Governance and Accountability:
Lessons from Bangladesh and the occupied Palestinian territory

Members of the Uria Union women's group meet in Bangladesh
Photo: INTRAC

Lessons from Bangladesh and the occupied Palestinian territory

In 2015, Christian Aid carried out an assessment across our work on governance. We focused on a range of programmes, aiming to draw insight and learning from our work in different contexts. Two of the studies, in Bangladesh and in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), sought to better understand the impact of using Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) Standards and Participatory Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments (PVCAs) in an effort to be accountable to beneficiaries and stakeholders. In particular, the studies examined whether these approaches involving staff, partners and communities had contributed to accountable relationships developing beyond the scope of each programme to other actors such as local government or NGOs. We used contrasting methodologies -an external evaluator using a research-based approach in Bangladesh; a staff member using a participatory photography approach in oPt- to investigate the impact of our programmes.

Both contexts have many similarities: deeply rooted unequal gender norms, unstable political contexts and complex politics. Political power is distant from communities. In Bangladesh, power is largely concentrated in the hands of the political elite, while in oPt, the Israeli Government ultimately holds power over the Palestinian Authority and Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. The learning from the two studies resonated across both locations and we summarise in this paper.

Programmatic approach

The Bangladesh and oPt country programmes have been part of Christian Aid's DFID-funded Programme Partnership Arrangement (PPA) resilience programmes since 2011, combining elements of emergency response and longer term resilience work. In common with other PPA resilience programmes, both used PVCAs as the basis for the work. Community members analyse their vulnerabilities and capabilities, plan actions that they can take themselves and advocate for technical and financial support from others sources, through a participatory methodology.

In developing PVCAs, staff and partners are encouraged to follow key programmatic principles, within a deep understanding of the wider context, to avoid reinforcing

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Key recommendations

1. **Accountability principles should be embedded in our programmes**, but we should be clear on what we realistically expect accountability mechanisms are able to achieve. The HAP/CHS mechanisms are important but our focus should also be on the practice of accountability. Effective use of mechanisms is dependent on ensuring they are contextualised and built on relationships of trust, so that community members feel able to speak out.

2. **We should deepen our understanding of the power dynamics at work**. It is not enough to 'focus on women'; we need to understand how different inequalities intersect and contribute to exclusion. A community 'empowerment' process is not enough to challenge deep-rooted social and political norms, but requires engaging with power holders.

3. **We need to understand how our programmes interact with their local and national context**. Social change is complex and while our programmatic approach is key to underpinning good accountability, we should recognise that we contribute to any change as part of a wider set of factors.

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existing community tensions and inequalities and transferring risks to other areas, communities or social groups. These principles included power and context analysis (concentrating on gender), a focus on accountability and a commitment to *Do No Harm.* In order to push the accountability agenda further, HAP standards were rolled out across the PPA for staff and partners. Our partners focused on community level mechanisms to share information, encourage participation and promote complaints handling. In contrast to a PVCA, which is a tool and a process[i], HAP standards outline a systematic approach to delivering accountability[ii].

Implementing these standards has been helpful in strengthening our programme practice, however, as these studies show, they have not transformed programme relationships on their own. We have learnt that HAP standards work best when integrated into wider programmatic work. The impact of processes like group formation, relationship development and rights training increases over time, as we pursue long-term development programming. This is because engaging with HAP mechanisms requires community members to feel confident to challenge power relations. This is only likely to be possible if a process that works with community members to analyse, use and develop their power has been followed.

Learning and recommendations

1. Group formation and participation had strengthened the impact of each programme

Both programmes targeted women's participation in group formation, rights and gender training and livelihoods development. There was evidence that this participation had strengthened the overall programme impact. Women who had been directly reached felt more empowered to engage in community decision-making and to take opportunities to exert influence. There were numerous examples from both countries. For example, in Bangladesh one women's group stopped a powerful actor increasing a girl's age on her birth certificate, preventing an early marriage; while in oPt a women's group successfully led an advocacy delegation to a local council for the first time to demand access to services.

"Before, our husbands would say, 'why are you going to these meetings? What use are they?' Now they are helping with family chores so that we women can come to meetings and get useful information."

Member of the Uria Union women's group in Bangladesh

Yet it was unclear in these studies whether the empowerment experienced by women at community level had extended to changes for women who were not directly reached by the programme. Aside from anecdotal evidence, it was not apparent whether the focus on participation for women had led to greater inclusion for other vulnerable groups. Understanding the intersecting social dimensions of vulnerability requires a deep analysis of inequality involving significant resources and time, and both programmes were limited in the extent to which they were able to achieve this.

