PUBLIC AUDIT PRACTICE – SHIFTING THE FOCUS OF ACCOUNTABILITY TOWARDS THE PEOPLE

Helvetas Nepal’s experience of ensuring downward accountability

CONCLUSIONS

The PAP has proved to be the right methodology to ensure downward accountability and to sensitize the people on their “Right to Information”. Also the government has recognized the importance of downward accountability and made it legally compulsory to conduct such an event once a year. The practice has reduced tensions and mistrust in the communities and has contributed to a higher awareness on the right to information and the importance of accountability.

Accountability makes a difference to both the organisation and its stakeholders. It increases the credibility and legitimacy of development organisations, strengthens governance structures, and leads to learning and innovation. Furthermore it ensures that the needs of the stakeholders are taken into account and that their awareness of accountability increases.

PROJECT EXPERIENCE

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Zurich, April 2014
This issue sheet provides an overview of the Public Audit Practice (PAP), as it is carried out within all Helvetas Nepal community infrastructure projects (irrigation, water and sanitation, trail bridges). The practice was introduced during the peak of the Nepali conflict around 2002, in order to be transparent to all conflict parties and therefore being able to continue rural development activities even in conflict zones. All stakeholders highly appreciated the tool and it is now a requirement for a project to be implemented.

The Users’ Committee (UC) – a management committee comprising of proportionate representation by caste, including a 40% representation of women – receives the funds and is mainly responsible for the coordination of the project implementation. Support is provided by local partners of Helvetas and Helvetas Nepal itself. Therefore, it is essentially the UC who is accountable to all users of the scheme.

The problem of corruption is particularly severe in Nepal and affects both governmental and non-governmental development agencies. Mechanisms for ensuring downward accountability and awareness among the people on their “Right to Information” are missing. Helvetas Nepal and its partners aim to ensure downward accountability in their own projects. Especially since the PAP is in place, funds are hardly ever misused. In case of small incidences, social pressure led to reimbursement. Through PAP Helvetas enhances its own credibility. But the actual goal is to sensitise the beneficiaries and build democratic practices from the bottom. People are empowered to demand accountability.

The PAP has an impact on a conflict setting, by de-escalating tensions through transparency. Inclusiveness is enhanced if not only formal actors, but also less visible key actors are invited. The following changes can be expected:

- The perceptions and attitudes among the stakeholder change and improve.
- Institutionalising PAP has a huge impact on relationships between the administration, groups and individuals. Increased trust due to transparency, communication and collaboration can be observed.
- Concerns and experiences of the marginalised are formally included in the policy process
- If practised over a longer term, the practice of transparency and accountability will not only change institutionally but also be embedded in the culture.

Empowerment

The PAP raises awareness among the people on their right to information and on the duty of the power holders to be accountable to them. People are empowered to claim transparency and accountability from other donors/NGOs as well as from the government.

PAP and Peace Building

Capacity at local level to organise such events is often limited and there is a risk of provocative queries to malign an individual or the organisation. Therefore, good facilitation is crucial and needs to encourage everyone to share honest and critical reflections. Ideally, meaningful participation of all participants, including the marginalised, is achieved.

Although government representatives from district and local level are invited, their active participation is still a challenge. In the Nepali context with no elected local governments in place yet, participation of political parties’ representatives is equally important. Local political leaders do attend the events and are interested in ensuring transparency. There is always the possibility that the essence of the public audit practice is not captured and that it becomes a mere formality. Therefore, Helvetas and its local partners have an important role in communicating time and again the importance of accountability in order to achieve sustainable change.

Empowerment and meaningful participation of the marginalised groups is always a challenge and a long-term process. Nevertheless, the quota system is an important mechanism, as long as it is combined with effective and transformational empowerment processes.
INTRODUCTION

This issue sheet provides an overview of the Public Audit Practice (PAP), as it is carried out within all Helvetas Nepal community infrastructure projects (irrigation, water and sanitation, trail bridges). The practice was introduced during the peak of the Nepali conflict around 2002, in order to be transparent to all conflict parties and therefore being able to continue rural development activities even in conflict zones. All stakeholders highly appreciated the tool and it is now a requirement for a project to be implemented.

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WHY DOWNWARD ACCOUNTABILITY?

The problem of corruption is particularly severe in Nepal and affects both governmental and non-governmental development agencies. Mechanisms for ensuring downward accountability and awareness among the people on their “Right to Information” are missing. Helvetas Nepal and its partners aim to ensure downward accountability in their own projects. Especially since the PAP is in place, funds are hardly ever misused. In case of small incidences, social pressure led to reimbursement. Through PAP Helvetas enhances its own credibility. But the actual goal is to sensitise the beneficiaries and build democratic practices from the bottom up. People are empowered to demand accountability.

WHO IS INVOLVED?

Basically, everybody who is interested is welcome to join the event. However, the key stakeholders, listed below, are specifically invited, either personally or through letters.

- Users
- Political party representatives
- Local elites
- Representatives from local government
- Local partner organisation
- Representative from Helvetas Nepal

HOW IS THE PUBLIC AUDIT PRACTICE CARRIED OUT?

PAP consists of three events (Public Hearing, Review, Audit) contributing to enhance participation of poor and excluded communities in planning, implementation and monitoring of the intervention. The events are carried out by the UC and supported by the local partners of Helvetas Nepal.

WHAT DOES THE PUBLIC AUDIT PRACTICE AIM TO ACHIEVE?

Transparency

All project relevant information is transparently shared. Discussions are held and inquiries are replied to by different power holders (UC, local partners, Helvetas). A billboard is erected that displays a summary. The people very much appreciate this increased transparency.

Participation

The various steps of the process are designed specifically to give farmers an opportunity to express their views and concerns in relation to the projects for which they are organised. Furthermore, there is a minimum attendance required: at least 60% of the users have to be present; otherwise the event is cancelled. Thus, it is important to fix the date carefully and avoid busy farming times.

Feedback

Users and other stakeholders are highly encouraged to raise their concerns and share their experiences. Some local partners have developed innovative ideas such as “suggestion boxes”, where people can place their concerns anonymously. Comments and concerns are taken into account and, if technically and financially possible, project implementation is adjusted to people’s wishes.

Challenges

There is always the possibility that the essence of the public audit practice is not captured and that it becomes a mere formality. Therefore, Helvetas and its local partners have an important role in communicating time and again the importance of accountability in order to achieve sustainable change.

Empowerment

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SUMMARY

Trust in NGOs cannot be taken for granted only because they work “not-for-profit”. Therefore, Helvetas ought to be accountable not only to its donors, but also to the beneficiaries. Helvetas Nepal introduced the public audit practice in its infrastructure projects to ensure that “power holders” are accountable to the people. Before implementing the project, during the construction phase, and after completing the project, the users of the scheme gather and all relevant information is presented to them and discussed. This raises the awareness on the importance of accountability and people are empowered to demand it.

CONCLUSIONS

The PAP has proved to be the right methodology to ensure downward accountability and to sensitize the people on their “Right to Information”. Also the government has recognized the importance of downward accountability and made it legally compulsory to conduct such an event once a year. The practice has reduced tensions and mistrust in the communities and has contributed to a higher awareness on the right to information and the importance of accountability.

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