

# Listen First: a pilot system for managing downward accountability in NGOs

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*This article reports on a research project intended to develop systematic ways of managing downward accountability in an international NGO. Innovative tools were developed and trialled in six countries. The tools comprised a framework, defining downward accountability in practical terms, and three management processes. They were successfully used to (a) encourage staff to improve downward accountability in ways relevant to their context; (b) hear beneficiaries' assessments of the level of accountability achieved and the value of the NGO's work; and (c) generate quantified performance summaries for managers. Taken together, they form a coherent draft management system. Areas for further research are identified.*

***Écouter d'abord : un système pilote pour la gestion de la redevabilité en aval au sein des ONG***

*Cet article présente un compte rendu d'un projet de recherche visant à développer des façons systématiques de gérer la redevabilité en aval (vers le bas) au sein d'une ONG internationale. Des outils novateurs ont été mis au point et mis à l'épreuve dans six pays. Ces outils englobaient un cadre qui définissait la redevabilité en aval en termes pratiques, ainsi que trois processus de gestion. Ils ont été employés avec de bons résultats afin de : (a) encourager les membres du personnel à améliorer la redevabilité en aval de manières pertinentes pour leur contexte, (b) entendre les évaluations des récipiendaires concernant la redevabilité réalisée et la valeur des travaux de l'ONG et (c) générer des résumés quantifiés des performances à l'attention des responsables. À eux tous, ils forment un système de gestion préliminaire cohérent. Les domaines devant faire l'objet de recherches supplémentaires sont identifiés.*

***Ouçá primeiro: um sistema-piloto para gerenciar accountability de cima para baixo em ONGs***

*Este artigo relata sobre um projeto de pesquisa destinado a desenvolver formas sistemáticas de gerenciar accountability no sentido de cima para baixo em uma ONG internacional. Ferramentas inovadoras foram desenvolvidas e testadas em seis países. As ferramentas incluíam uma estrutura, definindo accountability de cima para baixo em termos práticos e três processos gerenciais. Eles foram usados de maneira bem-sucedida para: (a) incentivar funcionários a melhorar a accountability de cima para baixo de maneira relevante para o seu contexto; (b) ouvir as avaliações de beneficiários do nível de accountability alcançado e o valor do trabalho da ONG; e (c) gerar sumários de desempenho quantificados para gerentes. Juntos, eles formam um sistema gerencial preliminar coerente. Áreas para pesquisa adicional são identificadas.*

### ***Escucha Primero: un sistema piloto para gestionar la transparencia hacia los beneficiarios en las ONG***

*Este ensayo examina un proyecto de investigación cuyo objetivo consistía en desarrollar formas sistemáticas para gestionar la transparencia hacia los beneficiarios en una ONG internacional. Se desarrollaron y probaron nuevas herramientas en seis países. Éstas consistieron en un marco lógico, la definición de transparencia hacia los beneficiarios en términos prácticos y tres procedimientos. Las herramientas resultaron efectivas para (a) motivar al personal para aplicar la transparencia descendente en formas adecuadas al contexto; (b) incorporar las opiniones de los beneficiarios sobre los logros relacionados con la transparencia y sobre los méritos del trabajo de la ONG; (c) elaborar reportes de rendimiento para los administradores. Estas herramientas en su conjunto constituyen un sistema preliminar de administración coherente. El ensayo identifica otras áreas que requieren mayor investigación.*

KEY WORDS: Aid; Civil society; Methods; Sub-Saharan Africa

## **Introduction**

This article presents the results of a pilot project by Concern and Mango, two international NGOs, to develop systematic ways of managing ‘downward accountability’. The project took place from 2006 to 2008, involving field trials in six countries and work with more than 530 staff and advisers. During the project the research team developed a set of practical approaches called ‘Listen First’.

Our experience is offered as a contribution to emerging practice on managing downward accountability. The approaches that we developed mirror advances made elsewhere, such as creating a flexible performance framework to define what downward accountability means in practice, and generating quantified feedback from local communities on their perceptions of an NGO’s work. These, and associated processes, could provide the skeleton of a management system that explicitly fosters, measures, and rewards downward accountability. The approaches need further development, and several areas for further research are identified.

This article locates the project within academic literature and current practice on NGO accountability. It provides a brief description of Listen First and how it was applied in Concern’s programme in Angola in 2008. It ends with lessons learnt and identifies implications of the research. More information is available at [www.listenfirst.org](http://www.listenfirst.org).