2. Communities were better placed to hold other actors to account

In both Bangladesh and oPt, there was consensus from participant communities and partners that group formation and activities as a result of the PVCA process, coupled with rights and awareness training and the support by HAP, had provided communities with the confidence and means to demand their rights from local authorities and NGOs. Examples of this included community groups becoming more involved in monitoring beneficiary selection. In Bangladesh, partners and communities felt that certain cases government support was less open to manipulation because of the involvement of community groups, while in oPt, a community had taken control of beneficiary selection for shelter project from another NGO to ensure the most vulnerable were reached.

Communities and partners said that they valued advocacy training and accompaniment from Christian Aid in engaging with local authorities as stakeholders. This approach built on group formation to support community organisations to collectively speak up and challenge decision making. In oPt, community groups used this training to gain media coverage to hold local authorities to account over a failure to provide adequate services, eventually securing funding to address the risks they had prioritised. In Bangladesh, women learned about and took on positions in governance bodies such as school management committees.

4. The limitations of an organising approach in influencing wider structural change

Despite the increasing ability of community members to influence local NGOs and other service providers, there was no evidence that either programme had contributed to the ability of partners or communities to address wider structural inequalities. There was little community engagement with state institutions beyond local authority level or with wider networks and advocacy carried out by partners was done so on behalf of communities, rather than with them.

It was noted in Bangladesh that "money and muscle" was still the principle determinant in local decision making, especially for sensitive topics like land rights. The same was apparent in oPt; one community had established protection strategies that allowed a young woman to successfully take action against local Israeli settlers who attacked her, but it was clear that the community did not have the power to facilitate a wider change in relations between the two communities, feeling instead reliant on national processes taking place elsewhere.

These examples show one of the limitations of community organising. To tackle wider issues of power, we need to extend our focus beyond community organising to consider power relations within the household. We also need to work more directly with power holders at national level over a longer period of time.

Reflections on the application and limitations of HAP

1. We should be clear on what we expect accountability mechanisms to achieve

The expectations of delivering HAP training and accompaniment to partners and communities were that they would work together to establish and manage community-level accountability mechanisms, which in turn would empower communities to hold partners and other duty bearers to account. This was partly true in both contexts where we found that implementing systems based on HAP had contributed to reducing the space for unaccountable actions by partners, Christian Aid staff and in some cases other NGOs and local authorities. There were no discernible differences in relationships with wider power holders.

Yet it is also true to say that, particularly at community level, the impact of HAP was difficult to separate from that of the PVCA process or of wider influences. HAP was implemented in each case as part of an integrated package to strengthen wide programmatic work. We should consider our expectations of HAP (and now CHS) and whether these are realistic. Any Theory of Change for accountability should encourage contextual understanding of power relations both within the household and community and in relation to the wider environment, so that HAP mechanisms are designed and implemented effectively. This can support relationship building and empowerment processes.

2. Accountability principles should be embedded into our programmes

Findings in both Bangladesh and oPt showed that the use of PVCAs had systematically grounded the participatory and information sharing elements of HAP in practice, representing a sustainable and systematic way that Christian Aid and our partners can build long-term, transformative relationships with communities. They also recognised that HAP standards were not yet fully embedded in practice. In Bangladesh, not all country programme or partner staff (particularly newer members) were aware of HAP, while in oPt the focus on HAP had not necessarily yet translated into consistent programme practice – for example, one community felt that they were not receiving enough information on project work.

The Bangladesh country team also noted that in many cases, accountability "*is often seen as just a project information board and a complaints box, and detailed complaints mechanisms have not percolated down to the community*." In the future, unlocking the potential of CHS will mean moving beyond delivering training or adding new compliance processes to embedding a way of working that systematically builds accountability into programming practice.

3. Build on the strengths of our partners

In Bangladesh the evidence pointed towards HAP strengthening existing partner-community relationships, rather than developing new ones, making accountability, 'more systematic, transparent and less dependent on fluctuating personal relationships between community members and individual partner staff'. We should be aware that many of our partner organisations have established strong relationships with communities over many years, and may have been implementing accountable practices through their implementation of participatory processes like the PVCA or adherence to other accountability mechanisms such as Sphere. They may or may not need new systems and processes, so we need to be flexible, building on existing relationships and practices and fostering a culture to share learning and good practice.

