Box 7.7 Recommendations for the "accountable organization"

- **Commit to human rights.** State a commitment to the protection and fulfilment of human rights. Provide adequate budgetary and human resources to realize this commitment.
- **Set standards and indicators.** Set standards and performance indicators for protecting and fulfilling the rights of crisis-affected people and field staff. Set these in participation with stakeholders and review periodically.
- **Communicate with all stakeholders.** Inform crisis-affected people and other stakeholders about standards adopted, aid programmes to be undertaken, and complaints processes available. Provide appropriate training in the use of standards.
- **Involve crisis-affected people in programme management.** Involve affected people in the planning, management and monitoring of aid programmes. Report to them regularly on the progress of programmes.
- **Monitor compliance with standards.** Involve crisis-affected people and field staff in monitoring compliance with standards, and in revising them. Regularly audit compliance, using internal and external mechanisms.
- **Resolve complaints.** Put in place complaints mechanisms, which safely and impartially provide crisis-affected people and field staff the opportunity to report concerns and to seek appropriate redress.
- **Report back on standards.** Report back regularly to affected people and other stakeholders on compliance with standards and changes to programmes.

Systematic development of indicators and transparent monitoring of the implementation of standards and codes constitute the next, crucial step for humanitarian actors. And the results of monitoring must be made public and lead to tangible outcomes. Without all that, codes and standards will remain no more than paper tigers.

Accountability mechanisms at field level

"International actors must make sure that displaced communities are given a say in decisions that affect them. Displaced communities are not passive. They create their own strategies for addressing their needs by exchanging limited resources, services, information and shelter. Their involvement in identifying needs, in other decisions that affect their lives, and in implementing aid programmes is therefore essential."

So argued the UN secretary-general to the Security Council in a report on the protection of civilians in armed conflicts in March 2001. That people displaced by disaster have their own coping strategies is hardly new. But recent experience in central

Africa and the Balkans makes the need to involve such communities at the planning stage essential, if aid providers are not to be left standing.

In 1999, for example, the spontaneous return into Kosovo of hundreds of thousands of refugees "wrongfooted" the cohorts of international relief agencies which had set up camps outside the territory. And more recently, following the volcanic eruption in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in January 2002, which destroyed most of the town of Goma, homeless people turned their backs on refugee camps constructed by international agencies in neighbouring Rwanda, preferring to brave the lava flows and salvage what they could from their old homes as quickly as possible.

Agencies' failure to engage crisis-affected people in meaningful dialogue about their needs and capacities can prove frustrating and even dangerous. One Luo chief was quoted in a 1996 article by Jok Madut Jok, entitled *Information Exchange in the Disaster Zone: Interaction between Aid workers and recipients in South Sudan,* as saying:

"They came here several months ago and called us together, asked us a lot of questions that we did not know how to respond to. Then two months ago, one of these young girls came back with five other people and asked us the same questions for which we gave different responses each time. And now they are here again asking if Luo people have acquired cattle from the Dinka… We do not know what to tell them other than yes, some people have bought cows, others have not, and yes our people are hungry and you ought to help them. Bring food, more food."

According to a paper published by the Humanitarian Practice Network in November 2000 evaluating NGO responses to Hurricane Mitch:

"Decades of experiences notwithstanding, agencies still find it difficult to assess beneficiary needs adequately, and do not take sufficient note of local capacities and resources. Local participation in needs assessment, as well as in specific projects, must be strengthened if agencies are to provide aid that meets the needs of beneficiaries. Similarly, agencies should listen more carefully to the people they are trying to help when designing programmes."

Many consultation exercises are more an exercise in extracting information than promoting dialogue. The listening aims at gathering some key data or filling information gaps about a population and the design of programmes. The listening is fairly superficial; information that would seriously question predetermined notions of programmes is likely to be censored. There often appears to be limited interest in the socio-economic and political dynamics of the affected or target populations, in the cultural and historical context. And there may be unwillingness to hand over decision-making power to affected communities or to question inappropriate codes and standards.

While many operational aid agencies may be experienced in listening to local people, there are some key questions that need to be asked. Listening and consultation for what? Who asks the questions? What happens next? Working in ways more transparent and accountable to crisis-affected people means more than just listening.

