

Independent Evaluation of CAFOD's Accountability Work 2010-15

Andy Featherstone & Claire Goudsmit, October 2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction and Approach

Introduction

The Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) is the official development and humanitarian relief agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, and is part of Caritas International. With an annual income of approximately £50m, it works alongside people of all faiths and none, and with around 450 partners in over 30 countries. Accountability to people and communities is core to CAFOD's Vision, Mission and Values and its faith identity. As CAFOD works in different ways and contexts with, through and for¹ local, national and regional partner organisations its relationship, engagement with and accountability to communities are mediated entirely through its partners who have direct contact with, and are often embedded within, CAFOD's target communities including local faith-based structures.

Purpose of the evaluation

To evaluate the impact (positive or negative) that CAFOD investments in accountability have contributed to strengthening accountability at partner- and community-levels, and assess the added value of this investment.

To identify learning from qualitative case studies whether, where and how – through different models (e.g. training, ongoing accompaniment, micro grants) – CAFOD's accountability interventions have contributed to positive changes in accountability practice at partner and community levels (and if not, why not).

Explore the extent to which CAFOD's experience and learning from its accountability work can help further develop (a) its accountability Theory of Change and (b) its contribution to wider humanitarian and development sector learning on effective ways of strengthening accountability to communities.

To use the results of the evaluation to reflect on the extent to which relevant elements of CAFOD's accountability framework have been progressed between 2010 and 2015.

Approach

The evaluation adopted a mixed methodology consisting of a document and literature review, an analysis of CAFOD's corporate accountability commitments and how it translates its accountability principles into partner practice and community experience, interviews with CAFOD staff in London and at country-level, and interviews with partners at country-level, external interviews with peer agencies and Caritas Internationalis partners; and an analysis of the different approaches that it has adopted to capacity development of partners. To explore the outcomes and impact of CAFOD's accountability investment, visits were made to three countries where CAFOD has engaged in capacity development of partners on accountability which included focus group discussions with CAFOD staff, partners and communities. A further five countries participated in the evaluation remotely via Skype interviews with partner staff.

Findings

Relevance

CAFOD's accountability commitments and interventions are broadly considered relevant by staff internally, by its partners and by the communities they support. While there is extremely strong ownership of accountability interventions in the latter two links of the chain, it is within CAFOD itself where there is the greatest challenges in reaching consensus on how to define accountability and deliver support in a way that meets partner needs and CAFOD's commitments under its partnership model. Recent leadership lapses and monitoring failures, identified by other CAFOD reviews in early 2015, have served to exacerbate these

¹ Implicit throughout the evaluation report will be CAFOD's partnership approach of working 'with, through and for' partners.

challenges. While there is potential for CAFOD to strengthen the relevance of its targeting of partners for accountability support in the future, there is evidence to suggest that at a community level it assists partners in identifying and assisting the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups.

Effectiveness

CAFOD has successfully delivered a menu of support to partners in its development and humanitarian programmes (albeit separately from each other). While a lack of monitoring data precludes an assessment of the extent of the support that has been provided, feedback from partners suggests that it has strengthened their knowledge and influenced their practice. This progress has come at some cost to the organisation and recent challenges in monitoring and reporting on the accountability theme within CAFOD's 2011-14² Programme Partnership Agreement (PPA) with the Department for International Development (DFID) has highlighted weaknesses in how it has resourced its accountability work. Despite this, the provision of accountability support to diverse partners (both development and humanitarian) is a distinctive competency of CAFOD which is recognised across the sector. There is also recognition and praise for the important work that CAFOD has done as a standard bearer for accountability and ardent supporter of accountability initiatives.

Impact

At partner-level, there is significant evidence of positive changes attributed to CAFOD interventions in partner awareness, commitment and capacity for accountability which has translated into greater engagement with communities which have been able to have influence in the design and delivery of projects that have affected them. Communities also attributed improvements in the relevance, effectiveness and sustainability of projects to partner accountability mechanisms. Partners considered mutual accountability between themselves and CAFOD to be relatively strong while conversely, direct forms of accountability between CAFOD and the communities its partners work with was considered by communities to be limited. While CAFOD's principle of subsidiarity places greatest emphasis on the relationship between partners and communities, there is an important need to consider the implications that this has for CAFOD's accountability commitments – both downwards from CAFOD to communities and upwards from communities to CAFOD. At a community-level, very limited knowledge existed about what CAFOD is, about its commitments and about how feedback or complaints could be made.

Sustainability

As CAFOD progresses its 'Towards 2020' (T2020) change process, there is important work being undertaken to ensure that accountability is more fluently articulated through its programme planning and management tools and it will be important that its corporate commitment to accountability is re-confirmed and that leadership gaps and inconsistencies are addressed with resources allocated in order to ensure future sustainability. At a partner-level, there is a strong message for CAFOD to continue to support its partners to identify, develop and embed organisational policies and globally-accepted standards and good practices that will ensure the sustainability of accountability practice in the future.

