Listen First

Practical ways of improving accountability for NGOs

A collaboration by Concern and Mango
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The authors are extremely grateful to the many participants, contributors and advisors to this research project, without whom it would not have been possible.

Listen First: Full Report
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Introduction

This report describes the Listen First research project, carried out by Concern and Mango from 2006 to 2008. The aim of the project was to research practical ways of managing downward accountability, on a systematic basis, across different country programmes.

Research has consistently shown that NGOs deliver high quality work when they are accountable to the people they aim to serve. But, curiously, NGOs do not generally manage this accountability on a systematic basis. It is often left up to individual managers, while organisations pay more attention to being accountable to donors and other stakeholders.

The Listen First project was designed in 2006 as a response to this, to develop and trial innovative approaches which might have broader application. It was carried out by Concern and Mango, from 2006 – 2008, and involved over 530 people, field work in 6 different field sites and academic research.

The project included a review of relevant academic research, and field work. As described below, tools and approaches evolved during the research process. The key findings were that standardised tools were useful in creating a shared understanding. But they had to be applied to local circumstances, by field staff. The quality of this application depended primarily on the attitudes and commitment of key field staff and managers.

This report is presented in three sections:

Section 1: Research Process and Methods
Section 2: Field Trials, Data and Analysis
Section 3: Conclusions

The final section includes a series of key findings, and implications for management to pursue the wider agenda of strengthening downward accountability.

Section 1: Research Process and Methods

1.1 Introduction

This section describes the processes, participants and key methodologies used in Concern and Mango's Listen First project.

The research was led by Robyn Wilford, in Concern, and Alex Jacobs, from Mango, with the active support and encouragement of Howard Dalzell (Concern's Policy Director). It involved desk research into existing practices and literature; developing initial management tools and approaches; field research across six different Concern country offices; and structured revision of the tools and approaches. The research was carried out with the aim of developing practical approaches that work for busy managers, as well as making a contribution to academic and practitioner debates. It also aimed to make an active contribution to Concern's staff and programmes, rather than being purely extractive.

Mango supported the research on an ad hoc basis from 2005 to mid 2007. Alex Jacobs was contracted to play a central formal role in the research from September 2007 to August 2008. Katherine Hewitt (Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine) undertook field research with the project in Pakistan. Jess Bryan (research assistant) and Amer Jabry (Emerge Consulting) carried out the literature review.

The research benefitted particularly from the wide-ranging and thoughtful engagement of Concern's staff, partners and the local communities they work with. We are particularly grateful for advice from Abraham Asha, Abraham Bwonta, Aine Fay, Andrew Fitzgibbon, Austin Kennan, Bunleng Tan, Carine Roenen, Caroline McCausland, Connell Folley, Danny Harvey, Dipankar Datta, Dorothy Blane, Edgar Montalban, Endanchiyelem Mekonnen, Endris Feyessa, Hamza Abbasi, Howard Dalzell, John Minto, Kieron Crawley, Mark Munoz, Matthew Pickard, Michael Hanly, Michele Mazzaroli, Mohammad Mobin, Paul O'Brien, Pradip Sanyal, Rehana Khilji, Remko Berkhout, Sarah Allen, Sinead Walsh, Soeung Saroeun, Stuart Highton, Syed Sulaiman Shah, Uk Samet, Yuko Yoneda, Zenebe Mekonnen. In all over 530 people were involved in the research, all dedicating time, energy and insights and we are grateful to all of them.

Table 1 sets out a timeline of key activities. Table 2 sets out the numbers of participants.

1.2 Research objectives

In January 2007, a research proposal for this project was sent to Concern's Regional Directors, with the stated purpose to "develop and implement quality standards for accountability to beneficiaries applicable to both emergency and development work, and to develop organisational tools and management systems to enable these standards to be managed across Concern".

We have also aimed to contribute to debates and practice outside Concern. During the research, we deepened our understanding of NGO accountability and performance management. This led us to develop these objectives further.

We have researched whether flexible performance standards for downward accountability can be presented in practical terms that both promote thoughtful engagement by staff and also allow quantified reporting of actual performance; whether staff can assess themselves using these standards, in ways that actively promote good practice and improvements; and whether the views of

local communities and intended beneficiaries can be researched using the same standards, in a way that triangulates staff's self-assessments.

We tested whether research into intended beneficiaries' views could give an insight into the impact of field work, by systematically reporting their perceptions of how useful they have found field work. We could not assemble enough evidence within the constraints of this research project to test the link between downward accountability and impact rigorously.

1.3 External advisors

We were privileged to have the advice of highly experienced external researchers and practitioners throughout the project. Tina Wallace (independent) and David Bonbright (Keystone) supported the research team throughout the project, both highly experienced and widely respected in the field of NGO accountability. They met with the research team at intervals throughout the project, and provided many thought provoking comments on the research process, emerging analysis and findings.

We are also extremely grateful for advice and contributions from 19 other respected academics, practitioners and researchers. They all have significant experience of the realities of managing and assessing performance, in the NGO sector and beyond, and provided invaluable comments and insights at different stages of the research. They are: Alan Fowler (University of Kwazulu-Natal), Antonella Mancini (independent, ex-ActionAid), Ashish Shah (ex-ActionAid), Chris Roche (Oxfam Australia), David Lewis (LSE), Duncan Wardley (PwC), George Redman (Trocaire), Helen Banos Smith (ex-Save the Children), John Cosgrave (Independent evaluator), John Hailey (Cass Business School), Margaret Blake (National Centre for Social Research), Monica Blagescu (HAP), Nigel Saxby Soffe (ActionAid), Peter James (ACCORD), Robert Chambers (IDS), Sheryl Haw (HAP), Silva Ferretti (ActionAid), Simon Hale (independent) and Tony Vaux (Humanitarian Activities).

Many other people have provided comments and feedback to the research team, including members of BOND's Quality Standards Working Group and participants at INTRAC's NGO research forum.

1.4 Literature review

An initial literature review was carried out in 2005, and a more detailed literature review from October 2007 to January 2008. This reviewed current research on the subject of NGO accountability and performance management, and identified previous attempts to manage downward accountability or participation on a systematic basis. The review found robust research that criticised NGOs' existing accountability mechanisms (such as Ebrahim, Edwards & Hulme, Mosse, Roche and Wallace). But it only found a small number of practical alternatives. Specific examples were identified and key lessons drawn from them, including ActionAid's ALPS, HAP, Kilby's work to measure accountability and empowerment, the One World Trust's Global Accountability Project, Save the Children's Global Impact Monitoring system, and Smith-Sreen's work on managing accountability.

The literature review and our emerging analysis was presented as a paper at the "Development's Futures" conference at the National University of Ireland, Galway, in November 2007, titled "Putting new approaches to NGO accountability into action".

Further research was carried out into the literature on methodologies for social research (such as Bulmer & Warwick, Chambers, Keystone and the Social Research Association).

Finally, another review was carried out in 2008 to identify examples of good practice by NGOs of downward accountability in field work. We have brought together a number of examples for each of the four key components of downward accountability, with the aim of helping field managers understand the art of the possible. This exercise proved harder than expected, as wide-ranging trawling of over 500 documents only brought up a limited number of documented, publically available case studies. The researcher for this part of the project, Amer Jabry, commented that the project appeared to have identified "a significant gap in NGOs' reporting".

1.5 Field work

The team carried out detailed field work, including field visits, with Concern's offices in: Pakistan (June 2006), Ethiopia (August 2007), Cambodia (May 2007 and April 2008) and Angola (January 2008). We visited Cambodia twice, and had the opportunity of working with two of Concern's partner organisations there. In addition, Concern Burundi and Concern Kenya trialled the tools. The field work focused on:

- testing practical definitions of downward accountability and management tools,
- developing processes for field staff to assess their current performance and identify improvements,
- researching communities' views of current performance and how useful they found Concern's work,
- understanding the opportunities and constraints for managing downward accountability in practice.

The field locations were identified in consultation with Concern's Overseas Director, Policy Director, Regional Directors and Country Directors. These field offices all expressed an active interest in getting involved with the research. Concern's Policy Director had visited many of them, and gauged the interest of management and staff in downward accountability. A number of other field offices considered getting more involved in the research, including Bangladesh, Tanzania and Zambia. It proved impossible to schedule visits to them within the time available.

During the research, we aimed to apply the principles of downward accountability to our work with field staff and managers. As much as possible, we supported people's own enquiry and learning, helping them to develop their own solutions to their own issues, rather than imposing our external techniques. There was a natural tension between this and our pre-determined research agenda on the one hand, and the search for tools and approaches that could be used across the organisation on the other. This tension between standardisation and flexibility was a key theme throughout the research, highly relevant to the premise that it may be possible to manage downward accountability on a systematic basis. It was also important for our legitimacy in the eyes of field staff: we could only discuss downward accountability with credibility by acting in line with its key principles ourselves.

For example, we ran workshops that provided structured opportunities for staff to reflect on their own experience and attitudes, and identify their own action points. We respected local managers' responsibilities to set their own priorities, helping develop options for future actions but not insisting on them. We also aimed to contribute respectfully to existing relationships between Concern staff and local communities or partner organisations. The core research team had limited dealings directly with local communities. Research into intended beneficiaries' views was planned with careful consideration of ethical issues, and designed to contribute to strengthening relationships between field staff and beneficiaries. Some of our earlier field work was not strong in this area, and as the research progressed, we reflected on our own performance and made improvements.

At the end of the research period, we sent a questionnaire of five open questions to 17 key field contacts, asking for their reflections on the research to date, receiving 11 replies.

1.6 Defining downward accountability

The project defined 'downward accountability' in practical terms that were designed to be useful for field staff and managers. Our starting point was Mango's "Accountability to beneficiaries: a practical checklist" (November 2005). This splits downward accountability into five specific areas, with a series of 5 – 10 normative action points that describe good practice in each area. Performance can be rated against each action point, on a scale of 0 - 5. The checklist was developed with careful reference to leading initiatives including HAP and the One World Trust's Global Accountability Project, as well as a review of academic literature. It is based on the understanding that the goal of downward accountability is to build open and respectful relationships between NGO staff and the people they aim to serve, and so promote honest dialogue, recognising the power imbalance between them. It is argued that this allows NGOs to support local people's priorities, rather than risking imposing their own ideas and ways of working. In other words, it releases decision making power to the people NGOs aim to serve, which directly contributes to their 'empowerment' and practice of holding powerful institutions to account.

During the course of field research, we found that the checklist provided useful practical definitions of what downward accountability meant for field staff. Staff and managers used it to generate quantified results, which helped them understand how well they were performing. The normative action points allowed them to discuss improvements. However, its highly structured approach tended to encourage a focus on assessment rather than reflection (with a view to making improvements). It did not encourage thoughtful engagement by field staff of how to apply the principles of downward accountability to their specific circumstances. At 8 sides long, it was also quite unwieldy for staff to use and could be difficult to translate into different languages.

Over the course of the field work, we developed the checklist into a simpler, more flexible, one page model, which we called "Listen First". Informed by feedback from field staff, the five sections were collapsed into four, and four broad performance levels were set out for each section. These describe the kinds of activities that comprise performance at each level (including very high levels of performance). They are indicative rather than specific, encouraging staff to reflect on how the general principles can be applied in their specific circumstances. They are also progressive, aiming to appreciate existing work and encourage staff to consider improving their performance – and avoiding negative or discouraging comments on current levels of performance. However, the model still allows a simple quantification of performance on a scale of 1 – 4 across each of the four sections. The model is also designed to be directly compatible with the four central benchmarks of the 2007 HAP Standard. This model lies at the heart of the management approaches developed during the research.

1.7 Self-assessment workshops

In the four countries we visited, the research team facilitated self-assessment workshops for Concern's field staff and managers and also, on occasion, for partners' staff. Concern Burundi ran their own self-assessment workshop, using the checklist to reflect on their current performance. Concern Kenya worked with a partner, KENWA, using the checklist to assess their performance.

Our initial workshops focused on value for money, a related priority area within Concern. The link between value for money and downward accountability caused some confusion. Over the course of the research, we developed a one and a half day long structure for the workshops, and also

strengthened our own facilitation skills and approach. This allowed us to create structured opportunities for reflection and learning. The initial sessions focused on what constitutes an effective relationship between staff and local communities, and why it might be important. We used these discussions to test the contents of the Listen First model, and adapted the model as a result. The model itself was not introduced until the second half of the workshop, and this helped focus attention more on strengthening existing relationships, and less on the tool.

Workshop participants were selected by local managers. The workshops were organised in times and places that were convenient for staff and managers, in Concern field offices. Some were largely run by local staff in local languages, with support from the research team; others were run by the research team with translation. Key materials were translated into local languages in advance. Participants were asked to complete evaluation forms after the workshops. The research team also reflected carefully on the workshops completed, discussing them with staff and managers, and planning improvements for future workshops.

1.8 Community research

We trialled a number of different approaches to community research during the project, using different research methodologies and different research instruments.

In Pakistan, the research team carried out the community research itself, using semi-structured focus group discussions, disaggregated between women and men. This generated qualitative data, based around a simple questionnaire.

In Cambodia, an independent local NGO researcher was commissioned to run structured focus group assessments using an adapted version of the checklist. Focus groups were held of disaggregated groups of women and men beneficiaries, and also of key informants. This generated quantitative data, with a few qualitative comments (including the informed reflections of the researcher).

In Ethiopia, a peer review method was used, where the project manager from one area conducted research in another, and his equivalent conducted research in his area. They held semi-structured focus group discussions, disaggregated by gender, using the simple Pakistan questionnaire. This generated qualitative data.

In Angola, a peer review method was used, where project staff from one area conducted research in another, and vice versa. They held structured focus group discussions, disaggregated by gender, using six key questions adapted from the Listen First model and participatory exercises, designed to generated both qualitative and quantitative data. In addition, interviews were held with key informants, also generating qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative data was structured to allow direct comparison with staff's self-assessments.

The research team carefully reviewed each methodology, considering the data it produced, the strengths and weaknesses of the methods, who learned what during the research, and how the data was and could be used.

1.9 Management issues

Throughout each field visit, the research team presented and discussed the research with staff and managers. This included a wide variety of formal interviews, meetings and informal discussions, allowing the research team to build up an understanding of the issues managers face in tackling this area. Our final wrap up meetings for each visit focused mostly on reporting our activities and

preliminary findings to managers, and considering next steps they could take to pursue the agenda, if they wanted to. These often included picking up the action points identified in staff workshops and carrying out the community research, or using its findings.

