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DOWNWARD ACCOUNTABILITY

Ensuring accountability towards the people

The idea that local people have rights and are active shapers of their own development, has led to a paradigm shift from a morally instilled cooperation to a rights-based approach. From this viewpoint, accountability reflects the relation between duty bearers, who have to account for their activities and right holders, who should claim accountability. NGOs as service deliverers and/ or promoters of advocacy thus have a duty to be accountable to their stakeholders. Good intentions, moral values and a not-for-profit orientation cannot be used as an excuse. While most organisations have put a lot of effort in ensuring accountability towards donors and governments in the last decades, little progress has been made in addressing primary stakeholders. There is growing critique that international aid is not accountable to those who are directly affected, and distorts accountability of governments and donors away from citizens. Consequently, the focus of accountability is now shifting towards the people concerned. By implementing downward accountability, NGOs not only fulfil an obligation they have towards local people, but also increase their credibility and set an example in order to raise awareness on accountability.

Helvetas has given more weight to downward accountability by including it in the new “Civil Society and the State” (CS&S) working area strategy as a cross-cutting topic which has to be implemented throughout the new working field, governance and civic space. This paper outlines the Helvetas guidelines on downward accountability and provides rough guidance on how to include Downward Accountability in the Helvetas’ projects and programmes.

CONCEPTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is defined as the obligation of power holders to take responsibility, and to be answerable and liable with regard to their actions and choices. Power holders refer to those who hold political, financial or other forms of power, usually governments, civil society organisations and market actors. Two essential components are:

- 1) **Answerability:** The right of the people to get a response and the duty of the power holder to provide it;
- 2) **Enforceability:** The capacity to ensure an action is taken through access to mechanisms for redress when accountability fails (IDS, 2006).

The different forms of accountability often overlap and cannot be strictly separated from each other.

Downward accountability obliges the power holders to be accountable to the people. An NGO – be it local or international donor, implementer or partner – needs to ensure accountability to the people concerned. If the local partner is a government agency or any organisation managing local public resources, downward accountability strongly overlaps with public accountability.

Public Accountability refers to the spending of public resources, the execution of public duties and responsibilities that serve the public. It is thus the national, district and local governments who are accountable to the citizens for all their actions and decisions taken.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Accountability is an ongoing process with an intrinsic motivation to disclose information and include the primary stakeholders in the project cycle and empower them to voice their interests. Downward accountability does not mean that an organisation has to do everything a stakeholder requests. Furthermore, it is an opportunity to learn and improve and requires investment in relationships. Helvetas thus adheres to the following principles of downward accountability (based on One World Trust, 2005):

1) Transparency

Transparency means providing all necessary information to stakeholders in an easy accessible way. But transparency is more than a one-way flow of information; it is an ongoing dialogue between Helvetas and its stakeholders.

2) Participation

Participation refers to the way stakeholders are involved in the programme and in all stages of the project cycle (planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation). People should participate in order to be the 'makers and shapers' of their own development (Gaventa, 2009).

However, participation is only effective if it is inclusive and meaningful and if it really allows for change. There is not much point in consulting with stakeholders if their remarks and concerns are not taken seriously.

3) Feedback

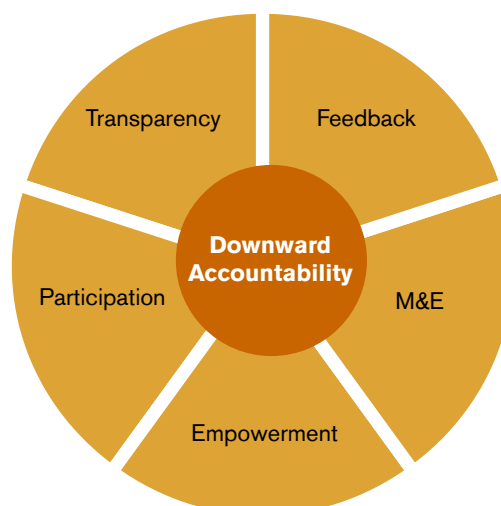
Enabling stakeholders to seek and receive response for grievances and alleged harm is a critical act of accountability. Feedback mechanisms should enable stakeholders to give feedback on the activities of Helvetas through suitable channels. Helvetas in return has the obligation to respond adequately to the requests brought forward. Through ensuring transparency and participation during all project phases, the occurrence of complaints and criticisms is reduced. Consequently, complaint and response mechanisms are accountability processes of last resort.