## **NGO accountability**

Edwards and Hulme framed the debate on NGO accountability in 1995. They concluded that NGOs’ need to improve their performance assessment was ‘central to their continued existence as independent organisations with a mission to pursue’ (Edwards and Hulme 1995: 224). Since then, a great deal of academic research and many practical initiatives have been undertaken to respond to their challenge and strengthen NGOs’ accountability. However, it is reasonable to conclude that NGOs have not yet satisfactorily resolved these issues (HAP 2009; Ebrahim and Weisband 2007; Wallace 2007).

The literature does not recognise a single, widely accepted definition of ‘accountability’. For example, see the different definitions used by Edwards and Hulme 1995; Bendell 2006; HAP 2009; Lloyd, Warren, and Hammer 2008; and Kilby 2006. But some common elements can be identified. The most useful definitions move beyond principal-agent theory. They recognise

accountability as an attribute of a relationship between two or more actors, which involves three elements: negotiating commitments, reporting performance, and restitution. These elements allow one actor to influence another's actions. So accountability is closely related to the distribution and enactment of power. In itself, this can deepen oppression as much as further emancipation.

Accountability mechanisms have a major influence on relationships between organisations. In order to be effective, NGOs need to maintain the trust and support of various stakeholders, including the intended beneficiaries of their work (whether they are individuals or organisations) and donors. In the context of complex social interventions, NGOs may initiate relationships through dialogue about the nature of the issues faced and appropriate responses. This dialogue may typically be shaped by accountability mechanisms (for instance, designing potential interventions with local partners and negotiating contracts with donors). Both sets of stakeholders may reasonably expect to hold an NGO to account for these commitments.

As a result, NGOs have to manage a complex set of relationships, particularly in the light of power imbalances and the flow of funds. The challenge for an NGO is to align the commitments that it makes, and the dialogue it pursues, with different stakeholders: some who have little power over it, but are immediately affected by its work, and some who have substantial power over it, but are distant from the field of action. This is made significantly harder when NGOs and intermediary organisations become large organisations, with their own internal systems, politics, and bureaucracy.

The literature tackles these issues by distinguishing between 'upward accountability' and 'downward accountability' (Bendell 2006). 'Upward accountability' is associated with relationships that face 'up' existing power relationships, where a more powerful actor (such as a donor) uses accountability mechanisms to influence the actions of a less powerful actor (such as an implementing NGO). 'Downward accountability' is associated with relationships that face 'down' against existing power relationships, where a less powerful actor (such as an intended beneficiary) uses accountability mechanisms to influence the actions of a more powerful actor (such as an implementing NGO). These issues are of real practical importance, as they influence how funds are used and what NGOs do.

Whereas powerful actors can require accountability from less powerful actors, less powerful actors cannot so easily require it of the powerful. Instead, powerful actors often have to choose to establish and submit themselves to mechanisms of 'downward accountability', which involves releasing some of their power. This may strengthen their legitimacy in the eyes of the less powerful. It may also contradict their short-term interests and create significant discomfort among managers about the associated loss of control. The tensions that these choices created for managers were a consistent theme in the Listen First pilot, described below.

Downward accountability is closely related to the concept of empowerment, a central component of much development practice (see, for example, Ellerman 2005, or Chambers 1997). Both involve people with limited power engaging more effectively with those who have more power, to increase their influence over decisions that affect their lives. From the perspective of poor communities, this may be just as important in their interactions with an NGO as it is in their interactions with other service providers and authorities, such as government. So, systems to manage downward accountability may provide an important link between the means and the ends of development. NGOs have the opportunity, and arguably the obligation, to model good practice.

Issues of accountability are closely linked to gender analysis. UNIFEM's *Progress of the World's Women Report 2008/2009* is entitled *Who Answers to Women?* – a direct question about accountability. The report argues that 'the key to ending gender discrimination and structural inequality is accountability' (Goetz 2008: 15). If gender-responsive accountability

mechanisms could make powerful actors more answerable to women, then this could influence women's subordinate position in public and private decision making and, as a result, improve women's condition and access to relevant services.

Accountability mechanisms risk reproducing existing power imbalances and local exclusion, for instance, by assuming that men's views are representative of 'the community' and not taking adequate account of women's views. Other socially excluded groups within communities may also be excluded from the influence created by accountability mechanisms, such as certain ethnic groups, castes, or the poorest people. Accountability mechanisms are therefore not politically neutral and need to make particular efforts to reach out to excluded groups and amplify their voices within decision making. This can increase the cost of accountability mechanisms, as different methods and individuals may be needed to engage with marginalised groups, overcoming multiple barriers. It also increases the complexity, as it is unlikely that a single 'community view' can be easily arrived at. Instead, the different interests of different groups may need to be explicitly discussed, and compromises sought.