In addition, the research team presented and discussed the emerging work with managers and advisors in Concern's head office in Dublin throughout the course of the research. This provided a great deal of insight into how downward accountability could be managed on a systematic basis, how it fits with other management priorities, and the different tensions and pressures that managers face at all levels. During the research period, Concern joined HAP, which involved Concern making a formal organisational commitment to enhance its downward accountability. This cemented the issue on to the management agenda. It also created some tension and confusion about how this research project fitted together with HAP.

Table 1: Timeline and key events

Throughout 2005	Discussions on value for money and downward accountability in Concern
Nov 2005	Mango writes initial checklist
Throughout 2006	Concern's Policy Director discusses checklist with various country teams
May 2006	Concern Burundi use checklist as part of their strategic review
June 2006	Research team visited Pakistan
Sept 2006	Concern Kenya trialled checklist with partner
Jan 2007	Research proposal circulated to Regional Directors
May 2007	Research team visited Cambodia
Aug 2007	Research team visited Ethiopia
Aug 2007	Contract signed with Mango
Oct 2007	Literature review started
Nov 2007	Paper presented at NUI Galway conference
Dec 2007	Listen First model developed
Jan 2008	Research team visited Angola
Feb 2008	HAP baseline carried out in Concern in Ireland
Mar 2008	Angola team carry out community research
Apr 2008	Research team visited Cambodia
Sept 2008	Writing up

Table 2: Research participants

		Concern Staff	Partner staff	Community research	Other	*Total*
Burundi Jun-06	Women	3	-	-	-	*3*
	Men	5	-	-	-	*5*
Pakistan Jun-06	Women	3	-	45	-	*48*
	Men	8	-	10	-	*18*
Kenya Sep-06	Women	-	1	15	-	*16*
	Men	1	2	15	-	*18*
Cambodia May-07	Women	3	5	50	-	*58*
	Men	7	10	25	2	*44*
Ethiopia Aug-07	Women	11	-	47	-	*58*
	Men	24	-	50	-	*74*
Angola Jan-08	Women	9	-	82	1	*92*
	Men	25	-	43	-	*68*
Dublin	Women	6	-	-	-	*6*
	Men	6	-	-	-	*6*
Advisors	Women	-	-	-	7	*7*
	Men	-	-	-	14	*14*
Totals	Women	35	6	239	8	*288*
	Men	76	12	143	16	*247*
	Everyone	**111**	**18**	**382**	**24**	***535***

Section 2: Field Trials, Data and Analysis

2.1 Introduction

This section provides a narrative description of how Concern and Mango's Listen First project unfolded and presents key data from field trials. It also records the research team's on-going analysis during the project.

The section is structured chronologically, describing work in the following locations:

- Background (2006 – 2008)
- Burundi (May 06)
- Pakistan (May – June 06)
- Kenya (September 06)
- Cambodia (April – May 07)
- Ethiopia (August 07)
- Angola (January 08)
- Cambodia (April 08)

All the field visit reports, apart from the last, have three sections covering: self-assessment workshops, community research exercises, and management involvement. They include a wide variety of primary data. Quotations and data are from primary documents, including interview notes, meeting and workshop notes, research reports, emails and other related sources. The management issues proved to be highly pertinent to the agenda of supporting new ways of working within the organisation. Analysis and reflections are included throughout.

Throughout the project, the research team was tasked with balancing their research agenda with providing practical support for field staff. At each field site the research team learnt more about working with staff in the area of managing downward accountability, and its tools and approaches evolved as a result.

2.2 Background (2006 – 2008)

Concern, a major international NGO based in Ireland, has a strong commitment to participation, empowerment and being accountable to the people it exists to serve. Mango, an international NGO based in UK, has a strategic goal of researching new approaches to performance management for NGOs. This research project grew out of a joint desire to explore new ways of managing how a major NGO can manage downward accountability, on a systematic basis, across its varied field work.

At a meeting in September 2004, Concern's Country Directors identified their single most important question for delivering Concern's future strategy: "How can Concern's accountability and transparency be strengthened?". Concern's 2005 Core Policy states: "Within the resources available to us, we aim to achieve the maximum possible impact in eliminating poverty and in developing the capacity for sustainable development." It continues: "the benefits will be primarily for extremely poor people and will be achieved through:

- Empowerment and the realization of the potential of those with whom we work
- Respect for people and the promotion of equality
- Participation by extremely poor people in the making of decisions which affect them
- Respect for the environment"

Concern's Governance Framework, approved by its Council in 2005, also states that "Concern is morally accountable to its beneficiaries and must ensure that it listens to and understands the needs of beneficiaries." It challenges Concern to develop indicators and means of verification for this.

The current research project has its roots in work from April 2005 on how Concern could maximise the value for money of its work in line with these commitments. This was crystallised into a paper that established a strong link between the three areas of (a) beneficiaries making judgements about the value for money of field work, (b) Concern's accountability to beneficiaries, and (c) the empowerment of beneficiaries.

Concern's Senior Management Team considered and approved the paper in January 2006, including its recommendation that Concern 'develop and run pilots to test the new ideas for involving beneficiaries in establishing the value for money of Concern's work'. The Policy Director actively championed the paper.

Over the same period, other NGOs were working on the same issues. In 2005, Mango drafted an 'Accountability to Beneficiaries' checklist, hereafter referred to as "the Checklist". The Checklist was referenced in Concern's Value for Money paper as one practical way to measure the quality of how we work with communities, and how accountable we are to them. During the first half of 2006 Concern's Policy Director trialled the Checklist during country visits to Cambodia and Burundi. He specifically worked with country head office staff and he returned enthusiastic about the potential for using the Checklist more broadly within Concern.

In June 2006 Concern's Overseas Department Team considered this work on Value for Money. The meeting included a participatory exercise to encourage senior decision makers to consider the subjective nature of 'effectiveness' in relation to NGO work, and the role beneficiaries could play in establishing the value for money of Concern's work. This exercise was also run successfully with other head office departments, including finance. A small minority of staff suggested that illiterate or uneducated beneficiaries were not in a position to make well informed judgements. The Overseas Department Team also reviewed Mango's 'Accountability to Beneficiaries' Checklist. The Team concluded that this was an area the organisation could and should improve on, and gave their backing to continue work on how Concern could manage and improve its accountability to beneficiaries.

As described below, pilot field work was carried out in Burundi (May 2006), Pakistan (June 2006) and Kenya (September 2006).

Over the same period, BOND, the umbrella body for UK NGOs, independently commissioned research into what drives quality in NGO work. The findings were presented in October 2006, including the central conclusion: *"The quality of an NGO's work is primarily determined by the quality if its relationships with its intended beneficiaries"*. The meeting was well attended, showing the interest the NGO community had in this topic. Concern's Policy Director also joined it.

In January 2007 the research team developed a proposal to research practical approaches for Concern to manage its accountability to beneficiaries. It was informed by previous experience, and approved by the Overseas Director and the Policy Director. Its aim was to balance a purely research approach with the provision of practical support to staff and managers. It laid out a plan of work over eighteen months to two years. This was circulated to Concern's five Regional Directors plus the head of the Emergencies Unit, who proposed pilot countries to take part in the action research.

As a result, Robyn Wilford carried out research field work with Cambodia (May 2007) and Ethiopia (September 07), described below. He developed new approaches, with a focus on appreciative enquiry techniques and took expert advice on developing tools for measuring qualitative factors, such as from the Head of Change Management at the professional services company PwC.

Through 2007, Concern also made a new level of organisational commitment to accountability to beneficiaries, by signing up as a member of HAP (the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership). In March 2007 Concern formally became a member of HAP, and in October 2007 the Overseas Director made a commitment to applying the HAP standard to all of Concern's country offices.

This created new interest and attention to the question accountability. Unfortunately, during September 2007, some confusion emerged about the relationship between HAP's six benchmarks and Mango's five section Checklist.

In August 2007 Concern signed a contact with Mango for Alex Jacobs to work closely with Concern on the action research for its final twelve months. Tina Wallace (independent) and David Bonbright (Keystone) were also contracted to provide expert guidance to the research team. In November 2007 the research team (Robyn Wilford and Alex Jacobs) presented an academic paper at the Galway University Development's Futures conference. This laid out the academic basis for the work and its practical research aims. In December 2007 the action research project took on the working name of 'Listen First'.

Through 2008, further field work was conducted in Angola (January 2008) and the team returned to Cambodia for follow up research (April 2008), also described below.

In February 2008, HAP carried out a baseline of Concern's head office in Dublin. The HAP process was led by Concern's Emergencies Department with support from Robyn Wilford (who was based in the Policy Directorate). The HAP baseline report made a number of references to Listen First as a mechanism that could help Concern implement the HAP standard, specifically referencing it as a possible implementation approach as part of Concern's Accountability Framework. The baseline report also commented that some of the indicators on Listen First *"are not easily measureable and would thus need to be improved to be used as quality objectives in the implementation section of the [Humanitarian Accountability Framework]".* The inclusion of Listen First in the HAP baseline report did not fully resolve the confusion that had been building since the previous year. At the same time, Concern was also developing a wider guide to monitoring and evaluation, which covered some similar issues from a different perspective.

In April 2008 Concern's CEO announced an organisational restructure and the Policy Director retired. The research team lost a strong senior level advocate for the project when this happened. However, by June 2008 an agreement had been reached between the new Policy Director and the Overseas Director that the Emergencies Department and the research team would work together to see how the Listen First work could be integrated with Concern's HAP plans.

The research team also presented Listen First to external audiences in early 2008. These included BOND's Quality group (in March 2008) and INTRAC's NGO Research Forum (in May 2008). The Executive Director of INTRAC thought the Listen First presentation was a 'great contribution'. Other organisations also trialled some of the Listen First tools. For instance, HAP passed the Listen First framework on to Christian Aid who used it at one of their management workshops. The Methodist Relief and Development Fund (MRDF) tested it with some of their partners. The BOND meeting also cautioned that NGOs should be wary of the risks associated with standardising approaches to implementing downward accountability.

2.3 Burundi (May 06)

Concern Burundi was one of the first Concern field offices to trial the Checklist. In early 2006, Robyn Wilford emailed the Country Director, asking if Concern Burundi would like to get involved in the research project. The Country Director replied enthusiastically: *"as we come to the pivotal time in terms of writing our strategic plan, [the Checklist] is exactly the document we need to stimulate thinking regarding the way(s) in which we interact with beneficiaries"*.

At that time, Concern Burundi was developing a new five year strategic plan. The management team held a series of strategic planning workshops, looking at how to make the change from emergency interventions to longer term development work, as well as new areas of work. At one of these workshops, on 13th May 2006, the management team and team leaders spent half a day using the Checklist to assess their performance, and discuss the issue of downwards accountability in relation to their work.

The assessment was carried out by the team leaders, with facilitation by managers, and no external support. With the support of colleagues, each team leader gave quantified estimates of performance across the questions in each of the five sections of the Checklist. These findings were discussed and compared against each other by the whole management team. Team leaders identified findings including "All Teams felt that they could present information in a more visual manner"; two "teams felt that they were good at involving beneficiaries in the planning of activities", while in a health pilot, beneficiaries were "not involved in setting the programme targets".

On the issue of complaints: *"There is no official complaints policy in Concern Worldwide Burundi.Team Leaders do feel that many complaints are dealt with in the field as there are Concern representatives based locally. However there is no mechanism if this member of staff is abusing their position."* It was noted that Concern's Programme Participation Protection Policy also reduced the chance of abuse.

A wider discussion of the findings concluded that *"Staff have a good relationship with beneficiaries, however they may make assumptions about the information that they wish to hear and the formulation of a complaints procedure has been neglected. Also need to feedback information to beneficiaries."* There was some disagreement about how much information should be shared with beneficiaries. A general conclusion was that the team needed "*to evaluate what level of participation is appropriate in consideration of the current external/internal environments".*

Later, the Documentation Officer, who was closely involved in the workshop, commented that "the Team Leaders really liked the session [which] definitely got us all thinking". In a report from the workshop, the results of the self-assessments were plotted on bar charts.

Analysis

In this case, the Checklist was a useful tool for reflection among senior managers. It provided a framework for considering key aspects of the relationships that staff had with beneficiaries, in ways that they found relevant. Performance was quantified, in a fairly informal manner. This allowed direct comparison between teams, and provided a basis for discussing the desired levels of performance across each section of the Checklist, including identifying some areas for improvement.

The workshop was held as part of a wider process of reflection and planning, which the Country Director was already running quite separately from the research project. This led to a new strategic plan with a specific emphasis on community-based methodologies for new programmes.

The quantified results from the self-assessments were sent to the Regional Director, with a comment from the Desk Officer that they "could ... be used as a baseline study at where our current competencies and capacity are in terms of our levels of engagement and where we would like to take that strategically in the future." No repeat exercise was carried out, and the Country Director subsequently left Concern Burundi.

2.4 Pakistan (May – June 06)

Introduction

The research team carried out its first field work in Pakistan in May – June 2006. Robyn Wilford visited for 10 days and Katherine Hewitt (an intern studying for a Masters dissertation) stayed for 17 days. The visit was proposed by Robyn Wilford, and set up with the active encouragement of Concern Pakistan's Country Director, who was keen to look at ways of improving downward accountability in the programme. The Programme Support Unit Manager from Concern Pakistan, was the key contact for planning and arranging the trip. The visit proved to be a valuable learning experience, particularly for the research team.

The purpose of the visit was "to pilot the accountability checklist, and explore any links between our accountability to the target population and the effectiveness or quality of our work". The key tools used were the Checklist, and semi-structured focus group discussions with beneficiaries around a simple questionnaire comprising three headline questions:

1. Are the services offered by the NGO useful to program participants?
2. Do beneficiaries influence what the NGO does?
3. How easily can individual beneficiaries talk to NGO staff?

More detailed follow up questions were prepared within each question.

The visit comprised an initial one day workshop in Islamabad, followed by a four day field trip to three project sites. The remaining time was spent in the Islamabad office. The team developed an ambitious initial work plan: to carry out a self-assessment exercise with staff and research into community opinions; to develop an action plan with staff; and for staff to repeat the self-assessment exercise and community research six months later and review any progress. Once on the ground, this had to be adapted.