Concerns and complaints

Complaints can be frivolous, or even fabricated for ulterior motives. But they can also be valid and serious (see Box 7.2). Most experienced field workers have heard one or several of these, often more than once. Yet they are rarely formally taken up within individual aid organizations or government aid administrations. The persistence of such concerns and complaints raises difficult questions. How can aid agencies better hear what people are concerned about, and distinguish between valid and invalid complaints? How can they tap the knowledge, experience and creativity of those affected by disaster, and draw from them positive ideas and suggestions for better programming? And respond to what they hear? What is under agencies' control, what can or can't they improve? How can they feed back to affected people what they can or can't do, what they plan to do and why they did what they did? How can they make this part of normal practice? And who is responsible for it? How can they hand over responsibility to "communities" if they cannot identify which actors represent "uncivil society"?

Many of these questions relate to the necessity to take into account the political and power relations between agencies, governments and crisis-affected populations and individuals, and to better unpack the various meanings, process and outcome of participation. So what can be done?

There are already examples of innovative approaches to foster greater transparency, responsiveness and accountability in programmes and policies. However, three specific components to accountability are beyond doubt: the obligations to *inform*, to *listen* and to *respond and report back* to crisis-affected populations.

Obligation to inform

Agencies must inform affected people about aid operations, including issues such as agencies' mandates; the responsibilities they have willingly assumed; what is (or is not) under their authority; their programmes, budget situation, timetables, criteria, procedures, programme changes and evaluation outcomes; and agencies' policies and codes, including, for example, those with regard to sexual harassment.

Agencies must also inform beneficiaries about the relief they are entitled to and their rights.

Aid organizations can do this through: public meetings, leaflets or public notices, local radio, agency or interagency information centres, and information officers. Following the devastating earthquake in India's Gujarat state in January 2001, one grouping of local organizations took the rare step of stopping their material assistance programmes to concentrate on the provision of information, particularly about government policies, entitlements and procedures. They even provided a "help-desk" for people who had a claim or complaint for the civil service (see Box 7.3).

Obligation to listen

Agencies must try to understand more about the population they are assisting and protecting, for example, their social and skills profiles, their history, knowledge, attitudes and practices. Agencies must actively seek the views of affected people on their perceived priorities and preferences; their concerns and complaints; what impacts they perceive aid programmes to have; how they see the relationship between aid-provider and aid-recipient; and constructive suggestions they might have to improve aid delivery or to help themselves better.

Humanitarian organizations need to understand how people themselves have struggled to cope with the crisis and how outside efforts can complement rather than undermine pre-existing coping strategies. They can do this through individual interviews, focus group discussions, participatory exercises, public meetings, sample surveys, opinion polls, a comments postbox or a complaints office or help-desk. Sometimes aid workers can simply discover things through observation.

Agencies can conduct participatory reviews or impact assessments with affected people. They can even commit to a regular "social audit" process with target groups or conduct population-wide social audits (see Box 7.4). They can suggest that evaluators are asked, in their terms of reference, to seek feedback from affected people, whether inside or outside target groups – and are given time to do so.

Crucially, aid-providers must set up complaints mechanisms, which safely and impartially provide individuals the opportunity to report concerns, make complaints and seek appropriate redress. In the northern Caucasus, the Danish Refugee Council has implemented a registration and complaints system for those affected by the conflict. Unusually the registration system, created on the basis of surveys, remains "alive" and up-to-date, allowing people to query and question the data (see Box 7.5).

Obligations to respond and report back

What agencies have learned from those they try to assist and protect should stimulate many changes in the nature, design or implementation of aid programmes; the profile of aid staff; entitlement criteria; protection strategies; camp design; and even the nature of dialogue with affected people. It could provoke a search for better collaboration with other aid providers and duty-bearers, or lead agencies to lobby and support others as "amplifiers" of the voices which have been heard.

Aid-providers must assume responsibility, in a meaningful way, for what they did well, but also for where they failed, if it was under their control to do better. In order to demonstrate that listening to beneficiaries has resulted in concrete changes to aid provision, agencies must report back on their actions (and inactions) to crisis-affected communities, donors and other stakeholders. Reporting back completes the accountability circle of informing, listening and responding. Agencies can do this through sharing programme information and lessons with internal and external stakeholders, public campaigns, social audit reports, stakeholder surveys and assemblies, or public disclosures (e.g., web sites).

