

Bottom-Up Accountability and the Tsunami

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Abstract

This paper explores specific examples of 'bottom-up' accountability related to the Tsunami response with particular reference to Sri Lanka. Examples include local and camp-level processes as well as attempts to scale-up these approaches at district, and national levels.

This experience is related to the broader literature on impact assessment and disasters, most notably work done by the Overseas Development Institute of Great Britain as well as the World Disasters report 2003.

Finally the paper attempts to draw some broader conclusions about what this experience and similar processes outside of emergency contexts tells us about questions related to the orthodoxy of current 'new public management' approaches and the implications for demand-led governance.

Introduction

Much of the literature on accountability and humanitarian assistance reveals that humanitarian agencies generally have a pretty poor track record in ensuring meaningful participation of affected people (see for example the Red Cross Disasters Report 2003, in particular chapters 2 and 6; ODI's state-of-the-art Impact Assessment Study, Hoffman et al. 2004). This literature, whilst recognising some of the particular challenges in ensuring meaningful participation in humanitarian emergencies, suggests that there are examples of effective participation but that these have not really led to a systemic change in the way that business is done.

In parallel, there is a growing body of work on accountability and more broadly notably around rights-based approaches, demand-led governance and administration, such as Fukuyama (2005), World Bank (2003), and ODI (2003), which is starting to raise particular questions arising from the application of 'new public management' approaches. In fact some, such as Onora O'Neill in the BBC Reith Lectures in 2002, have gone as far as suggesting that far from building greater trust in public sector organisations, the methods of accountability adopted are actually undermining confidence in them. She argues that "much of the mistrust and criticism now directed at professionals and public institutions complains about their diligence in responding to incentives *to which they have been required to respond* rather than pursuing

the intrinsic requirements for being good nurses and teachers, good doctors and police officers, good lecturers and social workers” (O’Neill 2002).

So what does the Tsunami response tell us about these issues? Has this poor track record in involving local people continued? Are the incentives provided to front-line staff misaligned or do they guide people to the intrinsic requirement of being good humanitarians? This paper seeks not necessarily to answer these questions but to contribute to the debate with reference to the specific experience of Oxfam Australia and its local partners.

The Tsunami

Roughly a quarter of a million people lost their lives as a result of the Tsunami in Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Bangladesh, Malaysia, the Maldives, the Seychelles, Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania. An estimated further two million people were forced to abandon their homes.

After eight months, whilst a major ‘second Tsunami’ of associated disease and mortality has been prevented, the challenge of rehabilitation, and restoring of livelihoods remains huge.

The financial response to the Tsunami has been extraordinary. Several billion dollars has been raised across the world. A multitude of agencies are working on the ground and coordination and planning are proving major challenges. Similarly, ensuring effective quality control and adherence to international standards, including the poorest, women and most marginalised effectively, and ensuring a degree of conflict sensitivity in the response — particularly in Aceh and Sri Lanka — are all proving hard.

Oxfam Australia’s response in both Sri Lanka and India has been to work primarily through and with local partners. In Sri Lanka, as documented in a review conducted before the Tsunami by Sue Blackburn of Monash University, Oxfam Australia has worked with community-based organisations (CBOs) in rural eastern Sri Lanka since 1990, assisting these organisations to “grow as strong, accountable, democratic and transparent organisations”. This has included a process that goes beyond the rhetoric and identifies and supports the poorest in those communities, developing procedures for dealing with grievances and conflict management and publicising the costs of any projects in public places for maximum transparency. Her research, which also looked at ‘control groups’ of women who had not been supported by CBOs, suggested that where this investment in CBOs had been made, women were more confident of asserting their rights and had less feelings of frustration and helplessness.

Mechanisms for bottom-up accountability

Camp-level processes

Because Oxfam Australia has been working with CBOs in the affected areas before the Tsunami and many of these groups were victims of it, this meant that the social infrastructure that Oxfam Australia had invested in for many years found itself in camps for those displaced. As a result of that investment, these groups then set about establishing structures and processes based on an inclusive model and one that deliberately sought to target the most vulnerable. In several cases this meant addressing issues such as child protection, ensuring women's needs were met and that equitable distribution of relief goods was happening both between and across camps (see Box 1).