Self assessment workshop

The initial workshop involved 11 participants, with head office staff and some representatives from partner organisations. The team presented the research process using concepts from the "Value for Money" paper, with a focus on enhancing the value for money of Concern's work. This focused on improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in relation to different levels of the logframe. Then the Checklist was introduced, and staff used it to assess the performance of Concern Pakistan's field teams.

Staff engaged enthusiastically with this assessment process, with some differences of opinion between partner and Concern staff which could form the basis of useful dialogue and learning. There was a particularly lively discussion around the potential to introduce complaints mechanisms into field work.

Later it emerged that staff were unclear what the term "value for money" had meant, and whether it was associated with cutting budgets or changes in staff structure. (There had been some restructuring in Concern Pakistan the previous year, with the reduction of at least one head office post.) In addition, staff were uncertain about the purpose of the assessment, and how the results would be used. "It felt like we were being tested", one member of staff said. The presence of Western head office staff, perceived to be powerful, appears to have exacerbated this.

This led the team to conclude that, in this case, the use of the Checklist was undermined by: *"different perceptions of certain terminologies and concepts, cultural differences, including different perceptions and reactions to a scoring system, cultural norms and beliefs (such as the value of women's input) and finally the presence of outsiders conducting the study."* However, the Checklist did make the concept of 'downward accountability' concrete, and provided practical ideas for how staff could make improvements.

Community research

The research team visited community organisations and ran focus groups with community members in three villages where Concern was working in Kotli Sattian, a subdivision of Rawalpindi District in the Punjab province of Pakistan. The meetings had been set up in advance by Concern's Project Manager who oversaw work in this area. The researchers ran focus groups with men and women separately, and met Community Organisations.

The researchers repeatedly encountered difficulties with power dynamics. For instance, at one meeting, the leader of the Community Organisation made a short presentation, asking Concern for a programme approach rather than a project approach. In answer to a question about identifying vulnerable groups he replied "we are all equal here". Later he said that "everyone can complain through me". It seemed unlikely that this represented the views of poorer and lower status people. During the same meeting, the Project Manager who was translating for the research team would not ask the Community Organisations questions about whether Concern should be transparency about indirect as well as direct project costs. This proved a particularly delicate subject, which made field staff uncomfortable.

The researchers had the impression that, at this meeting, the level of dialogue was constrained, and the leader of the Community Organisation was pursuing an agenda of trying to impress an influential outsider so as to win more funding. He may have been hesitant to criticise Concern in front of the Project Manager; and reticent to discuss divisions within his organisation or the local community. On the other hand, the Project Manager may not have fully understood the purpose of the research visit.

Concern's female Project Officer translated for Katherine. Like other Concern staff, the Project Officer spoke Urdu and not the local dialect. The majority of women in Kotli Sattien did not speak Urdu. 34 women attended one focus group, many of whom had travelled a long way for the meeting; only six understood Urdu and only three spoke it. The focus group was carried out with double translation from the dialect to Urdu to English and back again.

This raised immediate questions about the nature of the relationship between Concern staff and local communities, and in particular the ability of Concern's staff to engage directly with the poorest and most vulnerable people.

The focus groups provided inconclusive answers to the question “Are the vulnerable or marginalised people represented and reached by your work?”. The answers tended to be “yes, this benefits the whole community”. However, the focus groups were dominated by relatively affluent and high status people. Field staff suggested that “the more prominent members of the community probably ask some of the vulnerable people what they need and want” and that vulnerable people are reached “because it is in the logframe”, without being able to specify how they are reached.

The focus groups revealed that neither men nor women felt involved in decision making. Women articulated their needs as being accessible latrines and lack of healthcare (particularly around childbirth). Men emphasised the need for a road and better transportation. It was unclear how these differing interests were discussed and potentially resolved.

The researchers did not have the opportunity to understand all of Concern’s work in the area in detail. But they were concerned about the potential for elite capture. For instance, one local pilot project had built a single biogas plant which needed the manure of several oxen to run on a daily basis. The only family that had the oxen to run such a plant were the wealthiest local family, and field staff recognised that benefits seemed to accrue solely to them rather than to the wider community.

In 2003, Concern staff carried out a PRA exercise to identify the priorities of communities in the area, as the basis of a five year programme. The number one priority from the exercise was building a road into the area. But this did not fall within Concern’s strategic plans, so was not pursued. A programme plan and logframe was subsequently developed, and, during the research visit, the Project Manager clearly saw his responsibilities as delivering the outputs specified in the logframe.

The research process itself had the potential to help redress the power imbalance, for instance by providing a forum for Concern field staff to listen directly to women. However, as a one off exercise, it is unlikely to have contributed to lasting change. These research processes were carried out as a contribution to the on-going relationships between field staff and local people, to be developed further as field teams thought most appropriate.

Overall, the focus groups and meetings using the three research questions generated a variable level of dialogue about communities’ views. The researchers gained a number of significant insights into local perceptions and relationships between local communities and Concern staff. But the approach did not generate consistent data, and raised important methodological and ethical questions about hearing from people of all statuses in communities.

Management

Concern’s Country Director was interested in improving the accountability of field staff to local communities, commenting initially that she would “be happy to improve our mechanisms to hear what the beneficiaries think”. Reflecting on the research, she said that, in a spirit of continuous improvement, it reinforced “that ‘people’ are the main focus of our work, rather than the activities”. The Programme Support Unit Manager also commented that the research had been useful to get transparency and accountability on the agenda, backed by international work on the topic.

After the field work, the research team met with managers and staff in Islamabad again. This led to some discussion as to the purpose of the research. No specific action plan was developed. Managers had to find a way of taking this agenda forward in among the many other demands on their attention. Two years after the field visit, they reported that they had introduced complaints boxes in some locations, carried out some training with partners and staff, and supported HAP’s work in

Pakistan. It is unclear if these activities had contributed to a significant change in relationships with communities.

One of the researchers commented that field staff were often already extremely busy and that "any new headquarter driven initiative adds to their already demanding work schedule and can raise questions and fears of a watchdog presence" particularly when led by outsiders who may be seen to be unfamiliar with the local context.

Analysis

As with all the field visits, this visit led to a great deal of reflection by the research team. The emerging findings suggested that there were important questions to understand in more depth about relationships between field staff and local communities. They appeared to have a critically important effect on the quality of work actually achieved. The Checklist appeared to be highly relevant to these issues. But the tool itself and the way it was used had limited its effectiveness.

The research had run into the distorting effects of power dynamics at all levels, including between Dublin-based staff and Pakistan-based staff; Islamabad-based staff and Project Managers; Project Managers and Field Staff; Field Staff and community members; elite community members and others; men and women. These power dynamics impeded communication, consistently stifling the voices of less powerful people. They also led to differing expectations as to the purpose and use of the research.

It was clear that the tools and methodologies would have to be developed before further field work was undertaken. The team needed better ways of building understanding so as to enhance dialogue with less powerful people at every level. In particular the team considered how it could develop better approaches to facilitation and running reflective workshops. In other words, the research team considered how it could improve its application of the principles of downward accountability in its own work.

2.5 Kenya (September 06)

In July 2006, the research team asked the Assistant Country Director – Programmes (ACD Programmes) in Concern Kenya whether Concern Kenya would be interested in getting involved in the research, and sent him the Checklist.

As a result, in September, the ACD Programmes trialled the Checklist with one of Concern's partner organisations. The trial involved running the Checklist with three partner staff and holding focus groups with three beneficiary groups each made up of ten participants to triangulate the answers. For the focus groups the Checklist questions were rephrased into questions that reflected their original content. Concern national staff translated questions from English to the local language.

The trial resulted in a quantified assessment of the partner's performance, with points marked up against each question on a single copy of the Checklist. This was the basis of further discussion. The ACD Programmes reported that "the partner was keen to prioritise beneficiary accountability as a way of working and welcomed the priority given to it by the study". He commented that, as a result, the partner would document and prioritise feedback mechanisms and its beneficiary targeting process. Partner staff had also said that, otherwise, their donor INGOs had not encouraged them to use their limited funding for beneficiary accountability activities.

The staff involved were keenly aware that this exercise was taking place within a funding relationship between Concern and their organisation, and that this may have distorted their engagement in the process.

In February 2007, the Country Director reported that regretfully the office would had to step back from developing the research project further, along with any other new initiatives, because her team were already busy with other commitments, such as two large programmes and piloting the organisational intranet.

2.6 Cambodia (April – May 07)

Introduction

In May 2006, Concern Cambodia's Programme Advisor was enthusiastic about trialling the Checklist. Concern Cambodia had recently moved to work by funding and supporting local partner NGOs. The Programme Advisor thought the Checklist could particularly be used to "determine how responsive our partners are to the communities with whom they work". This could be done by asking local communities to assess partners, using a slightly re-worded version of the Checklist. It could empower communities "by putting the power into their hands to decide how they want a NGO to work with them and not, as is currently the case, vice versa." She went on to suggest that this could then be used to review partners' and Concern's logframes

Three months later, in August 2006, Concern Cambodia presented the Checklist to the Cambodian Humanitarian Accountability Network, known as HANet. (HANet is a membership organisation, set up in 2003 with the aim of promoting downward accountability.) Following this meeting, Concern and HANet carried out three training events for Concern's partners in "Humanitarian Accountability" between October and December 2006. The events were carefully designed to include an introduction to accountability, as well as Concern's policies in this area (specifically the Programme Participants Protection Policy and the Code of Conduct), and to introduce the Checklist. They were run by one of Concern's Project Officers.

As a result of the training, five local partner NGOs agreed to pilot the Checklist with their beneficiaries. The local NGO staff found that their presence in villages biased responses in favour of their NGOs. They suggested that further work should be carried out with an external facilitator running a community consultation process. At the same time, in early 2007, the Concern Project Officer and the Programme Advisor reviewed their work on accountability and mapped out some next steps. These included contracting a local organisation to carry out the community consultation, and collaborating with the research team to set up a visit as part of this research project.

The Programme Advisor commented in February 2007 that *"[the CD] and I both feel that Cambodia should become involved in the accountability pilot, especially given that we are trying to shift the programme towards a rights based approach."*

As a result, detailed Terms of Reference were written for the research team to visit for two weeks in April – May 2007. The visit had three objectives: (a) to initiate the community consultation process, (b) to establish a baseline with two partner organisations on accountability, and (c) to develop initial plans for partners to improve their accountability, and how Concern could support them to do that over the following six months.

This provided an important opportunity to extend the research project to work with partners, as opposed to direct implementation, and start exploring how Concern could encourage and support partners to be more accountable to the communities they aim to assist.

The visit comprised two half day workshops with Concern staff; one and a half day workshops held separately with each of two partners, in their offices; and meetings with managers and independent researchers.

Self assessment workshops

Process

The research team ran self assessment workshops with two of Concern Cambodia's partners: one in Kampong Chhnang and the other in Siem Reap. Each workshop lasted one and a half days. The first was facilitated by a Project Officer from Concern Cambodia; the second by a member of the research team and the same Project Officer. The workshop participants included senior managers and field staff from each partner. The Project Officers from Concern who habitually worked with them also participated.

The workshops were carefully designed in the light of our experience in Pakistan. They focused on reflection, working with local staff to help them identify and own ideas for improvements. They were structured around the core concept of the nature of relationships between frontline staff and communities, rather than "value for money". The first day involved reflection on what makes for respectful, effective relationships and why they are important to NGO work. This included testing the relevance of the five sections of the Checklist, without introducing the Checklist itself. The second day involved a self assessment process using indicators that the partner staff developed themselves, based on their own experience and the Checklist. This process naturally led to partner staff identifying improvements and an action plan.

The whole workshop used appreciative enquiry techniques, to encourage staff to think beyond current practice and develop their own energy for change. For instance, this included asking staff to identify a 'dream' of what they felt they could achieve in this area, and helping them identify practical steps to start attaining it. The research team maintained a positive approach, avoiding criticism of current efforts and encouraging partner staff to deepen their own analysis and develop their own ideas for improvements. This approach is also more coherent with key principles of downwards accountability, respecting people's right to autonomous decision making.

The same approach was used to adapt the Checklist itself. The key sections were summarised onto one side of A4, with scope for partners to identify indicators for different performance levels for each section. This has the effect of changing the tool so that it became a framework to support reflection (and encourage improvement), rather than 'checklist', which could be perceived as being primarily designed for monitoring performance. The tool is referred to as the "framework" hereafter.

Findings

The workshops generated lively discussions among staff from both partners. With time for reflection, staff and managers found it easy to make the link between the sections on the framework and their routine interactions with local communities. During an exercise conducted before the framework was introduced, they identified the attributes of an appropriate, effective relationship. These fitted very closely and easily into the five sections on the framework.

The process of encouraging partner staff to define these attributes themselves helped them to build a sense of ownership over the model. This appeared to strengthen their commitment to making improvements.

Both partners identified many examples of current practice which contributed to accountability, as well as areas where there was scope for improvement. There was also lively discussion of the constraints and difficulties involved in this area.

Examples of current good practice included informal complaints mechanisms: *"In 2007, one farmer in BomPenh Reach village reported and requested [the partner] to visit one well that contractor had not been done good work. He requested [the partner] to contact the contractor for repairing."* In many cases, local communities were involved in designing project activities, to some extent. But they rarely took the lead in this, and there questions were consistently raised about whether decision-makers truly represented the interests of the poorest people.

Difficulties and tensions were also raised. One member of staff commented that the provision of too much information could lead to conflict within communities, suggesting that they should not publish the specific amounts of support that individual beneficiaries received. Another commented that beneficiaries may request that the NGO gives them a pig, as livelihood support, but not have the time, food or money to rear a pig. Issues of representation also surfaced, including the necessity of working with local authorities in certain situations, and whether they actually represented the interests of the poorest people.

Participants used indicators and activities that they generated themselves during the workshops, to constitute different levels of performance across the five sections of the framework. On scales of 0 – 3, the summary of one partner's scores was:

Transparency:	2.5
Social structures:	2.3
Decision making:	2.0
Attitudes:	2.0
Complaints:	1.1

Both partners identified similar areas where they could improve their practice, including: developing a complaints procedure that people were comfortable using; using information boards in the community; and exploring new ways to involve the target population in decision making. Other specific suggestions included: helping the "beneficiaries know their rights clearly on the benefit to the project" and "present and explain the objectives of the project [to the community]".