Issues of accountability take concrete form in the management systems used by NGOs and donors. This sets up the general questions: do their dominant management systems achieve an appropriate level of both upward and downward accountability in the majority of situations? If not, how can they be improved?

A growing body of research shows that the mechanisms used for upward accountability consistently tend to undermine downward accountability. Wallace presents detailed research on the use of results-based management tools (including logical framework analysis, known as 'log-frames') that are currently widespread in the NGO sector (Wallace 2007). She describes a fracture between the tools used for upward accountability to donors – project plans, indicators, and impact assessment – and the reality of fieldwork actually undertaken. A substantial literature describes how results-based management tools are inadequate for NGO work: 'a case of cutting paper with a hammer' (Fowler 1997: 16). (See, for instance, Bakewell and Garbutt 2005; Chambers 1997; Ebrahim 2003; Kaplan 2000.) Ebrahim (2003) describes in detail how results-based management tools divert field managers' attention away from the changing realities of people's lives and towards pre-designed activities. They encourage NGO staff to see social change as linear and predictable; communities as having a single coherent set of interests; and NGOs as having inflated influence. Donors and senior managers may judge success as being how well staff deliver the specific activities described in initial plans, rather than taking a more flexible and adaptive approach. This makes staff less inclined to listen to the changing and contested views of different interests in local communities, and less able to adapt their work accordingly. The accountability mechanisms used by donors have a substantial impact on the priorities and practice of field staff. There are many powerful and deleterious examples of this effect, such as NGOs building houses that people would never live in, because the NGOs focused on completing tangible activities without adequately understanding local people's priorities (for instance, see Cosgrave 2006).

It has been argued that results-based management systems *can* be used in a sensitive and adaptable way (for instance, Wield 2000). But Wallace describes how in practice they are not: '... staff engaging in these procedures while trying to work with local realities all said that the tools do not work once implementation starts. There were no exceptions; this was a really striking finding' (Wallace 2007: 165). These findings are consistent with other research, mentioned above.

Researchers including Chambers, Ebrahim, and Wallace have described how current widely used accountability systems deliver unreliable reports of performance and achievements up the aid chain. This is seen to limit learning by senior decision makers and reduce the drive for improvements. Literature from the anthropology of development provides fine-grained descriptions of the differences between rhetoric and reality (for instance, see Mosse 2004).

The debate on downward accountability is closely related to the literature on participation. Both concepts describe the nature of the interactions between an NGO and the people whom it aims to assist. Ellerman draws on substantial philosopher–activists, including Freire, to make the case that development work is effective when activities are owned by local people and build on their priorities (Ellerman 2005). Many others have written on the same subject (for instance, see Chambers 1997; Kaplan 2000). This implies that the relationship between an NGO and its intended beneficiaries is a foundation stone for effective interventions.

Most NGOs subscribe to the values of ‘participation’, ‘empowerment’, and ‘accountability to intended beneficiaries’, recognising that participation is critical for successful fieldwork. But, curiously, most NGOs do not manage ‘participation’ or ‘downward accountability’ in a systematic way. One author has commented that the extent of downward accountability is a matter for the discretion of individual managers, relying on their ‘grace and favour’ (Kilby 2006: 952). The terms themselves are loosely defined, which makes them harder to manage within organisations. For example, ‘participation’ may be used to describe activities that range from requiring local people to participate in pre-designed projects to promoting sensitive processes of locally led action (Brock and Pettit 2007). ‘Downward accountability’ is often similarly imprecise in practical terms, referring to a mixture of transparency, listening, and responsiveness (Bendell 2006).

Much of the literature concludes that NGOs need new approaches to managing and reporting their performance which provide a reliable description of actual performance for donors and senior managers, and which also encourage field staff to develop appropriate relationships with their intended beneficiaries. In other words, NGOs need systems that align the incentives created by upward accountability with good practice in downward accountability (for instance, Edwards and Hulme 1995: 224; Kilby 2006: 960; Wallace 2007: 177; Ebrahim and Weisband 2007: 220). This was the entry point for Listen First. The project investigated systems for managing downward accountability on a systematic basis within a large NGO, across different interventions, rather than methods for strengthening downward accountability in specific circumstances.

The Listen First team reviewed more than 500 documents to identify case studies of NGOs’ mechanisms for downward accountability. But very few reliable case studies were identified with enough detail to understand how they worked at the local level. This was a striking finding in itself, suggesting a substantial lack of published material to support efforts in this area. After a great deal of searching, we drew out 25 examples, which are freely available online.