Following consultations with beneficiaries in the Balkans, the International Federation changed the style of its relief in a way which increased respect for the dignity of those affected by conflict and disaster (see Box 7.6).

The boxes on Sierra Leone (Box 7.1) and Nicaragua (Box 7.4) illustrate the initiatives in which an agency or a grouping of civil society organizations build an explicit link between the provision of aid and the wider politics of "good governance". The Nicaragua case illustrates how this can become controversial.

Towards a culture of accountability

The challenge now is to turn still rather exceptional examples of accountability into regular, institutionalized practice. This is a challenge that requires integrating all three (field, headquarters and interagency) levels of decision-making and action. Field initiatives illustrated in this chapter should be supported through headquarters and interagency mechanisms, and funding policies committed to strengthening accountability. Recommendations for the "accountable humanitarian organization" are given in Box 7.7.

Many steps towards establishing a culture and practice of humanitarian accountability have already been made. Over the last year, debates and initiatives have taken place within the humanitarian community aimed at identifying better ways to monitor quality and accountability through, for instance, more rigorous self-assessment, peer review or accreditation. The way forward consists in building on these and older initiatives.

As human rights activists and ombudspersons have experienced, building a culture of accountability never ends; it is not a specific and tangible outcome but rather an ongoing process with a number of required benchmarks measuring its evolution. The process is very much driven by the articulation and acknowledgment of responsibilities or duties, and by the creation of specific mechanisms.

The agency and interagency standards and guidelines identified earlier offer a general framework within which humanitarian actors can define and limit their responsibilities. However, as Oxfam's Nicholas Stockton pointed out to a workshop in 1996, "Occupational performance standards do not on their own ensure quality control... The demand for rapid recruitment in emergencies does result in inexperienced and unsuitable staff being pitched into the most demanding and responsible occupational contexts, with negligible specialist induction and support."

Furthermore, such standards, codes and benchmarks are not disseminated as widely as they should be. And very few of them are evaluated, monitored or their non-implementation sanctioned. The absence of meaningful self-regulation at every level diminishes the impact that these initiatives could have, in terms of offering an updated and context-sensitive interpretation of humanitarian responsibilities.

Is it even sufficient to rely solely on self-regulatory mechanisms? The majority of professional sectors (medicine, judiciary, police, public administration), which have adopted a self-regulatory framework, also recognize that a system without external and independent regulatory, monitoring and response mechanisms may be neither principled nor effective.

Similarly, however, relying solely on independent mechanisms will not be sufficient or effective either. Among other things, it would give sole regulatory authority to mechanisms or bodies, whose modus operandi may differ greatly from that of the humanitarian sector. Independent mechanisms or bodies should be called upon when the issues to be considered are beyond the mandate of self-regulatory bodies, or as part of an appeal process.

Strengthening accountability is both an individual agency responsibility and a collective responsibility, shared by all civilian humanitarian actors. The sector, as a whole, must acknowledge, through self-regulatory and independent monitoring bodies and mechanisms, its responsibility to ensure that its members observe minimum standards in humanitarian response. In particular, humanitarian actors should act together to build self-regulatory bodies, at national and international levels, which should:

- ensure beneficiary participation;
- ensure other stakeholders' participation;

- be transparent;
- have the mandate or authority to monitor and enforce agreed rules;
- update rules;
- accredit or remove the endorsement of non-complying organizations; and
- include a right of appeal.

While regulation is clearly crucial, it is equally important that agencies and their employees are geared towards feeling and being accountable to crisis-affected populations It is imperative that affected people, on whose behalf humanitarian action is conducted and funds raised, are able to exercise their rights to information, to have a say in decisions that affect them, and to seek redress where appropriate.

Only by being transparent in its undertakings and accountable to those whose lives it most affects, can humanitarian action truly meet its objective to safeguard and uphold the well-being and dignity of those who have been affected by disasters and armed conflicts.

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Web sites

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CARE **http://www.care-international.org**
ReliefWeb (OCHA) **http://www.reliefweb.int**
UNHCHR **http://www.unhchr.ch**

Section Two

Tracking the system