One partner commented on the financial implications of this work, and that they would need additional funds for it, potentially including additional staff. Concern Cambodia recognised that they would need to support partners' staff to develop their practice, and that a coaching approach would be particularly appropriate, in line with the principles of downward accountability.

Finally, a manager from one partner asked whether Concern could be more accountable to them, specifically raising the question of whether Concern could develop a complaints mechanism to hear from partners. This was relayed to Concern's managers and considered particularly by Concern's Programme Advisor.

Analysis

The workshops successfully facilitated a discussion about the nature of the dialogue and relationships partners had with local communities, and specifically about the use of power. They raised core issues and created space for reflection. In only one and a half days, they did not resolve the issues. However, they provided a foundation for discussing some foundations of the quality of Concern's partners' work. They also naturally led on to wider reflections about the effect of power relations between Concern and partners, and then within the Concern office and between Concern head office and Concern Cambodia. All of these power relations tended to limit the scope for respectful dialogue at the field level.

Generally, the nearer staff were to the field level (in all of the organisations), the more committed they were to accountability to local communities. Field staff saw this as a very high priority. Managers, in all organisations, were pulled in different directions by different priorities, such as maintaining good relationships with donors and balancing competing demands from more senior managers.

Specifically, there was significant potential for the research process to be distorted by the power relationship between Concern Cambodia (a donor) and the partners. The partners had a strong financial incentive to demonstrate enthusiasm for an initiative from Concern, to keep the money flowing. As the research team explored further in their next visit to Cambodia, this was one of a series of initiatives that Concern head office had introduced to Concern Cambodia, and that Concern Cambodia had introduced to its partners.

There was very limited discussion of gender related issues in these workshops, and specifically whether the voices of women were heard within local communities, or partners, of Concern Cambodia. All levels of interaction, from communities to workshops with partners to the composition of the research team and management in Concern, tended to be male dominated.

Concern staff commented that, even if the process relied on using partners' own frameworks, this created a way of identifying what constitutes progress, and tracking whether it is happening. The partners' frameworks provided a good starting pointing for a continuing conversation about performance in this area.

Concern staff also commented that there may be differences between reported actions and realities on the ground. For instance, they said *"In terms of Commune councils, complaints/feedback boxes have been placed in all offices. However, these have been placed in the middle of the offices, prohibiting people from using them [due to local political considerations]."*

Community research

Process

At the same time that the workshops were being held, in May 2007, a Cambodian researcher visited communities where the same two partners worked. He used the Checklist to survey local people's perceptions of how accountable the partners were to them.

The survey had been organised by Concern's Programme Advisor, earlier in the year. It was carried out by staff from the "NGO Good Practice Project", a unit of an NGO umbrella organisation called the Co-operation Committee for Cambodia. Concern Cambodia paid for the research. It was designed within the context of on-going NGO work, not as a pure research exercise. The aim was to generate credible information for further dialogue and discussion by the stakeholders involved, as

well as to test whether the Checklist was an appropriate tool for this kind of exercise. This required a compromise between the immediate priorities of local managers (to contribute to their programmes and current relationships) and our external research agenda.

The survey used the Checklist, translated into Khmer with some minor adaptations to make it more relevant to the local context. Each of 23 indicators was rated according to the following scale: 0 – not yet started; 1 – just started; 2 – progress; 3 – achieved. The researcher also recorded qualitative comments, which were fed back to partners and Concern staff.

The survey involved discussions with three groups of stakeholders:

- 57 beneficiaries (2 villages from each partner's project area, total of 4 focus groups)
- 13 community leaders/activists (1 meeting from each partner's area, total of 2 focus groups)
- 5 commune council members (1 meeting)

One focus group included only women, and one only men. The rest involved both women and men, most with more women than men. Focus groups lasted approximately two hours. The researcher commented that participants engaged in enthusiastically. They were often keen to continue discussing the issues for longer, and they appeared to appreciate being asked their views.

The focus groups were conducted in Khmer by a single researcher. The researcher translated the responses to English when writing up the final report. He did not report that any of the participants had any difficulty speaking Khmer. Coming from an NGO background, he used technical NGO language in his English report, like "participation" and "beneficiary". It is not known how these relate to the Khmer concepts used in the original discussions.

Findings

Three beneficiary focus groups ran well, with participants engaging in dialogue with the researcher and giving a variety of responses and ratings. One (mixed) focus group ran into difficulty. The participants expressed some opinions and gave some examples that indicated that partner staff were achieving good practice in their work; but they refused to rate performance. Power dynamics within the group, or difficulties in their relationship with the partner, may have inhibited this. Unfortunately, this only became clear after the research team had left the country, and the researchers were not able to find out more about the underlying issues.

The survey process generated a great deal of qualitative information from each focus group. The balance of the findings was positive about how the partners worked. For instance, findings from the focus group involving 12 women and no men included:

- *"The [partner] staff are often in the village or with the target groups. ... [They] are responsive to [participants'] requests and demonstrate that they value the participation of beneficiaries."*
- *"... before [the partner] came to their village, [participants] used to come to meetings but sat at the edge, remaining silent. Now they sit in front and speak out in the large group."*

Findings from another focus group were:

- *"[The partner] shared information from the financial report of each project/activity. The amount in the financial report was consistent with the amount provided to them for their activities."*

- *"Staff did not use their position in inappropriate ways, for example asking for any compensation for their service. They sometimes come to share food with community members."*

Some areas were consistently identified where improvement was possible:

- *"[Participants] have only recently learned the names of [partner] staff and their contact address. They did no know about the location or address of the [partner] office."*
- *"[T]here is no clear complaints procedure in place in the commune developed by [the partner]. ... [The participants] said that [a complaints mechanism] would be good for beneficiaries, who would receive a better quality of services."*

In some focus groups, different people expressed different opinions. For instance, the responses to one question from one focus group (involving 10 women and 1 men) were:

1.3 ***Contact information****, including: the office address, the name and contact details of the programme manager and other relevant individuals.*

- 3 chose 0, indicating that they did not have any information about the contact details of [the partner].
- 3 chose 1 as they have only recently learned the names of [partner] staff, but do not know the contact details of staff/ organisation.
- 5 chose 2 because they know [the partner]'s office address, name and contact details of the staff. They have visited, received training or attended meetings at [the partner]'s office, have contacted them by phone, etc

The commune leaders gave uniformly very positive responses to all questions, apart from the presence of a complaints mechanism. For example:

- *"This group of three respondents consisted of village and commune leaders. Their answers clearly indicate that they have good communication and good relationships with [partner] staff. They perceive that [the partner], although relatively new to the community, is helping the community to improve their living conditions and strengthen their confidence."*

Alongside this qualitative data, the survey also generated quantified results, which could be summarised as follows, on scales of 0 – 3. These are the weighted averages of all the responses by the different members of focus groups to all the different questions in each of the five sections. They allow for different individuals giving different responses within a group.

Table 1: Quantified community research findings, Cambodia

	Community A	Community B	Community C	Community D
Transparency	1.8	2.3	2.2	2.0
Social structures	2.5	2.6	2.6	2.0
Decision making	2.7	2.0	2.9	n/a
Attitudes	3.0	3.0	3.0	n/a
Complaints	1.0	0.0	3.0	n/a

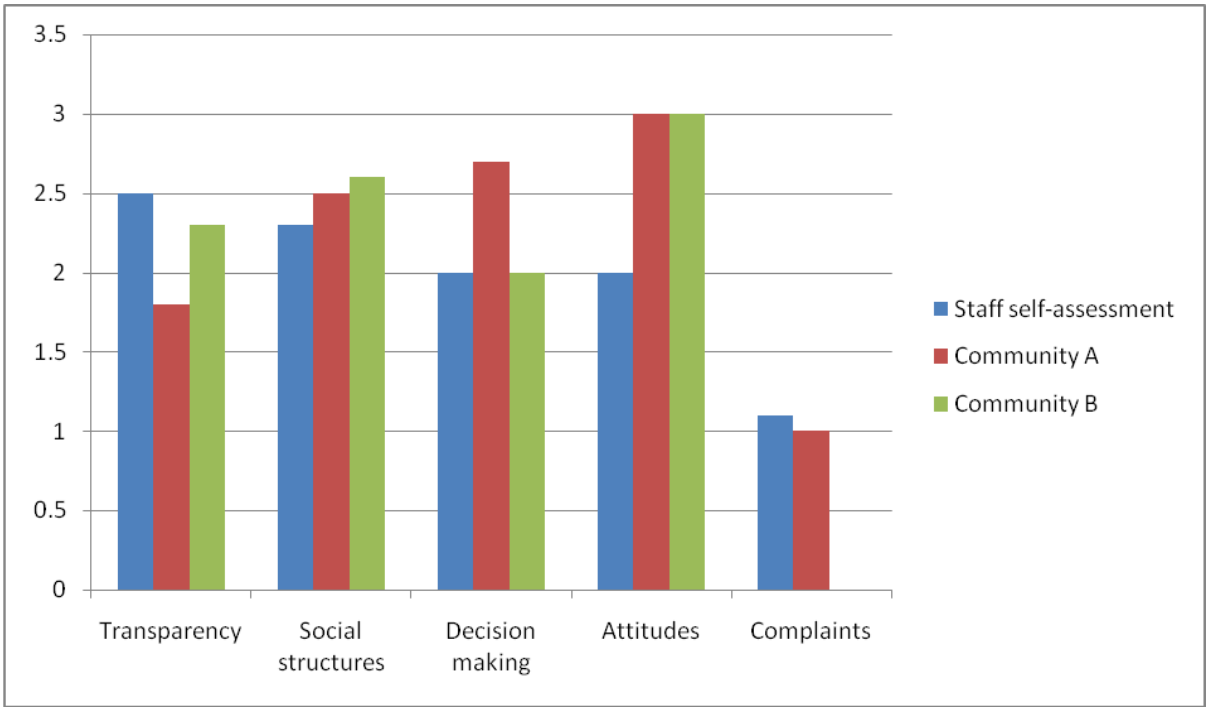
These findings could be compared with partners' self-assessments, for example for one partner:

Table 2: Comparison between staff self assessment and community research, Cambodia

	Staff self-assessment	Community A	Community B
Transparency	2.5	1.8	2.3
Social structures	2.3	2.5	2.6
Decision making	2.0	2.7	2.0
Attitudes	2.0	3.0	3.0
Complaints	1.1	1.0	0.0

And the results could be shown on a chart.

Chart 1: Comparison between staff self assessment and community research, Cambodia



This data is indicative, not precise. The methodologies used were a mixture of the pragmatic as well as the rigorous. For instance, more work could be done to improve sampling, on participatory research methods, and to engage with local power dynamics which may have inhibited honest and forthright responses. The quantitative scale (of 0 – 3) does not allow very find grained analysis. The assessment criteria used by staff and local communities are different, although closely related.

However both sets of results are based on the same set of issues, as described in the Checklist and the framework. They provide a snapshot of specific perceptions, collected under certain conditions, which can be characterised as reasonable, not ideal. As a result, they appear to provide useful data for further discussion, particularly among the main stakeholders involved: partner staff and people in local communities. Comparisons between different perceptions may provide particularly useful insights. For instance the chart above suggests the following questions (among many others):

- Why do staff see themselves as being more transparent than local people do?
- Why do local people think that the NGO is better at engaging in social structures, and reaching the most marginalised people, than staff do?
- Why is there such a difference between the two communities' views on how much they have been involved in making decisions about the NGO's work?

The data and questions could be used to help build more effective relationships, if staff have the necessary appetite, support and freedom of action.

Analysis

The researcher reported that people found two (of the 23) questions particularly hard to understand. These were questions 2.6 (on holding power to account) and 3.5 (adapting activities in the light of lessons learned). These could usefully be revised, if the Checklist was used this way again. Specific factual questions may have generated the most useful and reliable data (for instance 5.1 about whether a complaints mechanism exists). It may be useful to consider adapting this approach for other questions (for instance, people could be asked specifically whether they see NGO staff in their villages once per day, once per week, once per month etc.). It may also be useful to use more fine grained scales (for instance, 1 – 10 rather than 0 – 3), to allow more detailed discussion of specific differences in performance.

It was unclear how comfortable participants felt during the research exercise, and how forthright they were in their responses. The researcher was from the capital city, associated with power and status in general and Concern in particular. It was not clear whether people could feasibly have criticised partners to any great extent, particularly in delicate areas like whether staff abuse their position. Concern staff had initially wanted to accompany the researcher. But, after debate, it was agreed that this was not appropriate.

There was also a significant risk that stronger relationships between NGO staff and local people may have generated more critical responses. Under these circumstances, local people may have felt able to express more critical views. If the relationships were weaker, then local people may have felt it more appropriate to give assurances that everything was going very well.

One key variable appeared to be the length of time that an NGO had been working with a specific community. Concern staff commented that “the older partners have established the trust of the community and are generally more representative of the poor.”

While recognising these important methodological considerations, the data provided an indicative baseline of the level of downward accountability achieved by two of Concern Cambodia’s partners. Like the workshops, it provided a rich mixture of qualitative and quantitative information. It was based on a normative definition of what downward accountability entails, which the staff workshops confirmed as valid. However, this could have been explored further with local communities. For instance, it might have been useful to explore with local communities how they want NGOs to interact with them (an area explored in further field visits). As such, it could provide a draft management system to set performance targets and monitor actual performance compared to them. There is clear scope to improve the system further.

It is not clear how reliable this information is, when reported upward as a performance measure to senior managers. However, it may be possible to improve this, and further research also explore this point. For instance, the research team subsequently considered different approaches to adapt questions and improve participatory methodologies. There may be further scope to look at whether it is useful to track changes over time (rather than absolute performance); and improve cross-referencing within the survey instrument; and improve cross-referencing with other respondents / sources of information.

This community research exercise was designed in line with common practice in the NGO sector. It is striking that this appeared to fall short of the ethical standards required for academic social research, even though this generally does not have the same level of direct practical impact on respondents. For instance, while there was vigorous discussion of whether Concern staff should conduct the research, there appears to have been limited consideration to: reporting results back to respondents, or ensuring that they suffer no ill-effects from their involvement, or controlling how the information would be used.