A number of pioneering innovations are emerging in the literature and practice, and some exciting approaches are taking shape. Most are still at an experimental stage: further innovation and research is needed before they can be applied more widely.

ActionAid took a major step with its radical, values-based Accountability Learning and Planning System (known as ALPS), launched in 2000. This attempted to place downward accountability at the heart of organisational systems. A 2007 review found that the quality of implementation remained variable. Arguably, this is because ALPS had not been managed to a consistent standard within ActionAid International: individual managers have applied it at their own discretion. While some adapted the principles carefully to take account of local contexts, others have not applied them to a significant extent and are not familiar with them. They may have not been supported adequately and held accountable for their performance in this area (ActionAid 2007).

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership’s 2007 Standard for Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management created working definitions of downward accountability and located them within quality-management policies for NGOs. Their 30 members are generating

a host of innovations (HAP 2009). The HAP standard creates a framework for organisational policies. Managers have to develop ways of implementing these policies at project level and ways of demonstrating compliance with them. This locates HAP at the opposite end of a spectrum of organisational oversight from ALPS. It appears that the NGO sector is still struggling to develop organisational systems which balance the demands of central oversight with those of decentralisation and the need to inspire greater commitment to specific values in staff.

Chambers (2007) has described how participatory methods can be used to generate quantified measurements of qualitative factors. A powerful example from Bangladesh shows how this can enable an organisation to be successfully accountable to different stakeholders. In this case, local self-help groups rated their progress with the use of a standard framework, with three different performance levels across four areas. The groups found this useful to review their work and inspiring for future action. Senior decision makers used quantified summaries to manage the performance of field staff and report to donors (Jupp and Ali 2008). Other researchers have experimented with similar approaches to measurement. For instance, Kilby (2006) developed a model to quantify and measure empowerment. As part of a wider emerging field, the NGO Keystone is piloting methods for generating comparative feedback from recipients of funds and assistance, with a view to balancing local learning and management reporting (for example, see [www.farmer-voice.org](http://www.farmer-voice.org)).

The Listen First project developed along lines similar to some of these initiatives, perhaps reflecting a wider convergence in the sector concerning the problems faced and potential solutions.

## Listen First

Listen First is an emerging system for managing downward accountability in NGOs. It involves a central framework and three key processes, developed through a series of innovations and field trials by Concern and Mango. It is still work in progress.

The framework defines what downward accountability means in practical terms. In itself, this is a substantial output from the pilot project. It sets out four levels of flexible performance standards across each of four areas. The framework can be presented on one side of A4 paper, albeit using a small font. The four areas are providing information publicly, involving people in making decisions (participation), listening, and staff attitudes and behaviours. The four performance levels are labelled sapling, maturing, flowering, and fruit bearing. These were easily translated into ratings: one, two, three, and four.

For each performance level in each area, the framework sets out a series of example behaviours for field staff. The behaviours are couched in positive, progressive terms, with the aim of encouraging staff to build on their existing efforts and inspiring them to do more, where appropriate. The behaviours emphasise gender and power analysis. They encourage staff to engage separately with women and other marginalised groups. Taken together, they establish a set of expectations about what downward accountability means, and what different levels of performance would entail.

The framework aims to balance the flexibility needed for sensitive, context-specific interventions with the consistency needed for a management system. Field staff can adapt the specific behaviours for each performance level in line with local circumstances. The framework allows the same processes to be followed, and comparisons potentially made, across different interventions. It plays a central role in structuring the three processes, below. During the research project, the framework was translated into a number of languages, including Portuguese and Khmer. It is directly compatible with the central four benchmarks in HAP's 2007 Standard.

During the project, Concern became a member of HAP, and senior managers emphasised the need for this compatibility.

The structure of the framework was developed in discussion with *pro bono* advice from staff of the professional services firm PricewaterhouseCoopers and experienced NGO practitioners. The content for the first draft was drawn from Mango's Accountability Checklist (Mango 2005). Subsequent drafts were developed by the research team in response to field testing with staff and local communities in Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Angola.

The three key processes are as follows:

- **Self-assessment workshops** to enable staff to reflect on current levels of downward accountability, and identify potential improvements.
- **Community research** into local people's perceptions of the level of downward accountability actually achieved, and how useful they find an NGO's work, with the findings disaggregated by gender.
- **Management reports**, summarising the levels of downward accountability actually achieved.

