



OI Policy Compendium Note on Humanitarian Accountability

Overview: Oxfam International's position on humanitarian accountability

Oxfam International believes that our key stakeholders are those affected by humanitarian crises. We believe that:

- By being more accountable to beneficiaries, humanitarian response programmes can have substantially greater impact, can help affected communities recover more quickly, and can lay stronger foundations for sustainable development;
- All humanitarian programmes should primarily be accountable to beneficiary community members in disaster-affected locations and should be able to prove this independently.

Oxfam International understands that being accountable to beneficiaries of humanitarian aid requires more than statements. It requires the development of a number of practical mechanisms to ensure transparency and openness, and to ensure that all humanitarian responses are appropriate to those affected in terms of their content, scale, and in the way they are implemented. These mechanisms include the following:

- Ensuring the participation of affected communities in all aspects of programme response from assessment to evaluation;
- The provision of information relevant to communities' needs in order that they may claim their rights under international humanitarian law, (and, where relevant, the Guiding Principles for Internally Displaced Persons) – and clearly understand what humanitarian organisations can and cannot provide (according to the Red Cross Code of Conduct); and
- A means for communities to voice both positive feedback and criticism to those providing humanitarian assistance, and receive appropriate redress.

1. Definitions

There is no single, universally accepted definition among international humanitarian organisations of what it means to be accountable in humanitarian responses. Most organisations, including Oxfam, believe that accountability must mean both of these:

- The commitment to respond to, and balance the needs of, different stakeholder groups (One World Trust);¹
- The means by which power is used responsibly (Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International). HAP-I's definition of accountability involves taking account of the needs, concerns, capacities, and disposition of affected parties, and explaining the meaning of, and reasons for, actions and decisions. Accountability is therefore also about the right to be heard, and the duty to respond.²

2. Background

Since 1996, when the Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Genocide in Rwanda was published, a number of initiatives have been developed by different humanitarian organisations to respond to improve both the way humanitarian agencies operate, and their accountability. These

¹ www.oneworldtrust.org.

² www.hapinternational.org.

initiatives include the Sphere Project, ALNAP,³ the People In Aid Code of Best Practice, and the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International, which grew out of the humanitarian Ombudsman Project. Oxfam is a signatory to the Red Cross Code of Conduct (which was agreed in 1994) and to the Sphere Project Principles.

None of these initiatives, however, are regulatory bodies. Their various principles and standards are not binding on their members, and non-compliance does not lead to any sanctions against them. Instead, they act as aspirational targets that humanitarian organisations seek to reach.

In reality, humanitarian organisations find it difficult to monitor how effectively their interventions actually reach these targets, and often find themselves caught in the false dichotomy of choosing between the speed and the quality of their humanitarian responses. Being more accountable to beneficiaries – responding to what *they* choose – would go some way to solving this.

The continuing response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami has focused unprecedented public and media attention on these same questions: how to use humanitarian funds effectively, and how to ensure that those affected by disasters are involved in deciding how and on what the funds are used.

3. Oxfam International's position on humanitarian accountability

Oxfam believes that people affected by crises have the fundamental moral right to receive prompt high-quality humanitarian assistance. This assistance must be provided in all humanitarian crises, to relieve human suffering and to minimise losses to long-term development gains.

To do this effectively, and to have the greatest impact from the use of humanitarian funds, humanitarian agencies must be accountable to those affected by disasters. Putting this into effect as much as it must be means building on our current practice. In Malawi, for example, Oxfam's country staff asked for, and received, practical training in measures to make their work accountable to their stakeholders before the onset of the 2006 food crisis. Following this, the affected communities themselves selected the beneficiaries of Oxfam's programme in a public forum, using mutually agreed criteria.

In a sample of 1,100 beneficiaries interviewed in the subsequent evaluation, all of them said that they knew the rations that they were entitled to, how to collect their entitlement, and who was responsible for delivering them. They were aware of their rights. They knew, for example, that they did *not* need to exchange sex for what was provided, and knew how to seek redress if this was demanded.

But more must be done to ensure that humanitarian agencies are accountable to all their disparate stakeholders. Oxfam's stakeholders include the individuals and communities with whom we work: partners and allies; donors and supporters; our staff and the wider public; and regulatory bodies in both the countries where we operate, and in the countries where Oxfam International's affiliates are based. Balancing these different stakeholders' demands is part of the difficulty of ensuring accountability, choosing whose needs matter most and responding to them appropriately.

We take our accountability to donors extremely seriously. But there is a danger that accountability to more powerful stakeholders, who have a greater influence to affect our current and future responses, can sometimes outweigh our accountability to beneficiaries. Our beneficiaries do not always have either the resources or access to voice either their concerns or praise for Oxfam's performance.

We are therefore increasingly using checklists that allow beneficiaries to score the key features of our programming (such as the Mango Checklist),⁴ and directly involving beneficiaries in monitoring and evaluating our programmes, including 'voting' on questions on our accountability and what it means to them.

³ The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action.

⁴ Accountability to Beneficiaries: A Practical Checklist (draft version)
<http://mango.org.uk/guide/resources/otherresources.aspx>.

In June 2006, Oxfam International – together with a number of other organisations⁵ – signed up to the Accountability Charter, which sets out core values and operating principles for international NGOs. These include good governance and management; fundraising and multi-stakeholder engagement. The Charter also makes specific reference to respect for universal principles (such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), independence, responsible advocacy, effective programmes, non-discrimination, transparency, and ethical fundraising.⁶

In July 2006, Oxfam International commissioned the first external evaluation of our accountability to beneficiaries in our South India Tsunami Response programme. One thousand beneficiaries were interviewed to find out what they thought of Oxfam's response. Lessons from this will be fed into future humanitarian responses.

At the time of writing, in late 2006, Oxfam International affiliates are piloting different practical measures for staff and partners to explore and measure accountability to beneficiaries, working closely with other humanitarian organisations. We plan to extend the practical steps that we already take. For example, Oxfam affiliates rigorously include beneficiaries' perspectives in assessments. But we are still working to improve the tools, and find ways to give beneficiaries the time and (when needed) the skills to involve them in the rest of the project cycle of a humanitarian response.

Similarly, Oxfam affiliates generally use village or community meetings to tell beneficiaries what they can and cannot expect from Oxfam, and their rights, which they may not be aware of, under international law. But such meetings cannot reach everyone. We are committed to increase the ways we use to spread this information to all beneficiaries, using roving information desks, printing on ration cards, and so on.

Oxfam has also piloted a number of ways to hear what beneficiaries think of our performance. We are now developing a number of mechanisms for complaints and feedback that can be adapted for use in the very different situations in which we work.

Oxfam recommends:

That all humanitarian organisations resource and prioritise practical ways to enhance their accountability to beneficiaries by ensuring:

- Participation of affected communities in all aspects of programme response, from assessment to evaluation;
- Provision of information relevant to communities' needs in order that they may claim their rights under international humanitarian law, and clearly understand what humanitarian organisations can and cannot provide;
- A means for communities to voice both positive feedback and criticism to those providing humanitarian assistance, and receive appropriate redress.

⁵ ActionAid International, Amnesty International, CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation, Consumers International, Greenpeace International, International Save the Children Alliance, Survival International, International Federation Terre des Hommes, Transparency International, World YWCA.

⁶ See http://www.oxfam.org/en/news/pressreleases2006/pr060606_ngo_charter.