

Accountable Aid – Not Just Talk

Responding from the Heart

by Sheryl Haw



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Sheryl Haw argues that humanitarian aid agencies ought to give dignity and respect as well as help to victims, giving as an example the biblical injunctions in Deuteronomy, as well as Jesus' own ministry. However, there was until recently no external audit systems of these qualities for aid agencies. Sheryl commends a new system, which is being gradually adopted, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership.

There is a “feel good factor” when one considers giving aid - both for the financial giver and for the aid practitioner, the deliverer. Helping those in need is a fundamental part of the values of faith-based aid agencies and missions, as well as secular aid agencies and social action groups. We can all agree with humanitarianism – our obligation not only to save lives in disaster situations but to improve the overall welfare of people. It is indeed a noble calling and one in which many aid workers have found deep satisfaction and purpose.

Throughout the Bible poor and vulnerable people receive serious attention, revealing the very heart of God to protect, support, bless

and save (Luke 7:22). There are the commands of God that establish mechanisms to ensure that dignity, respect, justice and help are given to those in need (Deuteronomy 15:7-11) as well as the promises to those who serve them (Isaiah 58:9-11; Galatians 2:10). The life of Jesus illustrates the full outworking of God's desire to restore and heal, and calls Christians to do likewise. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a prime example (Luke 10:25-37)

Humanists emphasise the independent dignity and worth of human beings and seek solely rational ways of solving human problems, prioritising rights and choice as factors that will have a positive impact on the quality of

life. They have a strong belief that by enhancing these values, those in need will develop an increased capacity to be self-determining and thus work towards a greater fulfillment of life.

Both Christians and humanists may thus be powerfully motivated to respond to human need. However, humanitarian aid is a cause in which they have also gained access to power (e.g. in the form of resources such as financial and technical resources) and which they have authority to dispense according to their own judgement, using their own processes. Here lies a danger in which the aid worker can begin to feel superior, in control, and necessary to those in need. A reply from a displaced man

caught up in the crisis in Darfur (Sudan) captures this in a frightening way. He was asked for his opinion as to what he felt the needs of his community were, to which he replied, “Who am I to say, you are the *Master*”.

Accountability Deficit

So we reach a scenario where aid practitioners carry out the needs assessments of affected communities, write their own proposals, implement their own programmes, monitor and evaluate their own work and write their own reports, often using their own criteria.

The question must be asked: is this sufficient, is this accountable and is this appropriate?



■ Rwanda Genocide survivor ■

After the Rwanda genocide in 1994 it became very apparent that aid could do serious harm as well as good. Disaster survivors are at an extreme disadvantage as there is an asymmetry in the relationship between the giver and receiver. Some have seen this as a lack of power and have sought empowerment approaches, but though these are commendable and have their

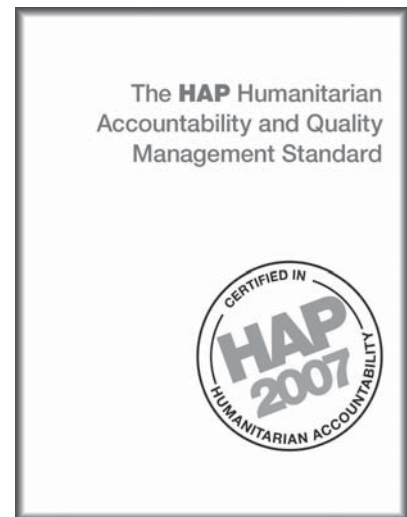
place, at the end of the day their impact is limited. It comes down to recognition that an accountability deficit exists, and this needs to be addressed.

Over the last 12 years the question of how to address this accountability deficit has been analysed, and quality and accountability initiatives have evolved as possible ways and means to answer the question. However, though each initiative has found its *niche* and has enriched the good practice indicators needed within the international aid system, validation of aspirational principles and codes of practice is to a large extent still only self-assessed and internally monitored.

Looking at the impact of these approaches in the recent *Tsunami Evaluation Coalition Report* (TEC Report), some improvement and awareness have been noted, but by and large the accountability deficit is still blatantly obvious. Disaster survivors are still marginalised in the decision-making process, from project design through to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Many feel they had no voice or say. Especially in trying to address concerns, failings or complaints arising in projects, they fear negative results, such as loss of the aid which is so desperately needed, if they raise their concerns. The Aid agency approach at times still subjects

affected people to veterinary-style relief, where those in need are “warehoused” for long periods of time in detrimental circumstances, with choices limited or with none at all.

And what about the perspective of those who faithfully give their money to aid agencies? How can the individual and the institutional donor make an informed choice as to which agency fulfils their mandate in an accountable way?