This approach was developed in response to some significant challenges in managing downward accountability, identified in the literature and reinforced during the research. Downward-accountability mechanisms had to be carefully adapted to the local context; standard solutions were not effective. There were significant tensions between downward accountability and other management priorities. By its nature, downward accountability requires personal courage and humility in order to listen actively to others, release power, and challenge personal assumptions. So, achieving downward accountability in practice relied to a great extent on a certain set of attitudes held by staff. It was not effective to instruct staff to change their attitudes. Instead, the research team worked with staff to reflect on the importance and implications of downward accountability in their work. These issues are discussed further below.

## Field trial: Angola

In February 2008 the research team worked with Concern's country programme in Angola. This section describes the methods used and research findings. The field trial built on experience from the preceding five pilot countries, allowing the team to trial a full set of tools. It provides a practical example of the three Listen First processes in action, and the type of findings they generated. Similar findings were generated in the other field trials, and lessons from these are included in the sections on lessons and implications.

### *Background*

With changes in Angola's political situation, Concern Angola was moving its programme from short-term emergency work (and direct implementation) to longer-term development work (and working with local partners). It had started exploring approaches to improving its accountability to local communities and was interested in being part of the Listen First pilot project, specifically focusing on a major livelihoods programme. The livelihoods programme aimed to work with 100,000 vulnerable people in two provinces in rural Angola. It had a budget of €9.2 million and was scheduled to run from 2006 to 2010, with a second phase planned from 2010 to 2015.

## Methods

The methods were discussed and refined with the team in Angola. They included the three elements of Listen First processes.

*Self-assessment workshops for field staff.* Two workshops were carried out with Concern and partner staff, one in Huambo and one in Kwito. They were a day and a half long, conducted in English with translation to and from Portuguese. They had three sections:

- Staff reflected on being in a disempowered relationship and identified the key elements of a more effective relationship.
- Staff identified the constraints and opportunities for improving how they worked with communities, across each of the elements of the Listen First framework.
- Staff used the framework to assess their current performance and identify plans for improvement.

*Community research.* Twelve focus groups, six women-only and six mixed, of approximately ten people each, and 12 key-informant interviews were carried out across six villages. The villages were randomly selected from all those with whom Concern works, with three from 'hard to reach' and three from 'easy to reach' categories. The community research was guided by an ethical statement. It used a peer-review process whereby field staff from one location conducted research in another project location. This was a practical compromise, bringing a measure of independence to the research process, reducing costs, and keeping learning within the staff team. In other field trials, independent researchers were contracted to carry out the community research.

Research questions were designed linked to the four elements of the Listen First framework, with two additional questions to explore people's perceptions of the value of Concern's work. The six research questions are listed below.

1. How easy is it for you to find out the following key information about Concern: who is the main person assigned to your village; how to contact Concern; what Concern's objectives are here; who Concern is trying to help; what Concern's budget is for its work here, and how funds are being spent?
2. How much have you contributed to making important decisions on project activities?
3. How much does Concern listen to your ideas and comments?
4. How comfortable do you feel discussing your personal issues with Concern's staff?
5. How useful has Concern's work been for you personally?
6. How wisely has money been spent on this project?

Researchers were trained in participatory exercises to introduce, discuss, rate, and record people's perceptions. Cartoons were commissioned to illustrate four different performance levels for questions 1 to 4. Each question was closed by asking participants to rate performance by allocating 20 beans across four different levels: low, medium, high, very high. These could be compared to the four performance levels in the Listen First framework.

*Reports for managers.* The quantitative and qualitative findings were written up by one of the programme managers, and discussed with country management and head-office management. They were presented in graphical form for senior managers.

## Findings

*Self-assessment workshops.* Staff members were observed engaging enthusiastically in the self-assessment workshops. They provided many practical examples of the importance of downward accountability for their work. One manager wrote that the workshops created ‘space for us to debate and discuss how we can further improve our approach in increasing participation . . . , transparency etc.’. There were lively conversations about what Concern was fundamentally trying to achieve and communities’ capacities to do things for themselves.

When field staff and their managers were split into separate groups, field staff were observed challenging their manager’s self-assessment scores, based on their own experience of working directly with communities. For instance, in one workshop managers scored the level of participation at 2, but field staff scored it lower at 1. After discussion, the field staff changed this to 2. In both workshops, staff settled on a self-assessment level of 2 out of 4 for all of the four areas of the Listen First framework.

*Community research.* The focus groups and interviews produced a rich mix of qualitative and quantitative feedback. The detailed feedback varied by location. However, some similarities and trends were identified. For example, about half of the focus groups knew the face of the relevant Concern field staff, and some could mention the name of the individual assigned to their village. Eighty per cent of the focus groups said that they participated in a number of project-related activities, including for example project identification, changes to activity plans, and selecting group leaders for the project activities. However, their level of participation was being ‘informed’ about what was happening: the first level of the framework. As one focus group respondent said: *‘We don’t contribute in decision, they come and had already make plan for us on what we will be going to receive’*.