Management

Two specific members of staff drove the agenda forward in Concern Cambodia: one of the Project Officers and the Programme Advisor. Independently of this research, they both believed that downward accountability was a very high priority for effective field work. They were involved in all aspects of the research visit, including organising crucial logistics, planning the community research and adapting research methods. Concern's Country Director was not directly involved in planning and promoting the research visit.

At the beginning of the visit, the Programme Advisor commented: *"Of equal importance, is to ascertain what information our partners would like from Concern, and for a complaints mechanism to be established. In addition, there is an obligation on Concern to select partners who are committed to being accountable to the community."*

At the end of the visit, the research team met again with Concern Cambodia's managers. The team presented key findings from the partner workshops, including the quantified results of the self-assessment. The results from the community research exercise were not available at that point. But the type of information that it would generate was considered. The meeting discussed whether this could provide a systematic approach to managing and monitoring downward accountability.

The meeting also discussed the opportunities for partners to strengthen their accountability to local communities; and for Concern to strengthen its accountability to partners. For instance, this included specific activities like regular review and reflection meetings which included local communities, partners and Concern staff, and coaching support for partners.

The Country Director said that he appreciated the research team's input and ideas, and noted that it was now up to Concern Cambodia to take the recommendations forward.

The Programme Advisor left Concern Cambodia in January 2008. By the time the research team visited a second time, in March 2008, she had not been replaced. The second visit is described below.

2.7 Ethiopia (August 07)

Introduction

During 2006, Concern Ethiopia's Country Director discussed the research project with the Policy Director. The Country Director was interested in both assessing the value for money of Concern Ethiopia's projects and in improving accountability to local communities. The main programmes in Ethiopia were two large scale livelihoods programmes, which had been running for over twenty years. The expat Country Director had joined Concern Ethiopia in early 2006.

In early 2007, the Country Director approved the research team's visit. The research team spent two weeks in Ethiopia in July – August, carrying out similar activities to previous field trips. These were: an initial session on accountability with staff in the main office (Addis Ababa); one and a half day workshops held at two field sites with field teams (Bodessa and Kampulcha); community research; and a final debrief in Addis Ababa.

During the visit, Concern Ethiopia was still in the process of negotiating approval for the next stage its livelihoods programmes and budgets with Dublin. There was on-going discussion about how Concern's work engaged with government programmes and priorities; and about the participatory assessment and review processes that had been carried out; and about how the large livelihoods support programmes fitted with the increasing emphasis placed on RBA in the organisation. There had been delays in approving funding, which created uncertainty and some anxiety in the team in Ethiopia.

Self assessment workshops

The self assessment workshops followed the same approach as in Cambodia. They were designed to encourage staff engagement and reflection, as well as to test the research team's main conceptual tools.

During this visit, and as a result of the workshops, the presentation of the framework evolved another step. The performance levels were changed to four levels, labelled: sapling, maturing, flowering, fruit bearing. These labels were inspired by work carried out by the Child Survival Team in Concern Bangladesh. The aim was to provide an additional performance level (increasing from the three used in Cambodia), and to use labels which were in line with Concern's culture and values, as well as an appreciative enquiry approach.

The five sections of the framework were confirmed as relevant and appropriate by local staff, and were not changed.

The self assessment process created lively discussion among staff as to current levels of performance and potential improvements they could aim for in the future. Many examples of existing good practice were discussed, such as participatory assessment exercises and field staff living in relatively inaccessible villages with local communities. One project manager described an informal three step process for monitoring staff attitudes, comprising: community interviews, peer reviews and community observation. It was unclear whether this was applied systematically.

The workshops also created space to discuss a number of practical constraints, which reduced their ability to develop dialogue with local communities and respond directly to their priorities. These were:

Relationships with communities. Staff felt there was a culture of dependency among local communities towards Concern. Community members were often illiterate, shy and not used to these kinds of interactions. They held Concern in high esteem, for instance suggesting that Concern stands in political elections. This was likely to have been encouraged by the wider social and political climate in rural Ethiopia, which tended to be authoritarian and centralised. It may also have been fuelled by Concern's long history in service provision in the project areas. Staff commented that there were many different interests and groups within the communities. Some individuals advanced their own personal interests, and if influential people were excluded from Concern's work, then they sometimes undermined it.

Relationship with government. Concern had to work closely with local government, a strong social force in the project sites, which influenced where and what Concern could do. For instance, farmers identified the issue of land ownership as a major factor in helping sustain their livelihoods. But the land was owned by the government, with no land distribution having taken place for years and none planned. Or to take another example, government policy was that credit schemes should provide minimum credit of 5,000 Birr per loan, a relatively large amount which could exclude poorer people from taking part.

Relationship with donors. Donors had been very strict about what they fund. For instance, after detailed consultations, health was identified as one community's first priority. But the EU refused to fund health work, and would only fund livelihoods work. As a result, the programme focused on livelihoods. In this case, two years later, Concern had been able to fund health work from other sources. Another example was a pilot project funded by the EU for communities to develop their own projects. An external evaluation found that these projects worked well, and were successful in promoting community ownership and empowerment. But the EU decided not to fund them in the subsequent long term project.

Constraints within Concern. The workshops noted that certain processes within Concern had created pressures against being accountable to local communities, and made it difficult to manage people's expectations. These included satisfying Concern's Programme Cycle Management system; satisfying financial reporting and budgeting requirements; restrictions to work in certain specific sectors; and the process for approving programme proposals.

For example, a significant amount of community time had been spent on Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA) activities, to develop the current livelihoods proposal. Staff had emphasised that this did not mean that funds would be forthcoming for all activities. But expectations had inevitably risen in the community. Then there were significant delays in approving project plans in Concern's head office. One mixed focus group, carried out during this research, found that community members were worried about the delay and potential cancellation of the planned activities. Another example was that local people prioritised secondary education, as the only way for their children to escape poverty. The nearest secondary school was 30km away. However, while education was one of Concern's key areas, the organisation's strategic plan limited their work to primary education. So this priority was not addressed. This also risked undermining confidence between community members and Concern staff.

Financial transparency. In one workshop, field staff commented that poor people would never ask Concern for financial information about their programmes. There was unanimous agreement that they have a right to this information. However, providing more information could inflate their expectations, adding to the difficulties and constraints that field staff already face. Staff were also unsure what information would be most appropriate to publish, and whether local people would understand it.

As in Cambodia, the workshops closed with a self-assessment exercise using the framework, and staff identifying areas for potential improvements. The results of the self-assessment exercises, using the five sections of the framework, were:

Table 3: Summary of staff self-assessment results, Ethiopia

	Site A	**Site B**
Providing information publicly	Maturing	Flowering
Local social structures	Maturing	Flowering

Involvement in decision making	Maturing	Maturing
Complaints procedure	Sapling	Maturing – Flowering
Staff attitudes / behaviours	Flowering	Fruit bearing

The programme teams identified next steps including:

- *"Run a pilot study on financial transparency with local communities.*
- *Develop a systematic complaints mechanism that can cope with both sensitive issues (as covered in Concern's Programme Participants Protection Policy) and more general feedback. It was noted that the real challenge will be to create a system that people feel comfortable and secure enough to use. So it will require close consultation with the community during its development.*
- *Develop appropriate ways of reporting progress to communities.*
- *Extend the current research project to include community representatives.*
- *There was a suggestion that Concern should develop an organisational code of ethics in relation to accountability and transparency."*

Community research

Process

During this research trip, community research was carried out on a peer-review basis by two project managers. The research was organised on a pragmatic basis, structured within busy schedules and limited budgets. They aimed to generate credible data for further discussion, within the context of pre-existing relationships, rather than authoritative conclusions.

The research was carried out by the two project managers, running four and six focus groups respectively, over two days in local communities at each other's project site. At one site, the researching project manager did not speak the same language as local communities (nor did the project manager who worked there). An additional member of Concern's staff translated conversation during the focus groups.

Focus groups included a mixture of beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries, elders, poor farmers and better-off farmers. At each site, separate focus groups were held with only women and no men. The focus groups were structured around the same questions used in Pakistan, adapted to the local context:

- Are the services offered by the NGO useful to programme participants? How could they be improved?
- Do beneficiaries influence what the NGO does?
- How could the relationship between the local community and Concern be improved?

Each question was backed up, and in some cases introduced, with supporting questions.

The focus groups generated purely qualitative data, with no quantitative measures. The findings were not available until after the research visit.

Findings

The members of local communities at the focus groups described the work that Concern was carrying out, and reported that they found it very useful. For instance, comments (with original spelling / grammar) from the research reports included:

"Previously we only harvest sorghum from our field once a year but now [with the irrigation] we could diversify ... There is vegetable that we produce and cereals. ... The irrigation enabled us to produce three times a year."

"There is significant saving of fuel after we started using the improved stove. Using the same amount of fuel, we were baking six ingera but using the improved stove 18 ingera. There was [before] incidence of child burning and in house pollution, but now no such problem."

The women's group were reported as saying: *"[Before Concern's work] there was no washing basin and hence there was great problem in washing out clothes. We had no place to take shower."*

Most focus groups suggested ways that Concern's work could be improved. A few did not. This may be due to methodological constraints, discussed below. Potential improvements mentioned include:

"The spring developed is not current working properly and should be maintained. This is mainly because of lack of proper management from the community side."

"Disabled and elderly groups are still not benefitting from the safety net program. Community concerned about these neglected community groups."

It was suggested that the daily payment rate paid under the safety net should be increased from the current level of 6 Birr / person, because living costs had increased tremendously and the daily wage for unskilled labour was 12 Birr. The researcher noted that the current rate is set by the local government.

One focus group said that *"Concern first came to the Kebele [local area] in 2005 mainly to conduct different assessments and surveys. Since 2007 it assigned its own staff in the Kebele."* The focus group could not answer many other questions, because implementation has not yet started. The researcher commented *"The community is suspicious about the work of Concern for fear it might not go into implementation. This may lose the trust of the community."*

Across the community research, participants gave many examples of how beneficiaries have influenced what Concern does. For instance:

"There was strong request from the community ... for health service and Concern took our request into consideration and constructed health centre ..."

"The overall process of need identification was facilitating the community to come up with their own needs from each [of 10 villages] in the Kebele."

"The overall process of the problem identification was that Concern together with the Kebele administration have discussed with the community to identify the most pressing problems ..."

One women's focus group commented on gender-related exclusion. *"House wives [are] always represented by their husbands at community meetings. ... Husbands will not allow them to come to the meetings and do not share them information adequately what is going in their areas. ... [Focus group participants] said that if they were [to] get a chance to decide what [was] done in their area, [they would] immediately prefer water project than natural resource conservation."*

Participants at both sites had only a very general understanding of what Concern was. One researcher reported that *"No one mentioned about different constraints of Concern. They simply*

consider Concern Worldwide as a holistic and capable organisation if it wants to do anything in the area. ... Generally they know about the mission of Concern by expressing that it is working change the lives of poor people in the world."

At the site where there had been a long delay in starting implementation, focus group participants recognised that Concern does not have its own money, and hence funding might be a problem. *"The budget approval process might take [a] long time."*

Participants reported that they have good relationships with Concern staff:

Staff *"give respect for the community, they try to understand people's feelings. [They] go down closer to the community to understand and listen to the people."*

Staff *"have good conduct that is comfortable for the community to freely raise their feelings and ideas."*

One researcher's report included suggestions of how Concern could build better relationships with local people. This included better two way communication (for instance through house-to-house visits to beneficiaries) and being more responsive. It was noted that *"Concern programs stick to what they already planned."*

Both researchers asked the focus groups what local people felt was important for a good relationship between Concern and the community. All focus groups in one area answered by saying they valued good communication and staff's ability to listen to them.

Finally, one researcher asked participants what factors would improve the relationship between the local community and Concern. The four points summarised in his report are: *"Maintain the promises committed, honesty, respecting of people and their ideas, transparency".*

Management

The Country Director approved the research visit. It is likely that she saw the research agenda primarily as an initiative from head office, rather than an opportunity for reflection and learning within Concern Ethiopia.

The research team held meetings with Concern Ethiopia's management at the beginning and the end of the visit. This included reviewing the action points identified in the self-assessment workshops described above.

However, the management team was handling many other major priorities at the time. These included on-going discussions about approving the major programmes with Concern's head office; engaging with other new approaches, like introducing a rights-based approach to programme design; reporting to donors; and pressure from the government. Later in 2007, they launched a massive response to a food crisis worsened by drought. The emergency response was a major focus for the team since it started, and continues today, in November 2008.

There were staffing changes in the senior management team. One of the Assistant Country Director's went on extended leave from February 2008. The Assistant Country Director who was responsible for programme delivery was not closely involved with the research process. In the second half of 2008, the Country Director took on a new role as the Emergency Response Director in Dublin. She currently retains her Country Director responsibilities and is still based in Ethiopia.

The action points from the workshops related to areas which staff had already identified as sensitive and challenging. In these circumstances, it was difficult for managers and staff to make a great deal of progress in this area.

Analysis

Self-assessment workshops

The self-assessment workshops confirmed that field staff found the content of the Checklist to be relevant and appropriate, stimulating lively discussions about real issues they face every day. The improvements to the presentation helped make the content more accessible, and improved the self-assessment process, by providing a clear fourth level of performance while also building on the positive, progressive aspect of the tool. In this visit, it provided a way of encouraging staff to reflect on and improve their practice.

One manager commented that "above all, I appreciate the start of the work on accountability research. The exercise conduct[ed] has made the staff at least to be aware about the issue". He continued, "The research also gave us the opportunity to see the view of the community about our programmes, in addition to the different reflection meetings we usually conduct ..."

It was striking to see the links between the Checklist and what a number of programme participants saw as the most important aspects of their relationships with Concern. The key concepts of honesty, respect and transparency all fit very closely with the content of the Checklist. The other factor identified by programme participants was "keeping promises". It may be possible to expand this to the level of a unifying principle, bringing together a lot of other factors. It is also closely related to the ideas of involving people in making decisions, providing them with regular reports of progress and the attitude of integrity.

The workshops and findings of the community research provide evidence that staff were committed to building good relationships with local communities and being accountable to them. Attention appears to have been specifically focused on participatory needs assessments. The constraints that staff identified demonstrate that there are no easy answers to building effective relationships. Staff face many competing demands and pressures, from other stakeholders outside of the community (including government, Concern and donors). They also recognise the power dynamics and different interest groups within communities. They face complex situations, making sense of overlapping networks of power and influence.