Translating accountability theory into practice

1. We should deepen our understanding of the power dynamics at work

Power is complex and dynamic and needs to be understood and managed. Although power analysis was carried out in both country programmes it was relatively limited. The focus was on programme design rather than on monitoring, which meant that partners were less able to track and understand change. We should use power analysis as a cross-cutting principle that sits at the heart of inclusion and accountability. This should inform how we implement and monitor our work and help us to understand the extent to which we are challenging existing power relationships and whether more can be done. This will help us to be confident that vulnerable groups are systematically included and that our impact is not being limited to those most able to benefit. We should also consider how a deeper understanding of power would support additional capacity building for advocacy, in order for partners and communities to engage in efforts to shift power more widely.

Women from the village of Amuria, oPt. They feel that social changes are driving women to stay in education longer than in the past. The photo was taken by Ferial, a member of the Amuria Protection Committee established as part of the PPA.

2. Our focus should be on contribution not attribution

Both studies recognised that change does not happen in a vacuum and that there are many other factors influencing a given community and its people other than our programme interventions. These other factors might promote or impede transformation. We should seek to deepen our understanding of such factors (social, political, ecological or technological) that are also driving change. In Bangladesh for instance, the report found that efforts by the state to increase transparency and openness had arguably contributed more to increased demands by communities for access to information than the programme itself.

In oPt, wider social changes were seen to be driving a trend for more girls to remain in education, which was in

turn having a (complimentary) positive social impact on gender equality than programme activities. By deepening our awareness and understanding of the shifting context in which we operate, we would be better able to identify our contribution and situate our programmes alongside other factors driving change.

3. Development work offers the time needed to build accountable relationships

HAP is framed in humanitarian language, but the studies suggested that our long-term interaction and relationship with communities formed during our development programming offers a greater opportunity to build the relationships and trust needed for good accountability between communities and other actors. In humanitarian response, accountability principles and mechanisms are key to ensure agencies act in a responsible and accountable manner towards beneficiaries and other stakeholders, fostering a well-conceived and targeted response. However, without a pre-existing relationship of trust, or deep contextual knowledge we need to be realistic in what we expect accountability mechanisms are able to achieve. Investment in accountability mechanisms are of upmost importance for the response, but the real use and power of these mechanisms is unlikely to be achieved if they are not supported by longer-term development approaches.

Initiating a response is an opportunity to set in place accountability and other principles at an early stage, with the knowledge that long-term relationships, trust and understanding of power dynamics are all ultimately crucial in making such mechanisms function effectively. This in turn reinforces the importance of our approach of working through long-term, local partnerships, not only during a response but beyond. In the longer term, working through these partnerships forms part of the process of shifting the power to civil society, national NGOs and community organisations.

4. Complaints mechanisms need to be contextualised

While the outcomes around HAP benchmarks of participation and information sharing were largely positive, the implementation of complaints and response mechanisms (CRMs) presented challenges for our staff and partners. CRMs were used in both programmes; in oPt an issue was raised against an NGO through the community complaints mechanism set up as part of the programme, which was acted upon and resolved by our partner. Despite this, partners in both countries felt that there was ongoing reluctance to write down complaints, particularly about programmatic work. The reasons given for this included fear of losing funding for expressing negative opinions and cultural norms that discouraged making formal complaints. Partner monitoring systems that did not systematically capture how informal complaints and feedback were acted upon.

Ongoing efforts should be made to ensure that the mechanisms used are appropriate to the local context and integrated with pre-existing practices and expectations. Attention should be given to monitor and understand who is or is not using them and why, taking into account factors such as illiteracy or a lack of mobility to ensure that complaints mechanisms don't privilege the few. CRMs should support all members of the community to engage with decision making processes and ensure their voices are heard.

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[i] 'PVCA' is often used interchangeably to describe both a one-off planning tool and a long-term community organising approach. For the purposes of this briefing, PVCAs will describe the latter, including the action planning and community group organisation that follows the initial assessment.

[ii] HAP has been replaced by the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS). Christian Aid was certified against the CHS in 2016.

Further Reading

- Christian Aid's Resilience Framework briefing, 2016

- Christian Aid, Resilience Framework case studies, 2016

- Christian Aid, Working in Partnership: delivering value for people, Research Summary, September 2015

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