4) Monitoring and Evaluation

Through monitoring and evaluation, Helvetas is measured against goals, outcomes and outputs and is thereby accountable to various stakeholders. The purposes of the comprehensive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system of Helvetas are to provide a) a basis for steering, b) to capture experiences for organisational learning and c) to ensure upward, downward and mutual accountability. For further information please refer to the "Monitoring and Evaluation at Helvetas" document. Wherever possible, Helvetas includes the voices of the beneficiaries in evaluations and in monitoring practices.

5) Empowerment

Effective downward accountability needs to ensure social inclusion and empowerment of marginalised groups. As accountability is often not rooted in the culture of the countries where development cooperation engages, the respective country programmes have to ensure an adequate implementation of the concept as well as the necessary empowerment and awareness raising strategies. At the same time, accountability can lead to empowerment, as it gives freedom of choice and action to poor people.



STANDARDS

1) Transparency

Information shared by an organisation should be deliberated carefully and adapted to the local contexts. The challenge is to provide enough information but not overburden people with unnecessary documents. Generally, the information should include:

- Vision, mission and goals; and the respective country programme, annual report, annual plans (where, when, duration, money, who is responsible)
- Organisational structure and processes (i.e. governance and decision-making processes)
- Financial information detailing income and expenditure, audit reports, resource allocation
- Monitoring & evaluation policy
- Project information
- Criteria for beneficiary/ target area selection

Annual and audit reports provide information to various stakeholders. However, publishing these on a website ensures transparency only for stakeholders who are literate and have access to electronic equipment. The most affected stakeholder group – the people concerned – remain largely unaware. Thus, information needs to be provided in a language they understand, and in a format that is easily accessible and understandable. Information should be focused on activities that are relevant for the people. Some information might need to be kept confidential; however it is crucial that privacy claims are not used as an excuse for not sharing information.

Ideas on how to ensure transparency

- Posters, leaflets or signboards outside the offices
- Presentations at regular public meetings
- Using media such as radio and newspapers
- Right to Information policy of the organisation
- Provide information on local website
- Public Audits/Social Audits
- Factsheet with annual key information
- Multi-stakeholder forums

2) Participation

Key stakeholders, especially primary stakeholders, are actively consulted and engaged throughout the project cycle. Despite the often short time period to draft the project proposal, the concerned people must be involved in decision-making. This will slow down processes, but in return increase credibility, cooperation and ultimately legitimacy. A clear policy on which stakeholders are involved, when and to what extent, builds the basis for participation in each country programme. Ideally, local people and partners should take the lead in making decisions and be owners of the work, while Helvetas should play a supporting role. In order to ensure participation, meetings and discussions have to be scheduled carefully, not according to the needs of project staff, but considering busy farming and house chore times. Only when the people are not under pressure, can they participate meaningfully.

Ideas on how to ensure participation

- Annual meetings with local people
- Public Audits/ Social Audits
- Including primary stakeholders in steering committees
- Community Scorecards
- Coordinating calendars (farming and house chore calendar with the organisation's availability)
- Radio
- Participatory Rural Appraisal tools
- Staff training in participation, facilitation

3) Feedback Mechanisms

Effective feedback and complaint mechanisms, a “channel for concern”, have to be formalised and institutionalised, together with local people and partners. This includes a description on what constitutes a valid complaint (e.g. project related complaints) as well as a statement that not all feedback can be adopted, but will be taken into serious consideration. Complaints can be dealt with at the lowest effective level, for example when project staff is on a field visit. However, the organisation has to ensure that they are properly reviewed and responded to, probably by the management. In order to deal with and respond to feedback and complaints adequately, project staff might need additional training.