In this case, the relationships between Concern and communities were strongly shaped by the government, and the norms set up between government and communities. It may be very hard for Concern to establish new norms and ways of relating to local people. This was potentially made worse by Concern playing a similar role in service delivery to the government. A rights-based approach (encouraging people to hold duty-bearers, including the government, to account) may make it easier for Concern to distinguish itself from government. But, as the team recognised, this brings its own significant complexities, ranging from re-training staff to re-negotiating agreements with local communities and donors to the Ethiopian government's crackdown on political activism.

The comment that "Concern programs stick to what they already planned" is striking. On the one hand, this makes a great deal of sense, as programs, budgets and plans have to be negotiated with many different stakeholders (including government, Concern and donors again). On the other hand, it naturally reduces field staff's ability to respond to local people's changing priorities, or to their

own deepening understanding of the different issues that different people face. Programs risk being locked in to the level of analysis achieved in initial assessments, with limited scope for flexibility. This can conflict with field staff's accountability to local communities.

One experienced member of staff commented that there is a need for Concern to clarify the ethical procedures governing upward and downward accountability. It may be worth considering whether practical guidelines could be developed to help field staff balance competing priorities from different stakeholders. These could also help align the demands made on field staff and the support provided to them. For instance, ActionAid's "Accountability Learning and Planning System" identifies accountability to local communities as the first priority for all staff. This provides initial ethical guidance on how to make complex judgements in difficult, case-specific circumstances.

Project managers commented that they liked the self-assessment exercise, using the structured framework. It helped them to understand what the organisation expected from them, and to judge for themselves how well they were doing against it – as well as identifying areas for improvements. One expanded on the point to say *"There is a need for [a] working definition and framework for evaluating ... accountability, including the indicators ... to say this programme is more accountable than the other."*

During one workshop, staff suggested that a key question to ask the community is *"Whose project is this: the community's, or Concern's?"*It may be possible to follow up this very interesting approach.

Community research methodology

The community research methodology used in this trip had significant strengths and weaknesses.

On the positive side, it was cheaper than using external staff. The individuals who carried out the research both reported that they felt they learnt a lot from it. As Project Managers, they are among the most important individuals for this learning, as it may influence their insights, beliefs and future actions. In addition, the purely qualitative approach may have been familiar and non-threatening to all involved, and this may have encouraged a more open dialogue.

On the negative side, Concern staff will not have been perceived to be as independent as an external researcher. The quality of the data depended on the quality of facilitation skills of researchers. Local people may have hesitated to criticise Concern or suggest improvements. Again – and counter intuitively – it is possible that better, more open, relationships may have created conditions that made critical feedback more likely. In addition, researchers may not have wanted to write critical reports of their colleagues.

It was striking that one researcher's report generated more reflection and suggestions for improving the relationship between Concern and the local community; the other's reported more appreciation of Concern's current work, anxiety that Concern is reducing its work, and requests for it to continue. Potentially, this could have been due to the external environment the research was carried out within, or due to the process followed and facilitation skills within the focus groups.

As shown above, it was difficult to analyse and compare the findings from two qualitative reports. They contain a rich depth of information. But each had to be considered separately, within its own narrative context. It is unclear whether there were different views within focus groups.

Management

The major sticking point for improving accountability to local communities proved to be making space for it on busy management agendas. Managers were handling so many other priorities that they could not reasonably be expected to welcome an additional burden, unless they saw it as being particularly important. This was made more difficult by the variety of demands on their attention from Concern, government and donors – and harder again by staff turnover at the management level.

It may have been possible to build on the tools introduced in this research visit and the community research. But in February 2008, the management team felt that they did not have a clear approach for taking this area of work forwards. In July, managers commented that they were still looking for a clear system and guidelines.

2.8 Angola (January 08)

Introduction

With changes in Angola's political stability, Concern Angola invested a significant amount of time in developing a new strategic plan and new programme plans for the period 2006 – 2010. They focused on long term development work with a particular emphasis on livelihoods and education, which marked a departure from the previous emergency programme. They also signalled a shift to working with local partners, rather than direct implementation.

Within this context, Concern Angola started exploring approaches to improving their accountability to local communities. In 2006, the Programme Manager in Huambo developed tools for communities to keep a record of visits from Concern staff and to encourage them to question Concern staff. Managers had also asked village elders what they liked and what they disliked about Concern staff's behaviour.

Towards the end of 2007, Concern Angola carried out an initial exercise to assess the level of participation by local communities in Concern's decision making processes. Focus groups were run with representatives from 10 villages asking them who makes key decisions: members of the community, or Concern. This revealed a strong perception that decisions were led by Concern.

Working with Concern's Policy Director, the research team established links with managers in Angola, and carried out field work there in January 2008. The aims of the field trip were to contribute to managers' work in this area, to support front line staff to reflect on their existing practice in this area and identify improvements, and to develop new approaches to community research.

Between the previous field trip and this one, the research team refined the framework again, in line with feedback, and named it "Listen First". The five sections of the previous version were reduced to four, with "local social structures" combined with "involving people in making decisions" (also referred to as "participation"). Field staff had consistently reported that "local social structures" was hard to understand and use in practice. So indicators about representation were included for each performance level in "involving people in making decisions". Staff had also said that four sections would be easier to work with than five.

The section on "Complaints procedures" was widened to "Listening". This included informal as well as formal mechanisms for NGO staff and managers to hear from local people. For instance, an indicator here was the amount of time field staff physically spent in local communities. Finally,

indicative activities were developed for each performance level in each section. The whole framework was kept to one side of A4 paper.

Self-assessment workshops

Two self-assessment workshops were held with Concern field staff and partner staff, in Huambo and Kuito. They followed the same format as the workshops held in Ethiopia and Cambodia, although they used the new version of the framework. They were run in Portuguese, with translation to and from English.

The workshops provided very similar findings to the previous self-assessment workshops. Field staff from both Concern and partners found the issues under discussion relevant to their daily work. They easily and naturally drew links between the contents of the Listen First framework and the practical issues they faced in building effective relationships with local communities.

Managers reported that they found this helpful in deepening staff commitment and understanding of accountability to local communities. Examples of good practice were shared and ideas for improvement considered. Following space for reflection and discussion, staff were willing to be critical of their own performance. The final self-assessment exercise was held in separate sub groups comprising field staff, partner staff and managers. This separation seemed to aid self-critical reflection and open reporting. Field staff scored themselves a little lower than managers in some areas.

The workshops discussed the issue of different people speaking different languages. In general, managers spoke English and Portuguese, field staff spoke Portuguese and a local language, and local people spoke three or four different local languages. Everyone spoke these languages with different levels of competency. Portuguese was seen as a sign of high status in local communities which created a barrier to building close relationships.

The workshops involved Concern's own field staff and staff from Concern's partners. The partner staff engaged enthusiastically in the workshops. They appeared to be closer to field realities and more committed to downward accountability than Concern's staff.

Analysis

The framework continued to evolve to make it easier to use with field staff. This came at the expense of a separate section on "local social structures". This section had covered questions of representation (who is speaking on whose behalf) and power and exclusion at the local level, within local institutions. Previous research (from this project, and others such as in '*Participation: The New Tyranny?*') have shown that there is a real risk that participatory processes can reinforce local inequalities and exclusion if these issues do not receive adequate attention. The team continued to consider the right balance for the framework between ease-of-use and sophistication. A later (and final) revision of the Listen First framework would examine this again, for instance including gender-related analysis across all sections.

The workshops in Angola confirmed the contents of the Listen First framework again. More field staff, working in their own contexts and another language (Portuguese) found the contents relevant to their daily interactions with local communities. The appreciate enquiry approach to the workshops again generated conditions within which open and self-critical reflection could take place.

Community research

Process

Building on the lessons of previous field visits, the research team designed a new approach to the community research methodology. It was developed in close collaboration with two programme managers in Angola. It had the aim of being practical, manageable and replicable, and producing credible information for further discussion and reflection.

The methodology was based on a clear ethical statement. This included considering the purpose of the research, minimising the burden on participants' time, ensuring participants suffer no harm as a result of participating, ensuring informed consent, the use of research results and feeding them back to participants, respect for anonymity and confidentiality, and other areas.

A set of research questions were designed that were directly associated with the four sections of the Listen First framework. The aim was to reveal local peoples' perceptions of the same issues as those covered in the framework, so as to enhance the comparability between the self-assessment workshops and the community research. Two additional questions were included to explore peoples' perceptions of the value that Concern's work had provided to them (similar to the concept of 'customer satisfaction'). The six research questions were:

1. How easy is it for you to find out the following key information about the NGO: who is the main person assigned to your village; how to contact the NGO; what the NGO's objectives are here; who the NGO is trying to help; what the NGO'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 the organisation listen to your ideas and comments?
4. How comfortable do you feel discussing your personal issues with the organisation's staff?
5. How useful has the organisation's work been for you personally?
6. How wisely has money been spent on this project?

A series of research exercises and reporting formats were developed. The exercises included participatory activities to introduce, discuss and rate Concern's staff's performance. For example, sets of cartoons were commissioned to illustrate different performance levels. 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.

The reporting forms captured simple summaries of the bean ranking exercises (in quantified form) and additional qualitative comments. They aimed to make it easier for researchers to write up results during the research and to compare results after the research, reducing the amount of staff time required.

The methodology used a peer-review process, with field staff from one location conducting research in another project location. This aimed to create a level of objectivity, while actively encouraging learning within the staff team. It was also designed to build staff capacity and reduce costs, by avoiding using external research agencies.

The methodology relied on a mixture of focus groups and key informant interviews. Separate focus groups were run with women and men in all locations. Selection criteria were developed including

working with the specific groups of people that the work aimed to help, and avoiding mixing up very influential people with less powerful people in the same group.

Key informants included community leaders and informal leaders (identified in advance in discussion with field staff). A separate set of questions and reporting form were developed for semi-structured interviews with them, again reflecting the content and structure of the Listen First framework.

A simple process was developed for random selection of villages in which to conduct the research, across the programme areas in both 'easy to access' areas and 'hard to access' areas. Finally, practical arrangements were considered, including communicating with participants, arranging focus groups, travel and support for researchers.

Researchers received two days of training on the methodology. They adapted the methodology, for instance using the performance levels: "very easy, easy, hard, very hard" for some questions. They also developed more detailed support questions for each of the six research questions. The research was initially designed so that it could be entirely carried out within one week (including training and transport). Subsequently, it was found that, in some cases, a few extra days were needed.

The research was carried out in March 2008, organised and carried through by the programme managers.

Findings

The community research generated rich qualitative and quantitative findings. The specific findings varied between research locations, as practice and context also varied. Examples of the qualitative findings included:

About half of the focus groups knew the face of the Concern field staff and some could mention the names of the staff assigned to their village.

"We know the person to contact in Concern, in particular the staff in charge in our community. However we don't know the address of Concern or even telephone number to contact." (Focus group)

"We don't want to ask them about it. Although we don't know how much money was spent, looking at the quantity of the inputs they have given to us, it cost Concern a lot of money and seems they spent the money wisely and appropriately." (Key informant)

"It is perhaps necessary that the community should know Concern office, so that when we don't get any feedback from our questions/suggestion, and then we ourselves will go to ask why". (Key informant)

"We participate with the NGO by helping them identifying who will received benefits the project, we also tell them when the good time to implement the project. But Concern will make the final decision." (Mixed focus group)

"We don't contribute in decision, they come and had already make plan for us on what we will be going to receive". (Mixed focus group)

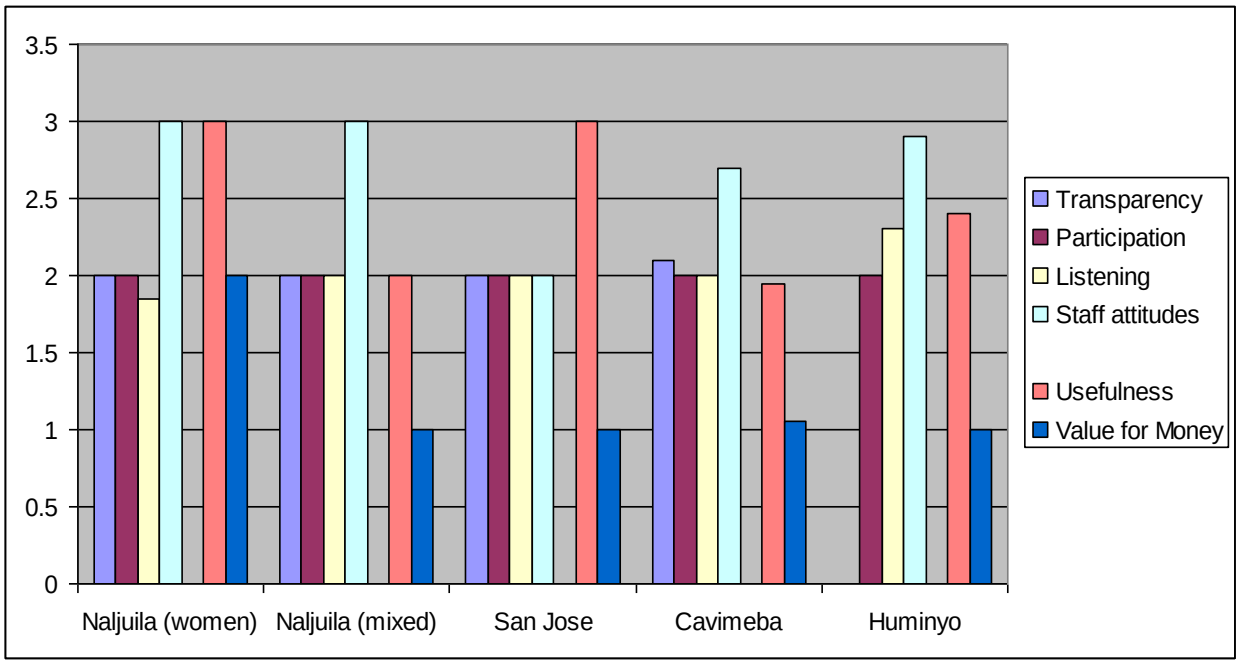
"It easy to contact Concern to send our ideas and comments through staff assigned in the field, but not all ideas /comments has been responded and in many cases it also no responses are given back to us." (Focus group)

"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)

"We mostly talk to them [field staff] about our needs and problems in the community, and we are comfortable of telling this to them." (Women's focus group)

The research also generated quantitative findings. For example:

Chart 2: Quantified community research findings, Angola



The programme manager commented that his team found it a useful exercise, saying 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 discuss initially the reports with the staff and partners and agree to many of the issues presented …"*

He continued to 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 (anticipating that we have done something to make the improvement)."* Some partners were also thinking about replicating the process in their areas.