Corporate-level lessons

CAFOD has been courageous in how it has championed accountability in the sector over the last eighteen years. It has been amongst the earliest adopters of accountability standards and it has played a leadership role in supporting accountability standards bodies to understand how accountability commitments can be applied to partner-led organisations.

While CAFOD's pursuit of certification against the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) standard and Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) commitments has been laudable, it has established an accountability agenda which has been perceived as compliance-driven rather than relational, which is the approach that many of CAFOD's staff are most comfortable with. There are similar differences of opinion in the organisation about whether accountability should be humanitarian focused as opposed to cutting across all of CAFOD's programme and advocacy work. There are also

² Accountability was withdrawn from PPA reporting in 2015 in agreement with DFID following CAFOD's identification of data errors in late 2014.

divergent opinions about whether and how CAFOD could and should extend its accountability to the community-level as well as the partner-level. Such diverse views are unhelpful as they militate against CAFOD achieving a unity of purpose in its accountability work and it will be important that action is taken to address this through CAFOD's Accountability Review Project³ under its T2020 change programme.

The language used to describe accountability in Just One World (J1W) and across CAFOD's programme and policy documents has been inconsistent which has led to confusion and has given mixed messages about the standing of accountability alongside other corporate priorities. This should be rectified in part by the revision of the Programme Planning Manual and will also receive attention from the Accountability Review Project. These initiatives must strive to ensure that messages about accountability are clear and consistent through all of CAFOD's strategic and operational policies particularly as the organisation moves towards implementation of its 'Towards 2020' (T2020) strategy.

Leadership and oversight of CAFOD's accountability commitments has been inadequate and monitoring has been weak; the ASG ceased to function effectively in 2014 and has now been formally suspended until after the Accountability Review Project has been completed; the accountability commitments made in J1W are no longer being monitored or reported on (including under the PPA) due to data reporting errors,⁴ and; CAFOD's Accountability Framework is no longer being monitored. As a consequence it is difficult to synthesise and analyse information about progress that has been made against CAFOD's accountability commitments.

The evaluation endorses the findings of the 2011 HAP mid-term progress audit and 2015 CHS verification exercise that CAFOD's Complaint Handling Mechanism (CHM) does not extend to communities which lack knowledge about its existence and rarely have access to the technology required to use it. While there are other means for them to raise issues with CAFOD – which includes via partners, regional staff or headquarters staff - CAFOD needs to reconceptualise its CHM in a way that ensures that it can meet its obligations to people and communities, whilst respecting its partnership model.

CAFOD's systems to share learning on accountability across teams have not been effective and do not promote organisational agility, which would allow it to adapt and re-focus its work in response to learning outcomes as the failure to adapt to challenges of the PPA has demonstrated.

Programme-level lessons

Despite the different views that exist in CAFOD about what accountability is and how it can best be advanced, the organisational commitment to accountability has been translated into partner policies and practice which have frequently resulted in communities having greater influence over how they experience development and humanitarian projects.

While the focus on CHMs has been helpful, findings from the country visits suggest that CAFOD should routinely support partners to ensure that their accountability practices are contextualised to take account of community preferences. and promote an approach which offers a range of ways for feedback to be provided to partners by the communities they work with. The importance of contextualisation was raised in the 2012 HAP audit and it is now essential that CAFOD seeks to address this oversight.

The findings of the evaluation suggest that the focus on documenting complaints raised through a 'formal' CHM is shortsighted as it is often the case that communities preferred to use less formal feedback mechanisms such as face-to-face meetings or phone calls to raise issues of concern with partners. If feedback is to be routinely addressed, it is important for all mechanisms to be identified and for feedback received across these to be documented and addressed and responded to by partners.

A country and partner-led approach to accountability that focuses on a set of accountability principles which can be contextualised and which responds to the diversity of CAFOD's partnerships and ways of working with communities in multiple contexts would have the potential to offer important flexibility while ensuring that internal and external commitments are adhered to. This should be the cornerstone of how CAFOD seeks to progress its accountability work in the future.

Communities have benefitted from CAFOD's work with partners on accountability. They value it and would like more from partners and CAFOD. Partners have greatly appreciated the support provided which has strengthened their knowledge, attitudes, policies and practices. They are keen for CAFOD to support them in their accountability journey with communities over the long-term.

³ 'Accountability Review: strengthening accountability to people and communities through our partnership approach (T2020 Change Project 16)', Project Initiation Document, 24 July 2015.

⁴ The monitoring and reporting errors have been investigated and will be addressed through the Accountability Review Project.

Conclusion and Recommendations

CAFOD has been courageous in how it has externally championed accountability over the last eighteen years which has demonstrated strong leadership at a sectoral and organisational level; furthermore, its commitment has been translated into policies and practice by its partners which has frequently resulted in communities having greater influence over how they experience development and humanitarian projects. In achieving this, CAFOD has demonstrated its ability to influence a shift in power which is encouraging.