Also the question of ethical handling of information has to be raised and defined, according to the context in the different countries. The challenge is to put in place a structure that stakeholders feel safe to use without fear of victimisation or loss of services. With regard to corruption cases, it is advisable to elaborate a separate anti-corruption concept.

In order to encourage the local people and partners to give feedback, it has to be taken into serious consideration. Not all feedback needs to be adopted; but it needs to be discussed and reflected back to the people concerned. Badly implemented feedback systems can generate misleading data for decision makers and worsen power imbalances among farmers. A power and gender analysis is necessary in order to ensure social inclusion and thereby a comprehensive feedback.

Ideas on how to ensure feedback mechanisms

- Participation in monitoring and evaluation exercises
- Public Audits
- Complaint boxes in project areas
- Complaint committee
- Community score cards
- Regular field visits of project staff
- Regular meetings
- Satisfaction surveys
- Internet online complaint mechanism (including corruption cases)
- Staff attitudes, managers take the lead in creating open and listening culture.

4) Monitoring and Evaluation

While peoples' point of views are usually included in evaluations, monitoring processes only sometimes do. First of all, they should be consulted when collecting the baseline data. When monitoring the projects, including information and feedback from the people is crucial. Ideally, monitoring systems are jointly designed, so that their views on what is important to achieve are also captured. Monitoring satisfaction levels of local people and partners regularly is important and should inform project activities.

Furthermore, the findings need to be reported back to them. In case the people have any complaints, there should be a mechanism to place them. Last but not least, transparency is increased substantially if monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment reports are disclosed as a standard, in a form that is easy accessible and understandable for the beneficiaries.

Ideas on how to ensure accountable monitoring and evaluation practices

- Yearly events to disclose monitoring results
- Primary stakeholders invited to project review meetings
- PRA to solicit the views of a wide range of people concerned
- Draft evaluation reports are shared with beneficiaries
- Community score cards
- Involving local people and partners in the design of the M&E system
- Multi-stakeholder forums

5) Empowerment

Helvetas needs to sensitise on the "Right to Information" and set an example in providing information voluntarily and on request. Ultimately, Helvetas wants to empower people to demand accountability also from the government agencies, the private sector and civil society organisations.

Furthermore, mechanisms need to be in place to ensure that the most affected and marginalised groups are represented and have influence. When discussing participation issues, representation regarding gender, age, race, culture, etc. has to be taken into account. Civic education is a key concept in empowering people to participate.

Staff attitudes and behaviours are crucial, staff need time to invest in relationships of mutual respect with local people and partners, actively promote dialogue and encourage reflection. This requires listening and facilitation skills.

Ideas on how to ensure empowerment

- Social mobilisation of marginalised people
- Awareness raising
- Empower people to demand accountability from government agencies
- Promoting dialogue between stakeholders
- Training in leadership, develop self-esteem of primary stakeholders

HOW CAN HELVETAS HEADOFFICE

SUPPORT YOU?

- Provide support in sensitising stakeholders and staff for accountability issues
- Assist Country Programmes in elaborating their own locally adapted accountability strategies and guidelines
- Provide examples and tools for implementing accountability

INSTRUMENTS AND TOOLS:

REFERENCE LIST

- Public Audits: see Helvetas issue sheet on public audits and Helvetas Manual on Public Audit Practice. https://donyaso.helvetas.org/cop/cop_cs&s.nsf
- Social Audits: UNPAN Toolkit for Social Audits, available at <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/cgg/unpan023752.pdf>
- Planning feedback and complaint mechanisms, One World Trust India Toolkit, tool 13, p.52, available at http://www.oneworldtrust.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=83&Itemid=70
- Complaint Process, One World Trust India Toolkit p.74, available at http://www.oneworldtrust.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=83&Itemid=70
- Beneficiary Reference Groups, available at <http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/tearfund-north-kenya-programme-increasing-levels-of-participation.pdf>
- How to Use Feedback Data? Keystone and AccountAbility. Available at <http://www.bond.org.uk/pubs/quality/report.pdf>
- Community Score Card, available at <http://www.civicus.org/pg/547-community-scorecard>

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