Analysis

This community research exercise depended on the commitment of the programme managers. They invested a significant amount of time in developing methodologies, training staff, organising the implementation, and analysing and writing up results. They did all this in addition to their existing responsibilities and work plans. Without this commitment, the research exercise could not have taken place.

One of the programme managers commented that the opinion ranking exercise worked well. Sometimes more vocal members of the focus groups took charge of the bean scoring. To overcome

this, the facilitators started giving beans to different members of the groups. This allowed more nuanced rankings, with different focus group members settling on different scores, and this could be reflected in the quantified summaries. The researchers reported that women were vocal in the groups.

A key challenge was field staff's ability to run the focus groups. The initial training helped. Staff learnt a lot from the research exercise, and subsequently used the bean ranking exercise for other elements of their work.

The quantitative findings tended to be grouped around level 2. There may be scope to improve the value of the data by changing the scales used to summarise findings, perhaps to 1 – 8 or 1 – 10 rather than 1 – 4.

The quantitative summary findings make it easy to summarise and compare performance across different project sites. This makes credible data about local people's perceptions of performance directly accessible to managers. They can also be simply compared to the results of staff's self-assessment exercises.

Comparison between focus groups may also generate useful insights, and so might tracking trends over time, for instance monitoring whether performance is improving or declining in each area. For example, the findings pinpoint questions for further discussion among managers and field staff like:

- Why do women in Naljuila think Concern's work is more useful than the mixed group? Is that OK?
- Why are perceptions of value for money low, in all focus groups?
- Why do women in Naljuila feel just a little less listened to than other focus groups? What can be done about it?
- Is there scope to involve local people more in designing activities?
- Is there scope to provide local people with more opportunities to contact Concern, and to demonstrate that their comments are followed up seriously?

These findings suggest that the approaches described above could form the basis of initial tools for managers to monitor and manage the level of accountability actually achieved by their field staff, on a systematic basis.

They are not yet a complete solution, and need further development. For instance, further trialling will be needed to consider areas like the impact of reporting results upwards on local reflection; the cost and practicality of repeated research; whether repeating the exercises increases or decreases their reliability; and also other areas.

Management

The research team met with Concern Angola's management team twice formally during the field visit, and discussed the issues many times informally with managers. The management team comprised the Acting Country Director and three senior programme managers. They particularly identified two key constraints.

Firstly, Concern had recently moved from emergency to development activities; but local people still associated Concern with giving out food and non-food items. Managers commented that people were saying: "in the past Concern used to come with something; now they are just driving around".

Different field offices were at different stages of making this transition; so it might be appropriate to expect different levels of accountability from them.

Secondly, Concern Angola has had a very high level of management and staff turnover in recent years, including three Country Directors in the last year and eleven Country Directors in the last thirteen years (not counting Acting Country Directors). Each one brought their own priorities and ways of working. Managers had to explain the programme and work to each one. This had created confusion and reduced the focus on communities.

This level of turnover at senior levels continued after the field trip, with a new Country Director arriving, but only staying for one month. The two programme managers involved in the research were both coming to the end of their contracts with Concern Angola at the end of 2008.

The overall Programme Manager welcomed the systematic approach to accountability embodied in Listen First and associated processes. He commented that it would help field staff understand what was expected from them, and change their attitudes. It would fit into a training programme that he was already carrying out for field staff.

The Acting CD's monthly report for March 2008 reported that the community research was under way. It also described the incredible variety of issues that the interim management was tackling, including:

- Security issues (for instance, an anti tank mine on a main road cut key transport)
- Continuation of a wide variety of project activities (for instance, buying and distributing goats, holding municipal level forums for reflection and planning, identifying programme participants, agricultural outreach and credit work)
- Working with partners
- Engaging with many other external stakeholders (for instance, UNICEF, EU and other NGO representatives)
- Contributing to government initiatives (for instance, the Ministry of Education's new regulation on Parents' Committees)
- Mainstreaming HIV/AIDS within Concern's work
- National and international staffing issues (including training, visa issues and recruitment)
- Organising office and temporary accommodation

Analysis

The research carried out in Angola depended on the commitment of key programme managers. They had previously come to their own conclusions that accountability and participation were of primary importance to their field work, and had already taken steps to start putting that conclusion into practice. It was unclear exactly what this conclusion was based on, though informal conversations suggested that it was more due to their previous experience than specific leadership within Concern.

The level of turnover in senior managers and the range of management responsibilities created enormous pressure in the management and staff team. It is likely to have been difficult to hand over relationships with local communities, partners and field staff from one manager to the next, let alone relationships with external stakeholders, like key government officials. This directly undermined accountability to local communities. It may have increased the focus on measurable, short term concrete project activities.

In these circumstances, the commitment shown to accountability stands out as all the more remarkable.

The management team commented that they found the research exercise useful. One programme manager said that it created *"space for us to debate and discuss how we can further improve our approach in increasing participation ..., transparency etc"*. It also reinforced his view that development activities must follow where local people lead, and that field staff must be encouraged to have the right attitude from the very start, that their job *"is to help people to do things for themselves"*. The research exercise fitted in to his on-going training programme for field staff and continuing change from an emergency approach to a long term development approach.

The Acting Country Director reported that the exercise has *"given management a way to control the performance and behaviour of our staff in the field which in the past was lacking"*. This is very encouraging, allbeit the emphasis on control could be explored further, in line with the principles of downward accountability.

However, the management team also commented again on the constraints they face. A programme manager said they had not fully considered the report and drawn up strategies to improve their accountability. This was because of pressure to focus on "fast track projects", achieve targets and spend budgets. The uncertain leadership in the programme further undermined progress.

2.9 Cambodia (April 08)

Introduction

The research team returned to Cambodia in April 2008. This provided an important opportunity to review progress made following the previous year's intervention and Concern Cambodia's management's commitment to pursuing the agenda with field staff and partners.

The research team held reflection meetings with Concern's senior managers and Project Officers. The team also worked with the two partners who had been involved in the previous year's work, visiting them in their offices and holding workshops with their staff.

Partners' progress

Following the previous research visit both partners had set up information boards and complaints boxes in a number of the villages where they worked. They had also set up 'accountability committees' in villages, to receive complaints and respond or refer them back to the partner organisation if necessary. One partner had paid particular attention to encouraging appropriate staff attitudes, focused on treating beneficiaries with respect. One partner had joined HANet (see above).

Partners had also continued with other participatory approaches. These included participatory wealth-ranking exercises in villages, to identify the poorest people who were then selected to receive assistance. Village meetings had also been held to discuss project activities.

A very small number of complaints had actually been received. For instance, one partner had set up complaints boxes in five villages. Over eight months, they had received a total of two complaints across all the villages. Another partner found that two out of eight complaints boxes had been destroyed and replaced. Staff blamed this on "uneducated teenagers" and visitors from other villagers, who "came for a party". The complaints received had mostly been about why individuals had not been included as beneficiaries; some were anonymous. They did not appear to have

contributed to building better relationships with local communities, or improving programme decisions.

Concern and partner staff identified a number of reasons why so few complaints had been received. Many local people were illiterate. They were not aware of their rights to information, freedom of speech and to make their opinions known. Although the constitution commits the government to local level accountability, it does not encourage this in practice. People may be scared of speaking out in public forums. This appeared to be a particular concern in the light of Cambodia's very troubled recent history. The culture of saving face may also have reduced people's willingness to make complaints. Finally, people did not understand the Khmer translation of the work "accountability".

Some information boards had been useful in unexpected ways. Others had not been useful. For instance, some partner staff reported that they had used the information boards to publish the prices of farm produce, which was useful commercial information for local farmers. Others said that they had put 'before and after' photographs on the boards which showed the effects of improved farming techniques. These had motivated local people to try improvements on their own farms. Beneficiaries had particularly enjoyed seeing photos of themselves up on the boards, and this had encouraged them in their work.

Some information boards included field staff's names and phone numbers. Local people called them to ask them to take their farm produce to market places, or to check whether prices they were being offered were fair. Others did not include this contact information.

The research team visited one board in person. It had been last updated in February 2007, 13 months previously. The information displayed included lists of all villagers split into 4 levels of wealth ranking, public information posters (for instance about the health risks of chemical fertilisers), a list of who in the village had received what from the partner NGO, and an out-of-date list of the prices of vegetables and commodities. Information was presented mostly in Khmer, with some in English.

A complaints box was fixed below the board. However, there was no explanation of what the box was for, or how complaints would be handled, nor any invitation to make complaints. The information board did not include the partner's contact details, goals or budget for the locality.

On reflection, field staff commented that there may be other ways for partners to hear effectively from illiterate people, and specially women. They suggested that spending informal time in villages and making time to talk to people may work better than a complaints box.

At one partner, a group of field staff discussed their wider approach. They suggested that, rather than focusing on livelihood options, it would be better to discuss the root causes of poverty with villagers. Migration to the Thai-Cambodia border might have been a significant issue, or lack of access to land or water. Neither of these were directly relevant to the livelihoods activities that they were currently carrying out.

Staff said that they faced practical difficulties in having this kind of discussion. Villagers may say one thing at public village meetings, like emphasising the effects of droughts or disasters. But when staff visited villagers at home, in private, they may say another thing, like emphasising the small amount of land or capital they have.

Staff considered how they could tackle these issues. They said that, in terms of overall approach, their organisation should consider both livelihoods activities as well as responding to other issues. It

might be possible to improve dialogue at public meetings, for instance if more of the poorest people attended them. However, local leaders could still dominate them. So more home visits could also be useful in providing ways of hearing from the poorest people. Staff recognised that this would take time, but they said they wanted to do it, because these people must be involved.

Concern had set the wider agenda, asking the partner to carry out a livelihoods programme.

Concern's progress

Senior managers described how accountability and quality were key components of Concern Cambodia's 2008 work plan and draft strategic plan 2008 – 2011. This included trialling new approaches to accountability with a number of partners.

The Country Director commented that field staff had "a lot on their plates already". However, he restated his commitment to enhancing accountability to local communities, noting that it was not a new agenda, but would make field staff's lives easier and help them improve the quality of field work.

The report from the community research carried out in 2007 had been disseminated to partners and within Concern. But this research process had been driven forward by the previous Programme Advisor, who had left the organisation in early 2008. Her departure had put a brake on further work in this area. The position was still vacant at the time of the second research visit.

Work on the accountability agenda had been concentrated on pilots with the two partners mentioned above. This was partly due to the particular importance that one Project Officer placed on accountability. The other Project Officers had not been much involved in this area of work. They had engaged with a wide variety of other initiatives, as well as handling on-going relationships with partners and engaging with project implementation.

For instance, a Project Officer noted that Concern had introduced many different initiatives to partners in recent months, including: gender mainstreaming, advocacy work and the Rights Based Approach, Disaster Risk Reduction, HIV / AIDS work, decentralisation (in relation to government policy) and also accountability.

The Director of one of the partner organisations reflected this, when he asked whether Concern could be clearer about its aims and not change its ideas often. Concern did not appear to have made progress towards developing ways to become more accountable to its partners (such as introducing new mechanisms for feedback).

Concern's Project Officers had different levels of understanding of accountability. Some had a very sophisticated view; others had not been involved with it previously.

The research team spent presented its findings from previous field work and the Listen First framework to field staff. Staff said that said that they found the four sections in Listen First easier to understand than the previous five sections. They had previously found "local social structures" confusing. The Assistant Country Director commented that Listen First provided a useful structure for conversations between partners and Concern's Project Officers, which could keep the issues on the agenda.

A Project Officer noted that "listening" could be translated in two ways in Khmer: "ka shap" or "ka sven yo". The former meant "listening", but did not emphasise hearing and understanding. The

latter meant "understanding" which appeared to be much closer to the intention of the "listening" section of the Listen First framework. The direct translation might not have captured this properly.

Extending the work

During the visit, Concern Cambodia's Country Director asked the research team to develop a process for rolling out accountability to all of their 18 partners. The research team discussed this with Concern's field staff, and developed a process for structured discussion of the issues with partners. This was informed by the dangers of a mechanical approach to implementing accountability activities (like setting up complaints boxes). Instead, it aimed to provide a way for Concern's staff to work with partners and promote structured reflection and improvements on their part.

Participatory exercises were trialled with field staff, to promote reflection on current performance within the Listen First framework. These provided useful opportunities for field staff to learn more about accountability themselves. For instance, they considered the strengths and weaknesses of participatory processes identified from the partner visits (including community meetings which risked excluding the poorest people, and information boards that were out of date and listed villagers' personal details).

The research team identified five specific areas for improving accountability across Concern's work:

a) Using the Listen First framework consistently, to provide performance indicators in four key areas,
b) Regular reflection and identifying improvements (by field staff and by partners),
c) Monitoring how partners apply the principles in practice (by field visits and community research),
d) Changing how Concern relates to partners (e.g. reducing the number of initiatives they are asked to handle) and improving the Listen First tool and processes,
e) All supported by developing Project Officers' facilitation skills.

The final report to the management team noted that *"Improving accountability will take some time because it depends on partners and field staff trialling new approaches that are appropriate for their local contexts; reflecting on them and learning how to improve them. No standard approach to implementing accountability can be implemented across all different places. ... In addition, partner staff and field staff have to feel a sense of ownership over the approaches, and are likely also to have to develop new skills and ways of working."*

The report commented that this would need consistent management support and attention, and may come into conflict with other aspects of how Concern works with its partners. It concluded:

"The key messages that staff discussed were:

- *There are no 'one size fits all' answers to accountability.*
- *There are risks to getting accountability wrong – what works in one place may not be appropriate in another (and could reinforce inequality).*
- *So the four Listen First principles need reflection and thoughtful engagement by each partner.*
- *Staff can help partners by encouraging them to reflect on two questions …*

> ***Reflection Questions***
>
> *1. How can partners have better dialogue with the poorest people …?*

2. *How can partners help the poorest people gain more confidence …?*

   … in ways that are easy and convenient for the poorest people?