However, recent experience highlighted in internal and external reviews initiated under the PPA has revealed weaknesses in the coherence of CAFOD's organisational leadership, governance and management of accountability at multiple levels and has brought into question the extent to which CAFOD has embedded accountability practice within the organisation. At a corporate-level, this is intended to be addressed through CAFOD's Accountability Review Project to which this evaluation is a contributing source of evidence and at the programme-level, some of these concerns are in the process of being addressed through the development of programme management and partnership tools which should reflect and renew accountability as core to CAFOD's international programme work.

What will be important to create through these processes is a shared, compelling and ambitious vision for the future of accountability in partnership throughout the organisation and a governance structure that will do more than oversee this, but which will champion it throughout all parts of the organisation. As CAFOD responds to CHS's recommendation for certification against the Core Humanitarian Standard Commitments and takes forward its Accountability Review Project, there is an important opportunity to re-energise and re-focus its accountability work – an opportunity that the evaluation suggests is in the best interests of the organisation, its partners and the communities which it serves.

Corporate-level recommendations

1. Leadership of accountability

It is important that a corporate oversight body, with responsibility for oversight and management of CAFOD's accountability work is established. In addition to the responsibilities outlined in the Accountability Steering Group (ASG) ToR, this body should promote coherence in how CAFOD's accountability commitments are articulated at the corporate-level and hold oversight of how these are translated into practice. Its mandate should also include monitoring of the accountability commitments implicit in the refreshed J1W and its ToR and membership should reflect the structure changes implicit in T2020. This body should also hold oversight of organisational resourcing to meet CAFOD's accountability commitments.

2. Promotion of a coherent vision and understanding of accountability within CAFOD

In order to reconcile the different views that exist and to unite the organisation around a common understanding, it is recommended that through its Accountability Review Project, CAFOD more clearly defines accountability and offers a vision of how it can be practiced within a partnership model. An essential part of this will be to broker agreement on how the current emphasis on accountability as a compliance issue can be balanced with accountability as part of a softer set of relational practices. It will only be through providing leadership in a way that is clear that CAFOD will be able to build consensus on this important issue.

3. Consistency in how accountability is addressed in CAFOD's policy and procedures

The vision of accountability referred to in the recommendation above should be translated through all of CAFOD's strategic and programme planning and implementation documents. With so much change happening and with a raft of revised programme policies under development, it is essential that a consistent set of messages about how CAFOD views accountability and the implications of this for its partnership model and international programme are included throughout these documents.

Programme-level recommendations

4. The adoption of accountability principles

Mindful of the importance of bridging the ideological differences which exist and noting the need for a flexible approach to accountability which can accommodate CAFOD's diverse partner types, programming models and the different contexts within which CAFOD's partners work, it is suggested that, through its Accountability Review Project, CAFOD develops a set of accountability principles. These should be consistent with CAFOD's theological understanding and definition of accountability and should provide space for partners and the communities they work with to contextualise them. Rather than seek to interrogate these through a spreadsheet-based approach which has failed in the past, the principles should become part of CAFOD's regular discussions with partners with a light annual reporting requirement against each. In this way, accountability has a far greater chance of enhancing CAFOD's relationship with partners rather than being seen as an extractive obligation.

5. Re-affirming accountability as a two-way process

The emphasis that has been placed on PPA reporting since 2011 has focused on accountability between CAFOD's partners and the communities they work with. However, there has been far less attention paid to the accountability of CAFOD to its partners. While the evaluation found evidence of good practice in engaging partners in regional strategy development and eliciting their feedback during annual reviews, feedback also suggests that this could be strengthened. It will continue to be important for CAFOD to emphasise the mutual nature of accountability and to role-model the behaviour which it seeks to promote with its partners.

6. The need to routinely adopt a holistic approach to accountability

CAFOD places a specific focus on CHM with its partners which appears at times to take precedence over the adoption of a more holistic framework of accountability. It needs to locate *complaint handling* within a holistic framework of accountability and express it as *one* component of good accountability practice which gives equal priority to information sharing and transparency, participation and feedback.

7. Promotion of contextualised feedback mechanisms which meet CAFOD's internal CHM policy

In order to meet CAFOD's CHM policy and to address feedback from the CHS verification report, it is recommended that CAFOD continues to routinely support its partners to develop contextually-relevant feedback mechanisms which can capture and respond to feedback provided by the communities they work with. In the absence of an effective link between CAFOD and communities, its accountability responsibilities can be met by ensuring that partners have effective mechanisms in place and evidencing that they are being used.

8. The importance of strengthening learning and knowledge management

CAFOD has gathered a wealth of knowledge on issues of accountability but this is not available in a way that is accessible or in a format that is easily digestible to its staff and partners. The evaluation highlighted a significant demand from CAFOD partners for technical support and knowledge which may be met in part through an approach to learning and knowledge management which can make this information more easily accessible.