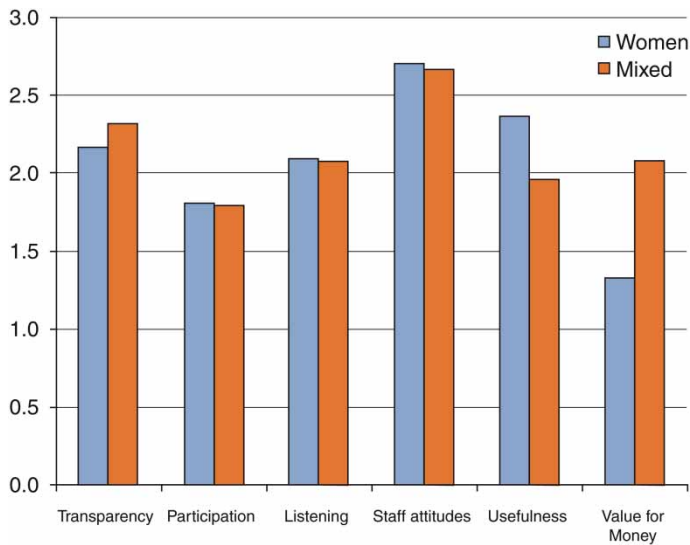
In relation to ‘listening’, the focus groups and interviews found that people felt that they had the opportunity and confidence to speak to Concern staff. However, feedback raised questions about the depth of this engagement. The following are two typical quotes:

*‘It easy to contact Concern to send our ideas and comments through staff assigned in the field, but not all ideas /comments has been responded and in many cases . . . no responses are given back to us.’* (Focus-group respondent)

*‘It is to difficult to encourage people to talk [at meetings], we always hear someone from the community who are vocal enough or village chief speaking sometimes on our behalf.’* (Women’s focus-group respondent)

The quantitative findings from the bean-ranking exercises were summarised in tables and charts. This made it easy to compare perceptions between villages and to compare staff members’ self-assessments with villagers’ rankings. It also enabled performance to be aggregated. For instance, the average results from across all the focus groups are summarised in Figure 1. It provided a comprehensive overview that managers could consider easily and use to ask more detailed questions about performance.

The individual focus-group scores provided data that field staff could use, in addition to the qualitative findings. For example, the women in one village were the only focus group to place beans on level 1, the lowest level, to convey how well they felt listened to. As a group, they placed three beans on level 1 and the remaining 17 on level 2. This allowed for more nuanced descriptions and further discussion of gender-related aspects of the programme.



**Figure 1:** Average ratings by focus groups, Concern Angola Sustainable Livelihoods Programme, 2008

*Reporting and management.* The programme managers were closely involved in the pilot and were very supportive of the results. One of the programme managers commented that his team found it a useful exercise, writing that ‘lots of information was provided by the respondent[s] which gave us to re think and staff start reflecting of what we are doing. We have discussed initially the reports with the staff and partners and agree to many of the issues presented ...’. He continued with the comment that the community research ‘provided a signal to the community and respondents that we are willing to listen and improve our work and relationship with them’. He also said that his team ‘definitely might repeat this research sometime, to make sure if there are any changes over time’.

However, the programme managers also faced many other priorities and, six months after the field research, one programme manager admitted to not yet fully considering the final report and drawing up strategies to improve their accountability. The other priorities included a pressure to focus on ‘fast-track projects’, achieve targets, and spend budgets.

The acting Country Director said that he found the process useful, as the exercise had ‘given management a way to control the performance and behaviour of our staff in the field which in the past was lacking’. This was very encouraging, albeit the emphasis on control could have been explored further. However, in practice this was not possible because he left the organisation shortly afterwards. He also had many other priorities on his plate. In his monthly report to head office, covering the Listen First field work, he listed eight other major issues he was dealing with alongside managing the programme, including mainstreaming HIV/AIDS work, contributing to government initiatives, and engaging with other external stakeholders such as the UN.

All managers involved in the project said that staff turnover had been a big challenge, particularly at management level. During the previous 13 years there had been 11 Country Directors.