Box 1. Camp Committees

"I saw people running. They said the sea was rising and coming to the land. When the first wave struck, I was in the office knee-deep in seawater. I also started running then."

These are the recollections of Koralai Pattu North Development Union (KPNDU) Field Coordinator Nagendram Peramalathevi who was at work in Vaharai on the day of the tsunami. KPNDU is one of Oxfam Australia's community-based partners in Sri Lanka.

Parimala feared the worst for her family as her house was located 50 metres from the shore. Fortunately, her parents and siblings had held onto a tree during the Tsunami and escaped. However, three of Nagendram's other close relatives died.

Despite the tragedy, Parimala returned to work in Vaaharai three days later and went about organising groups of Tsunami-displaced people in camps to manage the distribution of tsunami relief.

"The groups were divided into three sections — firstly distribution, then child protection, and stores. In all the nine camps this was the system. The stores section was responsible to maintain a record of articles received the dates and the donors and supplied the goods. The distribution section classified the beneficiaries and distributed the goods according to needs."

The child protection section was responsible to meet the special nutritional needs of children and to ensure their safety in the camps. A health and sanitation section was formed later, again by the camp residents themselves.

"Regarding the privacy of women" Nagendram said, "we erected separate sheds for breast-feeding, dress-changing and for pregnant women to rest. We erected fences to cover around the wells so they could change their clothes after a bath."

Oxfam Australia's country representative in Sri Lanka reports that "the social infrastructure that had been developed over the past decade turned out to be the biggest asset when disaster struck...our partners' villages were among the most devastated some of them having over 80% of their members displaced. But within a day the partners KPNDU, TCDO and AWF set up camp committees that were representative of different social hierarchies and gender. These camp committees...took full responsibility for needs assessment and distribution of relief. Their prior experience having been in groups and committees, and with the guidance of partner staff, they were able ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised were addressed and that relief reaches all without discrimination."

In some camps in Sri Lanka and Aceh, complaints and suggestion boxes were put into place by local organisations or international agencies to allow community members to directly express opinions, concerns and ideas. These were attempts to provide mechanisms of complaint and redress.

Box 2. Complaints boxes

More than government control, peer pressure or self-regulation, the most efficient mechanism to ensure effective and inclusive aid delivery is to establish 'real' bottom up accountability to the community. But this requires three things: knowledge of entitlement, availability of credible grievance and redress mechanisms and empowerment to access them. Oxfam Australia and its partners have been trying at different levels to ensure this. Oxfam for example drafted a letter and successfully lobbied with other agencies to get the government agent to issue information notes that laid out people's entitlements. These were printed and distributed among by the partners to the different camps and posted in public places in Batticalao District.

Similarly in Thiraimadu and Vaaharai after community, partner and government consultations, the beneficiary list for transitional shelters, which Oxfam had agreed to provide, was publicised on notice boards in all the camps and time given for people to clarify issues and to lodge complaints. Each beneficiary was given the material input and cost details so that he/she could monitor and hold the agency accountable.

In addition to the camp committees entertaining direct complaints regarding shortcomings in relief work, in some camps in Vaaharai they also set up complaints boxes, which were regularly opened and grievances handled.

District or higher level processes

Whilst process of accountability at local level are important, it is often the case that district level or other levels are equally critical, given this is often the level at which coordination and planning occurs between agencies and the first layer of government.

Two examples of attempts at this level to develop different forms of accountability are described here. The first is the example in two districts of Sri Lanka of an initiative called Gender Watch.

Box 3. Gender Watch

In Batticaloa and Ampara districts in Sri Lanka, the Women's Coalition for Disaster Management (WCDM), which was initiated by Suriya, a local women's organisation in Batticaloa, in mid-January, has been playing an important role in post-Tsunami relief and reconstruction work. The WCDM initially lobbied for a women's committee to be set up in every camp. The committees then identified the basic needs of women, such as private space, appropriate facilities (such as private bathing and toilet facilities) and access to relief supplies.

