this area and shine as beacons of legitimacy and accountability. NGOs must become exemplars of the society they want to create (Edwards and Sen 2000: 615). We also must remember that accountability should not be a brake on action, but an engine for change (Burgis and Zadek 2006: 34). Clearly, social accountability initiatives have the potential to reshape accountability relationships in many development contexts, but it is likely that progress will come through innovation and experimentation, not one-size-fits-all prescriptions.

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