Partners can explore these by:

- *considering the needs of poor women and men separately,*
- *making time for regular, structured reflection,*
- *asking the poorest people what they think!"*

Analysis

Concern Cambodia and their partners appeared to have experienced this action research project as one more head office initiative among many. Staff had tried to make the best of it, to some extent, within their already crowded agendas. They had had to pursue many other priorities at the same time, some of which actively pushed against accountability (like meeting fixed project targets, or focusing on centrally determined agendas like HIV/AIDS). Staff had limited time and support to consider what the concept of accountability meant for their work. Instead, they appeared to focus on simple concrete actions, like putting up complaints boxes, which used up their time without achieving much.

In other words, staff interpreted the research project within the established organisational culture. The culture was partly characterised by Concern acting as a relatively hierarchical organisation, for instance pushing new ideas out to staff and partners. One Project Officer was described as "supervising" a partner, suggesting a clear power dynamic. Field staff appeared to be more often instructed than listened to. Some field staff appeared to have the space within this to develop effective, respectful relationships with partners / local people; but this was neither systematic nor obviously the norm.

The established culture was an active barrier to enhancing accountability to local communities. Accountability would need a culture that encouraged reflection, listening and learning and that released authority outwards and downwards. Front line staff, partners and local communities would need the space and support to consider their own agendas and discuss them with more powerful decision-makers. Hierarchy, over-loaded work plans and centralised decision-making all prevented this from happening.

Managers at all levels tended to look for standard activities that they could make sure were implemented and that would improve accountability to local people. But, this management approach itself acted as a brake and diversion to achieving improvements. Instead, managers would need to reconsider how they worked with field staff, releasing real power to them so they could make sensitive judgements about the specific situations they faced. For example, Concern Bangladesh has taken positive steps to adapt their organisation structure, so as to increase the focus on managing relationships with local communities.

Improving accountability

In summary, the research team identified three key components for how Concern Cambodia could work with its partners to help them improve their accountability to local communities.

Firstly, Concern staff would have to be strongly committed to the principle that partners should be accountable to local communities. They would have to see this as one of the most important priorities that actively informs their work, and be willing to spend time and effort working with

partners on this agenda. This appears likely to mean cutting away other priorities. Staff's commitment would need to be actively encouraged and reinforced. They would need to deepen their understanding of what accountability means and how it plays out in local relationships and politics. (It may be useful to see this as analogous to a commitment to customer service in a commercial setting.)

Secondly, Concern staff would have to develop strong facilitation skills to help partners reflect on their current practice, and identify improvements. Facilitation is a means of encouraging reflection and adult learning, both of which are steps on the path of empowerment. It is a crucial tool for helping people build up their capacities and confidence, so they can wield more power for themselves, even if they are not used to it. Partner staff cannot be instructed how to improve their accountability; they will only achieve it if they believe that it is worth doing, and work out how to apply standard principles to their own contexts.

Thirdly, Concern would have to change how it relates to partners. It would have to model accountable behaviour, for instance by actively listening to partners and involving them in making all key decisions. In order to achieve this, it would have to develop a stronger form of partnership, characterised by open dialogue. It would also have to resist the temptation to impose its own initiatives, centralised agendas or bureaucratic requirements – or expect partners to shoulder all the risks of their joint work. It would have to increase the time available for reflection and building relationships, and decrease the emphasis on immediate project delivery.

This added up to a very challenging management agenda, which would need consistent and vigorous management support.

In particular, ways would need to be developed to monitor staff and partners' performance in this area. As described above in this report, feedback from partners (about staff) and local communities (about partners) may provide a crucial performance indicator for achieving this, which is in line with the principles of downward accountability.

Wider application

It may be reasonable to consider whether these three components apply more widely within Concern, in its work around the world. Concern's head office may have to follow similar steps to encourage its field offices around the world to improve their own and their partners' accountability. This could help inform a wider agenda for change in the organisation.

However, as informed by the literature review and analysis across the entire research project, it may also still be possible to identify some standard high level approaches that apply across most projects in most circumstances, which can enhance accountability. For instance, these might include: an open information policy based on the presumption of disclosure; informing beneficiaries about contact details, project plans and their rights in relation to Concern / partners; focusing staff attention on building dialogue and trust with local people (including the poorest and most excluded) at all stages of the project cycle (possibly including hiring dedicated staff to do this); paying careful management attention to the quality of dialogue and participatory processes; holding regular six month reviews with all stakeholders in all projects, and allowing budgetary flexibility to make changes as a result; ensuring that all projects collect systematic and regular feedback from intended beneficiaries / partners.

Section 3: Conclusions

3.1 Introduction

This section sets out the main findings and key implications of Concern and Mango's Listen First project.

3.2 Summary of downward accountability

"Downward accountability" is a set of processes which an NGO can use to release decision-making power to the organisations and people that it aims to help, so that they can have more influence over the NGO's decisions which affect them (such as the design and implementation of programme activities). In practical terms this means building a respectful and collaborative relationship between an NGO and local organisations and people, based on open dialogue, which bridges the inherent power difference between them. It is closely associated with the concept of empowerment, and the rights-based agenda of encouraging citizens to hold governments and other duty-bearers to account. It is widely seen as one of the foundation stones of effective NGO work.

The term 'downward accountability' is commonly used in the sector. 'Downward' refers to the direction that accountability flows from those with more power to those with less. However, there is a risk that the term suggests that local partners / intended beneficiaries are inferior to NGOs.

3.3 Summary of the Listen First Approach

During the project, the research team worked with Concern staff to develop a set of processes and tools for managing downward accountability, with the working name of "Listen First". Listen First evolved as it was trialled in different field locations, from a checklist to a set of three carefully structured processes:

- Workshops for staff to reflect on and assess current levels of downward accountability, and identify improvements relevant to their specific context;
- Research into local communities' perceptions of the level of downward accountability actually achieved and how useful they find Concern's work (disaggregated by gender);
- Reports for managers to understand the levels of downward accountability actually achieved across different locations.

These processes are all built around the one-side long "Listen First framework". The framework sets out flexible performance standards for downward accountability across four general principles. This establishes a common set of expectations about what 'downward accountability' means. It guides staff about how to put each principle into practice, while also allowing a consistent management approach and useful summary comparisons to be made across different locations. The framework is directly compatible with HAP's 2007 Standard.

3.4 Findings

1. Concern staff in different countries found the Listen First approach to be useful and relevant for discussing how to manage downward accountability. They used it to generate rich qualitative discussions of their current performance in this area, including constraints they faced and opportunities for improvements, as well as quantified self-assessments of actual performance levels. As the Listen First approach developed during the research, staff found

it more useful and engaged with it energetically, finding it relevant to the daily issues they face. The approach worked in a number of different languages and cultures.

2. Standardised or externally designed mechanisms for downward accountability did not work when they were applied without careful consideration. There were always local complexities and differences between contexts (such as local politics and specific aspects of the relationships between field staff, local communities and other powerful actors). Vulnerable and marginalised people were sometimes excluded, which reinforced inequalities (for instance in poorly facilitated community meetings). Local staff and managers needed time and space to reflect carefully on current practices and how to apply the general principles of downward accountability to their specific context.

3. The way that the ideas and tools were introduced was important for generating engagement, reflection and learning among staff and managers. We had to create non-threatening opportunities for reflection which were relevant to staff. (This approach was also coherent with the key Listen First principles of supporting people's own efforts and not making decisions for them.) Power dynamics risked distorting reflection, and learning at all stages. This was true for the research process (at all levels) as well as Concern's field work. Facilitation skills proved critical. Staff generally did not have strong facilitation skills.

4. The same processes of reflection were successfully carried out with partners. This required careful facilitation. They were sometimes in opposition to more directive / inflexible / 'donor-recipient' approaches to handling relationships with partners. Concern staff 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. This may have undermined Concern's ability to pursue this agenda with its partners; and partners' abilities to pursue it themselves.

5. Managers did not prioritise downward accountability. Downward accountability was sometimes in active opposition to other priorities (like centralised programme themes and budgetary approval, and less reflective activities). When individual members of staff were enthusiastic, the progress they could make was limited due to lack of management support. Managers had little incentive to prioritise downward accountability, and were not held to account for performance in this area. The management support available to field staff was highly variable between field locations, with influential field managers setting their own priorities. Reports of performance in this area were not always reliable.

6. The research generated credible qualitative and quantified data from intended beneficiaries, disaggregated by gender, presenting their views of the current levels of downward accountability actually achieved, and how useful they found Concern's work. This data was structured using the same Listen First framework, which facilitated reporting and allowed direct comparison with staff's self-assessments. The community research had to be carefully planned, in relation to the local context, for instance considering: methodologies, ethics, sampling, research skills and logistics. Local people engaged energetically with the research, appearing to appreciate being asked their opinions.

7. There was a lot of scope to improve downward accountability in all field work seen during this research. The primary factor in achieving this appeared to be the quality of management direction and support available to field staff. This was needed to help field staff navigate the many competing priorities they face, as well as to create space for reflection and opportunities to try new approaches in practice. It applied to both Concern staff and partner

staff alike. The tools and approaches developed through this research could only support effective management, not substitute for it.

8. Very few reliable case studies of NGOs' experiences of downward accountability were publicly available in the literature and on-line, with enough detail to understand the dynamics of how processes had played out at the local level. There were also very few examples of NGOs developing systematic approaches to managing downward accountability.

3.5 Quantification

The use of quantified summaries of performance created sharp differences of opinion among the advisors and researchers in the project. Some saw these summaries as important for reporting performance in a summarised and comparable way across projects. They argued that this was necessary for senior managers, so they could manage the levels of downward accountability actually achieved. Other people were concerned that quantified findings would be taken out of context by senior decision-makers and this would create incentives to inflate scores which would undermine reflection and learning processes at field level. There was a real danger that this could reduce the system to unhelpful bureaucracy. However, some field staff specifically reported that they liked the quantified findings, as they allowed them to see how well they were doing in this area.

As a result, the research erred on the side of caution, reducing the emphasis on considering quantified results throughout the research. Looking forwards, it may be useful to consider whether the potential for distortion and bias in Listen First could be less than the bias in other management systems, and how it could be kept to an acceptable level.

3.6 Implications

The findings above have significant implications for managing downward accountability.

1. Listen First could form the basis of a draft system to manage downward accountability across different field offices in both development and emergency programmes. It could provide a consistent way of monitoring performance and community satisfaction in a way that generates comparable, credible data for managers at different levels.

2. The key factors in improving downward accountability across the organisation, in both development and emergencies programmes, appear to be: (a) the quality of local leadership, management and support available to field staff, (b) the attitudes of front line staff to: the importance of downward accountability, releasing power to local people and partners, and helping local people build their self-confidence.

3. Managers could support staff to develop these attitudes by providing staff with structured opportunities to reflect on how to strengthen downward accountability in their work, and by modelling the attitudes and behaviours they aim to promote. Managers cannot instruct staff to change their attitudes. Front line staff could carry out the same processes with local partners and community groups. Managers and field staff would need to develop excellent facilitation skills to support these processes of analysis, confidence building and reflection.

4. A strong starting point for improving downward accountability may be to help key field managers (particularly Country Directors) to consider: what downward accountability means for them, how they can promote it and its implications for their relationships with staff.

Managers would also have to be consistently held to account for their actual performance in this area, if they are to continue to prioritise in among the many different issues vying for their attention. (Points 6 and 8 below suggest two approaches to this.)

5. The organisation may have to reconsider the relationships between head office and field programmes, and field programmes and partners, in the same light. Do these relationships actively model and reward downward accountability, or do senior managers give higher priority to other behaviours and issues in reality? For instance, more powerful decision makers may be able to model accountable behaviour by actively listening to less powerful people and involving them in making all key decisions. At the same time, management agendas may have to be reviewed to create the space and time for downward accountability, for instance by providing clear guidance for busy managers on how to prioritise competing demands on their time.

6. The data from staff self-assessments and community research could be used by staff and managers to compare different points of view (to drive learning and enhance understanding) as well as to understand current performance, identify improvements and monitor progress. Comparing quantified results from different respondents or projects could provide robust data and rich insights for further discussion.

7. There is significant scope to continue developing the Listen First approach. A number of areas need further research including the following, among others:
   - Understanding the issue of representation within local communities – i.e. who is speaking on whose behalf, and with what legitimacy – and making this more explicit within Listen First's analysis of downward accountability.
   - Performance reporting and analysis could potentially be improved by using finer-grained scales (e.g. a scale of 1 – 10 rather than 1 – 4, particularly for community research).
   - Different methods may improve community research and staff self-assessment, for instance by using a wider variety of participatory and reflective techniques. It may be useful to look at perceptions of trends and changes over time, either reported retrospectively or monitored over time.
   - Understanding whether stronger relationships generate more critical feedback from communities (or partners), because people feel more free to be honest. Weaker relationships may be more distorted by power dynamics, so people only feel able to make 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 also the implications of repeating Listen First processes with the same individuals over time.

8. It may be most appropriate to report only the feedback from communities back to managers, rather than also reporting staff's self-assessments. This could help limit the distorting influence of upward reporting on staff's reflection processes. In the same way care would be continually needed to ensure that research processes into communities' perceptions are ethical and reliable – for instance, limiting the chance that data are distorted by facilitators or that negative feedback could have harmful repercussions for local people.

9. It is likely that the Listen First approach may benefit from some form of verification or audit system, to provide assurance on the quality of reflection, assessment and community research processes.

3.7 General policies

This research provides evidence that effective downward accountability depends primarily on local staff making high quality judgements about how to apply the four general principles to their specific circumstances. Implementation has to be context specific.

The research (including the literature review) also suggests that some general policies can be applied across most projects in most circumstances to help enhance accountability. They create an enabling environment, encouraging staff to develop effective accountability practices.

They include areas such as: an open information policy, at all levels, based on the presumption of disclosure; informing partners and intended beneficiaries about contact details, project plans and their rights in relation to Concern (and partners); focusing staff attention on building dialogue and trust with partners and local people (including the poorest and most excluded people) at all stages of the project cycle; paying careful management attention to the quality of dialogue and participatory processes; paying careful management attention to values and attitudes in Human Resources processes, including staff recruitment; holding regular reviews with all stakeholders in all projects (perhaps every six to twelve months), and allowing budgetary flexibility to make changes as a result; ensuring that all projects and partners collect systematic and regular feedback from intended beneficiaries, and field offices collect regular feedback from partners.