The WCDM has also formed an action group called Gender Watch, with local and international non-government organisations involved. The initiative enables women to report domestic violence, sexual harassment and discrimination to the group. The group documents violations in the camps and distributes the information to international agencies and the government. Remedial action taken includes: having a government officer suspended for violations; providing protection to five orphaned children; ensuring women have access to oral contraceptives; facilitating access to the police in the case of domestic violence; temporary shelters being given to single women who were originally excluded because they did not possess the right papers; and registering women for the provision of ration cards so that they can have access to relief goods.

A review of the Gender Watch was done last month after six months of operation. This was requested by the participants and supported by Oxfam Australia. The review identified the strengths and weaknesses of the approach adopted and also identified the future direction. The most important critical success factors were seen as: a) this was only network in the area that was driven, run and managed by local women but supported by INGO's, UN organisations and government representatives, who had decision making authority; b) it provided a platform for discussion unavailable elsewhere; and c) it was not a sectoral meeting — most official forums are organised on this basis, e.g. on health or water, but looked at all issues that affected women which ranged from shelter, rape and employment opportunities in a holistic manner.

The review concluded that this process "turned out to be a credible bottom up network which attracted large number of INGO's and government representatives to come in and bounce their ideas with them before designing new initiatives".

The second example was a rapid Temporary Housing survey conducted by Oxfam Australia in Sri Lanka, which had the result of not only determining people's aspirations regarding housing, but also had the secondary effect of empowering respondents to understand the choices that they rightfully did have, as well as galvanising them into demanding greater voice and choice regarding their future.

Box 4. Temporary Housing Survey

Towards the end of the first month after the Tsunami, many of the people in Vaaharai, the poorest division in Batticaloa district in the East of Sri Lanka, were still in displacement camps, often school buildings. The relocation sites were decided by the government and some of the NGOs with minimal consultation with the people. Each displaced camp was then 'neatly' mapped into to a relocation site. 'Speed', it was said, was of the essence and consulting people could be 'messy'. OCAA with its partner in the area (KPNDU) carried out a rapid survey covering over 85 per cent of the displaced families in the division (2656, of which 1630 were male and 1026 female) to find out people's preferences on relocation.

The results were telling. Over one-third of the people did not know where they were being moved; most of them believed, wrongly, that they did not have any choice in site selection and that they would lose their entitlements if they didn't go to the site shown by the government. Respondents did not prefer (by a margin of 6:1) the 'emergency tents' being distributed on a large scale by government and agencies in order to move them out of the schools.

The survey demonstrated that it was not 'messy' to consult the people even in emergency periods. With a network of community-based organisations it is possible to do this rapidly and effectively. Secondly the process itself was empowering — people became aware of the options they actually had, began discussing the pros and cons of different sites identified, eagerly sought out the opinion of their neighbours and kin, and critically considered security implications (there are military and rebel camps dotted in the area), fertility of soil and availability of water during dry season, none of which appeared to be of much concern to others.

The findings enabled Oxfam Australia to raise process issues at the district level shelter coordination meetings, which resulted in the creation of a shelter policy group that plays an important role in shelter and relocation related issues. The people in Vaaharai ended up settling in more places than were initially identified and were able to insist on their right to transitional shelter in their own site, if they preferred.

National-level initiatives and beyond

Finally, it is at the national level that many of the major policy decisions and allocations of resources are made by most organisations. It is therefore important that mechanisms of bottom-up accountability don't stop at the local or district-level. One attempt to extend these processes to the national level is the proposed establishment of Aid Watch in Sri Lanka.

Box 5. Aid Watch Sri Lanka

In the first emergency relief phase, the challenge posed in the Tsunami-affected areas was to ensure efficient and equitable delivery of assistance through participatory processes, which served to eliminate waste, misuse/corruption, delays, as well as to ensure conflict sensitivity and gender equality in the relief operation.

In the next phase these challenges remain and are reinforced by the need to build on local capacities, in order to ensure both sustainability and bottom-up accountability. It is precisely to develop the capacity of affected communities to direct and determine the shape of the Tsunami response in their lives that needs urgently to be addressed if the Sri Lanka post-Tsunami context is not to exacerbate conflict, increase gender disparity/violence, fuel militarisation and, in short, increase human suffering.