The research team took the findings back to managers at Concern’s head office. The Regional Director found the summary chart useful. The summary scores provided a structure within which to talk in more detail about the issues faced in Angola. From her experience of working with the Angola team, the Regional Director agreed that accountability to communities

needed to be improved, and that the scores were in line with this expectation. She said the pilot exercise could provide a baseline upon which to monitor improvement. She also had many other priorities contending for her attention. The research team had a one-hour meeting with her to discuss their report and findings.

## Lessons and implications

### *Lessons*

The way in which the ideas and tools were introduced was important for generating engagement, reflection, and learning among staff and managers. The research team quickly learnt that head-office initiatives, like this one, had to be handled carefully. To work well, non-threatening spaces for reflection had to be created. Power dynamics always risked distorting this process. For example, in an early pilot using the Mango Checklist, field staff scored themselves as highly as possible, as they felt that their scores might affect the level of funds available to them. This prompted a review of the approach taken by the research team, in particular how to work with the developmental principle of supporting people's own efforts and critical reflection. Before the detailed pilots took place, head-office managers had tended to prefer the simplicity of the checklist as a basis for managing accountability.

The same principles were equally important when field staff took steps to improve downward accountability. When standardised or externally designed approaches were applied without careful consideration, they often did not work. There were always local complexities. For instance, some of Concern's partners in Cambodia put up notice boards and complaints boxes, but local people did not use the boxes, for reasons including local political history, cultural norms, and out-of-date information on the notice boards.

During the first pilot in Pakistan, it was not possible for men to speak to women alone in the pilot villages. Male members of local communities dominated some of the meetings. Further discussions between a female researcher and local women identified significant differences between women's and men's views and development priorities (including those identified in a previous Participatory Rural Appraisal study). The female researcher also gained important insights into gender-related dynamics within the country team. These experiences demonstrated how women could be excluded at all levels: in programme activities, in accountability mechanisms, and within staff teams. Cultural norms influenced gender relations within the staff team, as well as within local communities.

These experiences contributed to revisions of the tools and approaches used by the research team. The Listen First framework was created as an evolution of the Mango Checklist, including explicit gender and power analysis. It may be possible to deepen this further. Women were involved as members of research teams. Women-only focus groups were run in community-research exercises, to understand their views of Concern's work. This feedback, directly from women, could potentially be used to start systematically measuring how responsive programmes and staff are to women, and how well programmes meet women's priorities.

Facilitation skills proved crucial for implementing the Listen First processes and improving downward accountability. The self-assessment workshops provided staff with an opportunity to consider the effects of existing relationships and power dynamics within communities on their work. The workshops required careful design and facilitation to encourage self-critical reflection. For example, at one workshop in Cambodia, staff considered the efficacy of holding public meetings as a way of hearing from intended beneficiaries. Staff concluded that even if the poorest in the village were present at the meeting, they were not comfortable saying anything. Staff suggested that this could make local people feel less confident, rather than helping to

tackle discrimination and inequality. During the workshop, staff considered alternative approaches to enable them to hear from local people, such as visiting them at home.

The research team faced significant language challenges in the first pilot in Pakistan. Many of the poorest people in villages spoke a local dialect, not the national language, Urdu, but some staff members did not speak the dialect. During one of the women-only focus groups, the wealthier members of the community translated the exchanges between staff members and the poorest in the community, which risked distorting processes and entrenching oppressive power dynamics. Women tended to be disproportionately excluded by not speaking the national language. The same issue occurred in Cambodia, Angola, and Ethiopia.

Translating the words for key concepts could create substantial misunderstandings. Sometimes there was no direct translation for the word 'accountability', and translators instead chose from a number of options, including words that meant 'policing' or 'checking up'. The pilots seemed to work better when the word accountability, or its translation, was not mentioned, and instead the work was described as being about developing effective relationships with local communities.

With careful facilitation, the same processes of reflection were carried out with partner NGOs. This approach was sometimes in opposition to less flexible, 'donor-recipient' approaches to handling relationships with partners. Staff members were more comfortable considering partners' downward accountability than their own. The relationships seen during the research between Concern and its partners were not generally characterised by the Listen First principles. For example, the head of a longstanding partner organisation in Cambodia asked politely but directly if Concern would also improve its accountability to his organisation. A year later, the partner organisation had taken steps to improve its own downward accountability, but Concern had not changed how it worked with that partner.

Managers had many other priorities, such as getting project plans and budgets approved, completing activities laid out in project plans, and spending budgets within fixed timescales. Downward accountability was sometimes in active opposition to these, as it required more time and bottom-up decision making. When field staff were asked about the main constraints to making progress in this area, staff in two different pilots said: 'Leadership ... how senior managers are serious enough to promote this participation and not becoming activity oriented', and there was 'no motivation from line manager'. Managers had little incentive to prioritise downward accountability and were not held to account for performance in this area.