Humanitarian Accountability
■ Partnership Standard ■

Change in the Air

Something had to change. In 2003 a group of nine Non-Governmental Organisations* (NGOs) got together and pioneered an accountability project that looked at how humanitarian accountability principles could be applied in the sector. Taking the lead, they committed to apply the *Humanitarian Accountability*

Partnership (HAP) Principles of Accountability (see annex), demonstrating their plans for ongoing improvement through the annual submission of an Accountability Work Plan. However, by 2005 it was apparent that this was not rigorous enough, as the principles still did not state clearly how they were to be measured and what



Afghanistan Earthquake, one year on
■ (House in Balakot, 2006) ■

was deemed sufficient good practice.

In June 2005 HAP decided to commence a broad consultation, drawing on advice from disaster survivors around the world, aid practitioners and quality initiatives, in order to draft a humanitarian accountability and quality management standard. I myself, formerly the Operations Director for Medair, a faith-based humanitarian aid organisation, was appointed as the standards

and certification development manager. My first task was to set up an Editorial Steering Committee that would play an essential role in developing and finalising the accountability standard. Eight disaster survivors were invited to be on this committee, and kept the process focused on tangible and transformational good practices that would impact the accountability deficit. Sharing their perspectives brought home the shock reality of what actually happens in emergencies. For example:

- **Afghanistan Earthquake response:** Yasim, a trained doctor, had with hundreds of others lost her home along with her extended family. Shelter was a priority together with food, water and blankets. Aid agencies responding were giving out tents – in fact Yasmin had seven now, but each time she sought to explain to the aid agencies that food and water were now needed, she was told to go away and not be so ungrateful. In fear of being taken off the distribution lists she just said thank you and she was given yet another tent.
- **Balkans Crisis:** Branka's world had been torn apart by the war that broke out; she and her family were displaced, losing everything. Gaining a job as a translator for the aid

sector, she got an insight into the communication process between aid workers and disaster survivors. She commented that when you have lost so much, the last thing you have is your dignity. But the very people who come to help are the very ones who take away your dignity through patronising attitudes and through lack of information sharing. She went on to explain that people understood the limitations of aid provision, and just needed to be told in a timely manner what was available for whom and when. It was the constant experience of not knowing that led people to despair and at times anger.

Listening to these painful stories invigorated the standard development process to develop mission-critical criteria: the benchmarks to be included would need to be clearly measurable, feasible and cost-effective, adding value to the impact of the project objectives. At the same time it was crucial that they did not add to an already bulging bureaucratic demand for reporting or



■ *Bulging Bureacracy* ■

documentation that would further take away the attention of practitioners from the people they were there to serve. Each requirement was analysed and tested in operational sites to ensure they could be integrated into everyday practice, sharpening accountability and quality assurance. Over the next few years the business case for the application of the HAP Standard is being tested to provide reassurance that the financial implications of applying each benchmark can demonstrate its savings. One of HAP's members has already shown direct savings of US \$1 million through following the practices outlined in the Standard. Taking the time to consult the affected community after the Tsunami in Sri Lanka, and ensuring that an effective feedback/complaints mechanism was established, meant they received timely input from disaster survivors which ensured that they re-designed the homes they were building to include essential requirements.

In January 2007 the HAP Board adopted the HAP Accountability and Quality Management Standard and the first aid agencies applied to be certified against its six benchmarks and nineteen requirements.

The Standard

The list below summarises in essence what the six benchmarks

and nineteen requirements seek to address:

1. State and document your accountability commitments publicly in the form of an accountability framework. Demonstrate how your quality management system enables these commitments to be implemented throughout your agency.
2. Be transparent and ensure that at least the following minimum information is made available to disaster survivors, partners, staff and other specified stakeholders:
 - a. Who you are and what you do (especially how you can be contacted)
 - b. Your accountability commitments
 - c. Your project plans (clearly showing the criteria by which disaster survivors will be selected, and what their entitlements are)
 - d. Your progress updates (measured against your project plans and accountability commitments)



■ Ongoing participation with disaster survivors ■

- e. An accessible and safe way for complaints to be received and dealt with.
3. Seek and ensure informed consent through ongoing participation with disaster survivors and their representatives. This would include ensuring that the survivors and affected communities are not just seen as one homogenous group, but rather take into consideration gender, age, disability and other vulnerable groups, noting their specific concerns and varied needs. Participation is not a once-only activity at project design but should be ongoing throughout the project cycle. Participation is required throughout, even when evaluating the impact.
4. Staff competence, which is vitally important. Though agencies may have developed files of guidelines and policies, good intention is not enough unless staff are able to deliver the commitments and the project objectives in an accountable and qualitative way.
5. A safe and accessible means for disaster survivors and affected communities to complain. This is perhaps one of the most controversial requirements but as it actively solicits feedback from those we serve it is an essential part of accountability. Over the last two years HAP has heard the following comments from aid practitioners when suggesting

that complaints handling is one of the most effective ways we can hold ourselves to account to those we serve:

“We will get too many complaints – people are never happy”

“Why should they complain? They are grateful for whatever help they get”

“People will lie, in order to get more”

“It’s not relevant for us, because our staff are committed to helping”

These comments shed light on some of the reservations and fears felt by aid practitioners and indicate why change is needed, and why certification (third-party independent validation of good practice) is essential to bring it about.