To this end, a number of local and international agencies have come together to facilitate the creation of a participatory, transparent, independent and credible Aid Watch mechanism.

The particular concerns of this body would be to pay special attention to:

- aid Coordination, including non-duplication, coverage and inclusion
- aid impact and efficiency, including speed of delivery and cost-benefit analysis
- accountability, and participation of affected communities in decision-making including mechanisms for their input regarding mismanagement, waste and corruption
- sustainability, including capacity development of local CBOs to hold government and NGOs accountable to them
- non-discrimination, including of ethnic, religious minorities, women and other multiple marginalised groups
- conflict sensitivity, including equity issues for neighboring communities repeatedly affected by the conflict but relatively unaffected by the Tsunami
- poverty alleviation, asset creation and livelihood support for the poorest of the poor.

The major challenge at the moment is to establish Aid Watch in a way that is:

- neutral/impartial and avoids conflict of interests, and therefore is not constituted by the very agencies who have a vested interest in the findings of the organisation
- public, open and transparent in its decision-making processes
- representative of the various stakeholders and constituencies in all of its processes, including its establishment formation, operational modalities, and reporting/dissemination procedures.

Of course, these processes at national level beg the question about how at international level such bottom-up processes work as well as how they penetrate into the institutional frameworks of international organisations.

Broader implications

1. Bottom-up accountability can be put into place in a very practical sense and mechanisms can be established, but this is lot easier if: a) a prior investment in social infrastructure and in relationship building with local organisations has been made; b) there is a major effort to do so, and; c) initiative and innovation in this area are positively encouraged. However 'real' bottom-up accountability to the community requires three things: knowledge of entitlement,¹ availability of credible grievance and redress mechanisms and empowerment to access them.
2. There is a tendency amongst agencies to over-emphasise '*poor communities*' being left out of relief processes at the expense of talking about and dealing with differences within the community. One of the major challenges for the agencies in South Asia is reaching the poor, poorest and most marginalised within communities. Gender, caste, religion, class and ethnicity, etc. make the Tsunami-affected regions amongst some of the most stratified in the world in terms of social hierarchy. To address this requires subtle understanding of local systems, tested targeting tools and, above all, representative local organisations who are from the community and have an intimate understanding of the social ordering, poverty profiles and local power relations, in particular if they have been previously involved in targeting the poor and vulnerable. Any process of bottom-up accountability has to recognise these important power differentials.
3. It is essential that communities are given 'voice and choice', and that the processes by which these are given are sensitive to within community differences. Otherwise, when using conventional channels like the village head man, more often it is the needs of the dominant that prevail. This becomes particularly pertinent when livelihood restoration strategies of the poor differ from, and at times may be in confrontation with, those of richer groups. For example, richer fishermen are insisting that they be given the same number of boats they have lost. However, poorer community members, who often work for richer fishermen, do not want to see the situation in which they earn some one-third of what the boat owner earns maintained.

¹ In Sri Lanka and Aceh, efforts to popularise and communicate International Standards that International agencies have signed up to, such as the Red Cross Code of Conduct and SPHERE, are important efforts to do this.

Transparent and participatory processes like the 'preference surveys' of the type described above also engender possibilities of raising awareness and instigating critical discussions. This needs to include forums like those provided by the Women's Coalition for Disaster Management (WCDM) where local language is privileged and space for agencies to hear the 'voice' of the affected communities are provided.

