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## Accountability: a report card

By Andrew Lawday

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The story of humanitarian accountability is not yet one of success. After more than a decade of debate about performance, standards and giving beneficiaries a say, accountability problems continue to plague international disaster responses. A sector-wide study by the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, published in July 2006, concluded that poor accountability to affected populations was a significant problem in the response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, and the UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, Bill Clinton, has launched an 'intensive review' into accountability to beneficiaries. According to Save the Children, aid workers are still trading food aid for sex with young girls in Liberia – several years after this unacceptable practice was originally discovered. Displaced people in Darfur have told the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) that they feel undervalued by NGOs, know little about what these organisations are trying to achieve, and – therefore – do

not cooperate with them. A survey of 320 informed individuals, conducted by HAP in March 2006, showed a majority view that relief agencies were unaccountable to intended beneficiaries. Some 81% of respondents said the quality of accountability to beneficiaries was 'low' or 'medium' – while 82% said that accountability to official donors was 'high'.

### Developments during 2005

It is safe to assume that most agencies do not answer to the people they try to assist. Nonetheless, there were signs during 2005 that the humanitarian community was beginning to face the problem of accountability more squarely. Several important studies stressed the link between aid effectiveness and accountability. The Fritz Institute, for example, conducted beneficiary opinion polls to assess perceptions about the effectiveness of emergency aid after the tsunami. It found that consultation with affected people improved aid delivery. In March, Nicholas Stockton, the HAP director, presented a paper at the Geneva Centre for

Security Policy entitled *NGOs and International Security*, which emphasised the link between security, acceptance and accountability. In September, Nicholas used a presentation at the Fifth Asia and Pacific Anti-Corruption Conference in Beijing, called *Preventing Corruption in Humanitarian Relief Operations*, to argue that proper humanitarian accountability can prevent corruption and fraud in humanitarian operations.

Senior UN officials, perhaps for the first time, articulated clear accountability pledges to the people they are mandated to assist. Writing in this publication (no. 30, June 2005), the Emergency Relief Coordinator, Jan Egeland, stated: 'our ultimate accountability as humanitarians is to the people we serve. And we must serve them as people, in a manner that affirms individual dignity'. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, acknowledged that UNHCR

should be primarily accountable to refugees. Secretary-General Kofi Annan told us that all UN funds, programmes and agencies must be clearly accountable 'to both their governing bodies and the people they serve'. These statements came as the UN faced charges of illicit payments, corruption and indiscipline in its Oil-for-Food programme in Iraq.

Meanwhile, many of the leading relief agencies and donors were 'moving towards' greater accountability in 2005, although the impact of such movement remained uncertain. Joint efforts to improve quality and accountability continued through initiatives like Sphere, ALNAP, People in Aid, Compas Qualité, InterAction and Good Humanitarian Donorship. Seven of the largest NGOs launched the Emergency Capacity Building (ECB) project to enhance agency accountability to standards and improve impact measurement. HAP and Sphere also began providing operational support at field level, deploying capacity-builders to Pakistan following the earthquake there in October 2005.

Also in 2005, a number of agencies, including HAP members, made efforts to apply accountability in specific settings. Advances were reported in information exchange, beneficiary feedback and complaints handling, as

these examples from HAP agencies show:

- The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) developed a complaints-handling system in the North Caucasus, where it was providing food aid to over 200,000 mainly displaced people in Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. The system improved food distribution and increased dignity, trust and security.

- In Darfur, Medair used household surveys, individual interviews and patient opinion polls to identify problems and assess impact. Beneficiaries appreciated being asked their opinions, and Medair observed that this contributed to restoring their dignity.

- A mid-term programme evaluation commissioned by Medair and other NGOs in Sri Lanka found that a lack of beneficiary engagement combined with existing communal tensions was creating bitterness among beneficiaries. The agency developed a plan to review the complaints, and formalised a process whereby concerns could be safely voiced directly to Medair.

- Also in Sri Lanka, CARE delegated significant authority to its project directors at an early stage in the tsunami emergency, streamlining decision-making.

- In Indonesia, Oxfam GB introduced an information exchange system to increase

understanding and recognition among beneficiaries and reduce corruption. The agency sought to strengthen its accountability in Aceh and Nias by sharing information with beneficiaries about service delivery.

- In Aceh, World Vision rebuilt the entire physical infrastructure of Lamjabat village, including houses, water and sanitation, roads and pavements, the mosque, women's centre and school, with escape routes and high points (under the village's disaster mitigation plans). The project involved the community from the beginning of the planning phase, enhancing beneficiary pride in, and ownership of, the reconstruction process. World Vision was rated highest by recipients surveyed in Indonesia for quality, dignity and fairness in aid distribution.

HAP also collected examples of good practice from non-members during 2005, including: Save the Children UK's child-centred feedback work in Zimbabwe; International Medical Corps' community-owned water and sanitation work in Aceh; and Merlin's staffing policy in Aceh, which required language skills and a study of the socio-political context before deployment.

## Real improvements in prospect?

All of this concern for accountability would inspire more confidence if the problems these agencies and individuals are trying to address had not been identified over a decade ago. Aid agencies have long recognised the humanitarian accountability 'deficit' – at least since the response to the Rwanda genocide in 1994. There was indeed an accountability revolution after Rwanda, but it was a revolution in accountability to donors, not to beneficiaries. The sector became professionalised, results-based management replaced good intentions and codes and charters were introduced. None of this, however, led to meaningful changes in accountability to beneficiaries. Unlike donors, beneficiaries or affected populations simply did not have the power to *demand* accountability – although clearly they have the most interest in seeing aid operations succeed in meeting vital needs.

Prospects may finally be improving for humanitarian accountability. Accountability experts foresee a beneficiary-centered approach taking hold across the sector in the not-too-distant future. For HAP members and other humanitarians concerned with accountability, the key question is how to implement accountability to beneficiaries.

HAP is therefore developing an accountability standard, a manual for putting it into practice, and a certification system to guarantee it.

At the time of writing, HAP's members and 197 external experts had drafted the first humanitarian accountability standard. To measure up, agencies will establish a quality management system; publish relevant information; seek informed consent from beneficiaries; find means to support local capacity; monitor and improve staff performance; set up complaints-handling procedures; and establish a continuous improvement process. HAP has also begun exploring models to create a certification and accreditation system for humanitarian agencies. Certification processes typically involve self-evaluation by the candidate institution, resulting in a report used for an on-site review by a team of professional peers. The certification body then reviews the reports as the basis for decisions and follow-up action on granting certificated or accredited status.

Regardless of HAP, agencies and donors may soon be compelled to demonstrate accountability. With record amounts of cash allocated to humanitarian action, agencies are facing increasingly critical public attention. They also face stiff competition from small agencies that sometimes find it

easier to be accountable. Governments may impose stricter accountability rules, which could harm aid operations. In 2005, the chairman of the US Senate's Finance Committee announced plans to regulate not-for-profit organisations, and the US Internal Revenue Service outlined requirements to force disclosure of compensation, governance and other policies. NGO leaders themselves have recommended tightening financial operations and maintaining a database of information on charities.

Without proper accountability to beneficiaries, who can rule out a major scandal – perhaps of ENRON proportions – exploding confidence in the whole sector? Opinion polls during 2005 indicate that NGOs still enjoy greater public trust than governments and businesses, but how deserved is that trust? It is sobering to consider the views expressed on the *BBC News* website after the latest aid-for-sex reports from Liberia surfaced. Some international readers stressed that aid agencies, managers and donors should impose proper oversight and accountability. Many more, however, demanded strong punishments for all those involved.

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