6. Clear processes that seek to ensure that continual learning and improvement are captured and applied. This includes agencies that work with partners, ensuring that they have clarified for partners what the agreed means of accountability and quality management should be, and then developed support mechanisms to enable their partners to reach this agreed level of good practice.

Reflecting on each of these benchmarks through a Christian lens is both exciting and challenging. Colossians 3.23 (NIV) states “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for Lord, not for men”. Does this mean we are not accountable to people? On the contrary, it demands a higher level of accountability and quality assurance (1 Corinthians 3:10-13), where God will test (audit) the quality of our work. Recognition that human beings are made in the image of God and tasked with caring for the world and all who live on it, not as owners but as stewards who will be held to account, should motivate missions and aid agencies alike in their desire to demonstrate quality in all they do (Matthew 5:16).

Is it possible though to demonstrate a Christian distinctiveness in applying the HAP Standard? Comparing the end results desired by humanists and Christians you may end up with the following emphases:

Humanists Prioritise	Christians Prioritise
Individualistic achievements	Community achievements (unity and reconciliation to one another)
Ownership	Stewardship
Profit	Welfare
Rights	Responsibilities
Self fulfilment	Humility
Knowledge - control	Understanding - improve
Life NOW	Life ETERNAL

All On Board

After so many years of the aid sector crying out for a solution to the accountability deficit, stating that what was needed was some sort of regulation scheme built for the aid sector and managed by the aid sector, one would have expected that the queue to validate good practice would be long. However, to date only five agencies have been certified against these six benchmarks, Tearfund UK being the first Christian faith based agency to be certified. Has it made a difference for Tearfund UK and more importantly has it impacted their partners and the people they serve? Take a look at their publicly available accountability framework. (www.tearfund.org)

Are the standards too rigorous? If we set the benchmarks too high, many would feel defeated before they even start; if we set them too low, no one would take the process seriously. The benchmarks needed to be feasible and they needed to address the mission-critical concerns for disaster survivors.

None of the six benchmarks outlined above would be seen to be irrelevant. Aid agencies have been confirming for years that they do these things, but somehow it is daunting when the certification system asks them to demonstrate how, and to commit to quality assurance.

The Standard needs to have a degree of flexibility built into it so as to cater for the fluid contexts in which aid workers often find themselves (Afghanistan, Somalia and Sri Lanka to name but a few). What happens when security restrictions prevent participation, and yet the humanitarian imperative, alongside a Christian desire to express solidarity and



*What happens when security restrictions
■ prevent participation? ■*

support, means we must still provide a level of aid response - albeit incomplete? When such circumstances arise and an agency is unable to achieve full compliance with the HAP Standard, an explanation is required, drawing on the *Humanitarian Accountability Covenant* that acts as a tool to help agencies work through these tough choices. The term *Covenant* was a deliberate choice and reflecting on how it is used in the Bible helps to indicate why it was chosen. It is about a unilateral declaration of commitment from one who has power to give help to one who has not. Hence it is a foundational commitment that anchors aid delivery into a commitment against core principles of humanitarian action

and principles of accountability (for details see HAP Standard – Covenant section). It is this commitment that should frame the decision-making of every aid agency and practitioner.

Certification Rationale

The question is: why seek certification – what advantages does it offer? Self-assessment is indeed a valuable part of continual improvement but an independent third-party review provides increased quality assurance and confidence for stakeholders that the agency is meeting specified good practices.

The further benefits for the agency are that the review will help in risk management, highlighting weakness, and providing corrective or preventive action. The resulting action plan will provide an excellent management tool to monitor ongoing improvement through clearly stated progress indicators.



■ *Covenant:* ■
Moses Showing the Ten Commandments
(Engraving by Gustave Doré, 1865)

Below are some further points that show the added value of certification:

- Provides an independent verification and validation process
- The external element provides a neutral analysis
- The incentive to ensure good practice and accountability in place is reinforced
- A mechanism through which to provide the corporate improvement changes throughout your agency
- It is an international validation process designed to ensure all sizes of agencies in all geographical areas can apply
- Quality assurance recognition that stakeholders will note and gain confidence and trust in.