4. Sri Lanka indicates the importance of working on multiple levels of accountability. The role that debt networks in East Africa and elsewhere are starting to play in monitoring the disbursement of budgets are other examples of how these sort of approaches might be scaled-up in relatively simple ways (see Uganda Debt Network 2002). In addition, these experiences point to the potential of linking an assessment of how 'inputs' are being disbursed, and thus the degree to which policy is being implemented, with formal and informal methods of looking at outcome and impacts; for example, through participatory poverty monitoring and household surveys (see <<http://www.uppap.or.ug>> for examples of District level Participatory Poverty Assessments in Uganda).
5. Much of what needs to be done in situations like that which existed following the Tsunami cannot be made routine, but require the skill and judgement of imperfect information by skilled decision-makers. In addition, whilst some of the outputs needed have high 'specificity' — e.g. the consequences of these not being delivered will be visible quite quickly such as lack of clean water, food or poor temporary shelter, which are liable to lead to disease and malnutrition quite quickly — many processes required for successful response are of much lower specificity. For instance, training, appropriate consultation with different stakeholders, 'gap-filling' to meet needs not met by others, participatory evaluation and research. In these cases of low specificity, which are highly discretionary, monitoring performance through centralised bureaucratic process using predetermined indicators and standards can be highly problematic.² As Hirschman and others have argued an important alternative is what he calls 'voice' options, which attempt to give those who are ultimately meant to benefit from a particular service or process much better access to information and decision-makers in order to hold providers responsible.
6. These lessons are probably not just applicable to emergency response or NGOs. For example as Judith Tandler has shown in Brazil and the World Development Report noted in 2004, four interlocking explanations for the positive performance of state and local government in Ceara in Brazil are:
 - a high level of dedication to their jobs on the part of employees
 - a sense of 'calling' among these workers, which was supported by positive and public admiration by government

² See Fukuyama (2004) for a longer discussion on this.

- relatively high levels of discretion and job task variety enjoyed by the workers that led to them customising their roles and responses to citizens on the front-line
- the nature of the workers' direct accountability to the citizens they served, leading to spiralling mutual trust.

This suggests that organisational procedure, behaviours and incentives are critical if responsiveness and openness to the messages provided by bottom-up accountability mechanisms are actually to be encouraged.

Similarly as Booth and Lucas (2001) have suggested in a recent review of good practice in the development of PRSP monitoring systems, there is a need for agencies to have 'dynamic' inputs and feedback that can provide relatively rapid feedback into decision-making in a timely enough manner for changes to be made. NGO experiences with participatory impact assessments, focus groups, exit polls, stakeholder surveys, etc. are all relevant here and provide some further 'clues as to worthwhile shortcuts in monitoring' (Booth and Lucas 2001).

7. Much of the literature on monitoring and evaluation, and certainly Oxfam's experience, suggests that some of the biggest challenges for any form of bottom accountability include whether the feedback provided actually changes anything in the institution(s) in question. Most of our organisations have effective means of ignoring findings that challenge us. This suggests that the challenge is as much to look at how open we are to dealing with difficult information about our performance, as it is to develop sophisticated methods, which produce results that we might subsequently ignore.

This is particularly the case given the current emphasis on outcomes and impact; and achieving these in partnership with others. The great irony is that although there is certainly an increased rhetoric of being outcome-focussed, working in partnership with others and becoming more accountable to those we seek to serve, there is also a need to 'prove' what difference individual organisations make is becoming more common.³ This leads to the managerial tendency to focus more on intermediate outputs, objectives and targets as measures of performance, as they are more easily attributable to specific actions.

However, as outcomes and impacts are longer term by definition as well as being likely to be achieved with others, this actually makes attribution to single organisations harder. This tendency, therefore, can provide incentives to: a) downplay or ignore the contribution

³ See for example Van Brabant (2001) for examples from Gujarat about incentives to compete, amongst local organisations: "Donors ask us: why should we fund you, we are already funding this and that other local organisation? So we are forced to emphasise our differences, which makes it more difficult to coordinate and collaborate."

of others; b) stick to intermediate objectives and targets, or proxy indicators, even when they may not be the most effective means of achieving broader or more long-term objectives; and c) to downplay professional judgement particularly on qualitative and difficult to measure variables (Roche 2002).

As Onora O’Niell points out “if we want a culture of public service, professionals and public servants must in the end be free to serve the public rather than their paymasters”. The Sri Lanka experience suggests that effective bottom-up accountability can provide an important complement to current public management orthodoxies. In fact, arguably it provides a powerful means of correcting potentially perverse incentives that current mechanisms can promote. At least it might if our agencies are willing to open ourselves up in this way.

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