The use of quantified summaries of performance and a standardised framework caused differences of opinion. Some saw the summaries as important for reporting performance in a short, comparable way across projects. They argued that this was necessary for senior managers, to enable them to manage the levels of downward accountability actually achieved. Some field staff involved in the research reported that they liked the quantified findings, as they helped them to understand how well they were performing. Other people were concerned that quantified findings would be taken out of context by managers and that this would create incentives to inflate scores, which would undermine reflection and learning at field level. There was a danger that the system would be reduced to unhelpful bureaucracy. In some cultures, this kind of rating may be unfamiliar and counter-intuitive for local people. Some also questioned whether the four criteria were too simplistic for use across a wide variety of organisations and communities.

### *Implications*

The findings appear to have significant implications for managing downward accountability in international NGOs like Concern.

The research project identified two key factors for improving downward accountability: (a) the quality of local leadership, management, and support available to field staff, and (b) the attitudes of front-line staff to the importance of downward accountability, releasing power to local people and partners, and helping local people to build their self-confidence. These factors could shape a management agenda, for instance by encouraging country-level managers to consider what downward accountability means for them, how they can promote it, and its implications for their relationships with staff, along with enhancing associated soft skills, such as in facilitation.

An NGO may also have to review the relationships between head office and field programmes, and field programmes and partners, to ensure that managers have the space and flexibility to implement downward accountability. To support this, managers may have to be consistently held to account for the level of downward accountability that they actually achieve. Without this incentive, it is hard to see how improvements will be possible in practice. A system like Listen First could potentially form the basis of an organisational system to achieve this. Conflicts with other management priorities – in terms of both time and values – would need to be carefully considered.

The pilot project also concluded that some general policies could be applied across more interventions, in most circumstances, to create an enabling environment, encouraging staff to develop effective downward-accountability practices. They resonate closely with the HAP Standard and include areas such as an open information policy; informing partners and local people 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; holding regular review meetings with all stakeholders every six or 12 months; and collecting systematic feedback from partners and local people.

### *Further research*

The Listen First approach needs further research in a number of areas, including the following:

- Understanding representation within communities: who is speaking on whose behalf, with what legitimacy, and making this more explicit within an analysis of downward accountability.
- Understanding how Listen First can contribute better to deepening and assessing gender responsiveness within field teams and managers.
- Improving performance reporting by using finer-grained scales (e.g. 1–10 or 1–20) rather than 1–4, particularly for community research.
- Improving community research and staff self-assessment by the introduction of participatory methods. It may be useful to look at trends, either reported retrospectively or monitored over time.
- Understanding whether stronger relationships generate more critical feedback from communities (or partners) because people feel freer to be honest. Weaker relationships may be more distorted by power dynamics, as people feel able to make only positive comments about decision makers.
- Understanding the relationship between reporting quantified summaries of performance and the quality of reflection and learning processes at field level; and the implications of repeating Listen First processes with the same individuals over time.
- Understanding how to manage the relationship between the core values of ‘downward accountability’ and hierarchical management structures. The former emphasises decentralised decision making. The latter tends to lead to more centralised decision making. This may mean continuing to develop management approaches that link resource allocation, performance assessment, and core values.

## Conclusion

The academic literature concludes that there is an urgent need for NGOs to develop better ways of managing and reporting their performance, which are aligned with the fundamental principles of good development practice. Some exciting new possibilities are emerging. The sector as a whole is at the stage of trialling new approaches.

Listen First was trialled as one such innovation. Through field research in six countries, a performance framework and three management processes were developed. They were used to generate critical self-reflection by field staff, feedback from local communities, and summary quantified data for managers – all three of which emerged as necessary components for managing downward accountability on a systematic basis. They created a level of insight into programmes' gender-responsiveness.

Listen First could be a step towards developing a consistent way of managing and reporting performance for NGOs. It appears to be part of a new wave of approaches and methods. A number of areas need further research, in particular testing the impact that this form of measurement has on relationships over time, and refining specific methods further. These issues appear manageable, particularly in the light of the potential gains available from improving accountability.

Future progress will depend on senior decision makers creating incentives for managers to focus on these issues, and monitoring actual performance. Given the context of packed management agendas and often overworked field staff, management priorities may have to be carefully reviewed to create the space and support for staff to deliver what matters most.

This research, and related initiatives, suggests that there are real opportunities for NGOs to take hold of the debate about accountability and to model good practice in making themselves consistently and verifiably accountable to local communities.

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