Who should regulate the aid sector?

Growth in the aid sector has been phenomenal, with some of the largest agencies employing over 26,000 staff and having turnovers close to US \$2 billion. With this in mind it is clear that regulation will come. The question is, where will it sit?

If state regulation became the defining lead there would inevitably be a loss of that neutrality and flexibility, which has given aid agencies their critical role in emergencies. It would give

the State ability to exercise ever greater degrees of control over aid operations.

Donor conditionality has already set its agendas but it is undesirable that this should be the driver. It is often bureaucratic and tends to draw accountability action towards itself instead of towards affected communities. This phenomenon is referred to as upward accountability.

Self-assessment as we have said has its place, but is inconsistent, often confusing and mostly insufficient. Corporate engagement and regulation does not take into account the fluid contexts and extreme situations in which aid agencies operate. They focus on processes rather than on impact, delivery, attitudes, rights and accountability. Coupled to this, their for-profit motives need to be taken into account.

It is important that the application of standards does not lead to an inappropriate and sub-optimal

resource allocation in order to meet politically or financial defined standards rather than save lives.

HAP has chosen to go down the route of collective voluntary regulation within the aid sector. The emphasis is not only on quality assurance of the deliverables, approaches and mechanisms used, but it 'goes the extra mile' by adding mission-critical minimum accountable good practice benchmarks, which ensure that the rights of affected communities are not only recognised but their engagement is enabled and respected.

Conclusion

For HAP, accountability can be defined as the responsible use of power. Aid agency mandates state clearly that their reason for existence is to serve those in need. Surely one of the best ways to fulfil this admirable objective is to allow themselves to be held to account by those very people for whom they exist? We hope that the HAP certification mark, given to agencies that have been audited as in compliance with the HAP Accountability and Quality Management Standard, will start to give both disaster survivors and supporters an informed choice of whom they want to engage with. For

faith-based agencies it gives an opportunity to demonstrate values in action, practising what is being preached. That is indeed transformational. ■

Sheryl Haw is a highly experienced senior relief and development specialist with over 17 years experience around the world in both field and head office positions.

During the last three years Sheryl has been working with Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International where she was responsible for developing an accountability and quality management standard for the aid sector. This Standard and its complementary certification system represent the first regulatory scheme within the industry. Sheryl currently audits aid agencies against the accountability standard as well as working with All Nations Christian College as their Integral Mission Co-ordinator, responsible for the extension-training programme and lecturing on the Masters in Mission and Development Management.

Note

* Medair;
Tearfund UK;
World Vision International;
Oxfam GB;
OFADEC;
Danish Refugee Council;
Norwegian Refugee Council,
CARE International;
Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.



All Nations Christian College, near Ware in Hertfordshire ■

*See Humanitarian Aid Work Training and Consultancy www.haw-tc.org,
HAP International www.hapinternational.org and All Nations Christian College www.allnations.ac.uk*

Annex to Accountable Aid – Not Just Talk

HAP-I Accountability Principles

1. Respect and promote the rights of legitimate humanitarian claimants.
Commitment to humanitarian standards and rights
Members state their commitment to respect and foster humanitarian standards and the rights of beneficiaries.
2. State the standards that apply in their humanitarian assistance work
Setting standards and building capacity
Members set a framework of accountability* to their stakeholders
Members set and periodically review their standards and performance indicators, and revise them if necessary.
Members provide appropriate training in the use and implementation of standards.
3. Inform beneficiaries about these standards, and their right to be heard.
Communication
Members inform, and consult with, stakeholders, particularly beneficiaries and staff, about the standards adopted, programmes to be undertaken and mechanisms available for addressing concerns.
4. Meaningfully involve beneficiaries in project planning, implementation, evaluation and reporting.
Participation in programmes
Members involve beneficiaries in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes and report to them on progress, subject only to serious operational constraints.
5. Demonstrate compliance with the standards that apply in their humanitarian assistance work through monitoring and reporting.
Monitoring and reporting compliance
Members involve beneficiaries and staff when they monitor and revise standards.
Members regularly monitor and evaluate compliance with standards, using robust processes.
Members report at least annually to stakeholders, including beneficiaries, on compliance with standards. Reporting may take a variety of forms.
6. Enable beneficiaries and staff to make complaints and to seek redress in safety.
Addressing complaints
Members enable beneficiaries and staff to report complaints and seek redress safely.
7. Implement these principles when working through partner agencies.
Implementing partners
Members are committed to the implementation of these principles if and when working through implementation partners.

* Framework of accountability includes standards, quality standards, principles, policies, guidelines, training and other capacity-building work, etc. The framework must include measurable performance indicators. Standards may be internal to the organisation or they may be collective, e.g. *Sphere* or *People in Aid*.