Accountability to Communities Framework[1]

Relief International's commitment

Our Strategic Plan 2015-2020, sets out accountability and transparency as central to RI's culture. Indeed, The RI Way of working includes transparency, accountability and deliberation (captured as Civic Skills) and Local Participation through the project life cycle, as two of its four core elements. We work with fragile, vulnerable, mobile communities, engaging community members as participants, not recipients.[2] As a consequence, we listen to, learn from and explain our intentions and performance to the women and men, girls and boys, with whom we work, involving them as decision makers at each step of the program.

RI's commitment to accountability to communities is codified across existing RI policies.[3] We recognize that documenting codes and standards is only one step in the process and we aim to build a 'culture of accountability' through integrating our commitment across systems and practice. Practical steps, including the provision of trainings and tools outlining minimum standards, will aid staff in operationalizing the commitment. To that end, we have developed this Accountability to Communities Framework.

This Framework has two parts. First, we outline the principles guiding Relief International's (RI's) program approach to accountability to the community members with whom we work. Second, we list organizational actions that RI is implementing to realize these principles. This framework should be considered alongside RI Global, Regional and Country-level practical tools relating to RI's commitment to accountability and the relevant policies governing RI staff practice.

Section A: Guiding Principles

RI is a member of the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) Task Team and our organizational approach is aligned with the IASC Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations (CAAP) (2011) and the Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS) (2015)[4]. Our own Accountability to Communities guiding principles reflect the three Core Humanitarian Standards in this area and are:
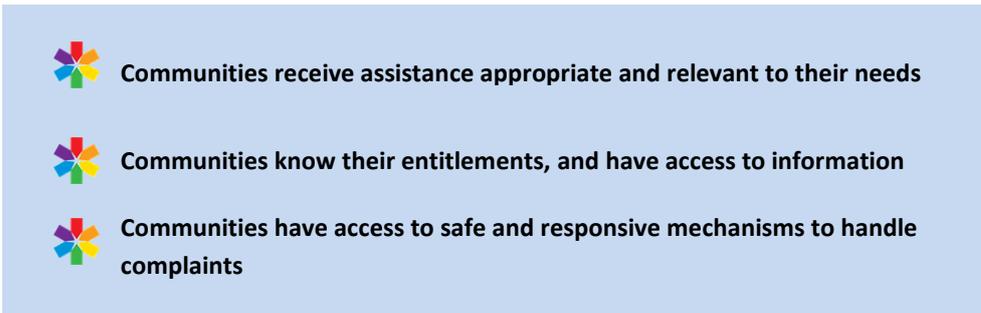
> **Communities receive assistance appropriate and relevant to their needs**
>
> **Communities know their entitlements, and have access to information**
>
> **Communities have access to safe and responsive mechanisms to handle complaints**

These principles guide RI work. The way in which they are applied will depend on the context. Our country teams have the knowledge and expertise to develop systems and processes appropriate to their particular setting[5].

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1 The definition of 'communities' in this framework extends beyond people directly benefitting from RI programs and to those that are indirectly affected. For example, RI recognizes a commitment to engage the wider community in a discussion about the selection process for those receiving assistance. 'Community' is defined as the broad range of people in the locations in which RI works and may include those not receiving direct assistance.

2 The RI Way, as outlined in the Relief International, Strategic Plan: 2015-2020, Dec 2014.

3 This includes the RI Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Policy, Child Protection Policy, Critical Incident Reporting policy and procedures, Fraud, Bribery and Corruption policy, Conflict of Interest Policy, Terrorist Financing Policy, Acceptance First Policy – The RI Approach to Security, Whistleblowing Policy, Humanitarian Strategy and each of our four Sector Strategies. All of these policies outline RI staff responsibilities to community members, particularly those most vulnerable, and outline processes through which staff and community members can voice concerns.

4 The Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS) were developed through the Joint Standard Initiative (JSI) involving Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), People in Aid and the Sphere Project working to develop one core standard. RI's guiding principles are based on Core Humanitarian Standards 1,4 and 5.

5 The particular setting would include the level of emergency being responded to for humanitarian relief interventions. As referenced in the framework, minimum standards will be developed in relation to the different levels of emergency as the extent to which the principles can be applied may vary.

1. Communities receive assistance appropriate and relevant to their needs

RI is committed to implementing programs that address local priorities effectively. We recognize the importance of listening to community members and adapting program design according to what we learn. This includes both at the initial program design stage on the basis of needs assessments and community consultation, and also throughout the life cycle according to monitoring and evaluation findings and community feedback. Relief International endorses the following principles to ensure programs are appropriate and relevant to community needs. We will:

- Engage a broad spectrum of the community when doing needs assessments, baseline studies and project evaluations. This includes government officials and community leaders, where appropriate, as well as other members of the population.
- Take into account the views of men, women, boys and girls of different ages.
- Prioritize the situation of vulnerable people, including women, children and hard to reach populations in our assessments.
- Disaggregate data by gender and age at a minimum, and where possible, by disability.
- Extend the definition of diversity to include composition of the assessment team and ensure gender balance.
- Share results from needs assessments and ongoing program learning with communities concerned and with other agencies when possible.
- Always base the program approach on evidence, including needs assessment findings where available.
- Continuously consult with communities throughout program implementation, to find out whether the program is meeting their needs and whether adjustments need to be made.
- Actively engage communities themselves in project monitoring and implementation.
- Wherever possible, conduct joint assessments, recognizing that it is most effective to work in a coordinated approach with other organizations in the sector.

2. Communities know their entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them

The RI Way takes a community-driven approach, engaging with community members as active participants rather than passive recipients. Such engagement increases resilience and independence, which raises the likelihood of the success and sustainability of our programs. The RI Way also builds core civic skills of transparency, accountability and deliberation into all programs. We engage a range of local stakeholders in the delivery of projects. Informed and empowered community members strengthen the outcomes of all project phases, build community ownership for sustainability, and encourage feedback for continuous improvement. They can also strengthen trust, transparency and reduce the risk of corruption and fraud. RI aims to adhere to the following principles to ensure our response is based on communication, participation, deliberation and accountability. We will:

- Inform all stakeholders about Relief International's work. This includes RI staff, community members, and other relevant partners. Communicating with community and religious leaders is important, but this will be in addition to sharing information with the wider community.
- Communicate basic information including RI mission and values, RI contact details, project details, objectives, any distribution plan, beneficiary selection criteria, evaluation findings, details of feedback mechanisms.
- Consider what should not be shared: most crucially this includes any sensitive information that may compromise the safety of staff or community members.[6]
- Share information in a format accessible to the affected populations. Text is culturally appropriate, translated to the local language and free of jargon.
- Consider the various approaches available for communication and identify those most appropriate to the context (including for example, leaflets, community discussions, notice boards).
- Ensure participation and engagement of communities through community dialogues or surveys, to gain ideas and input throughout the project

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[6] As detailed in the Operational Framework for Accountability to Communities, at the time of writing, RI guidelines around information sharing protocol are currently under development. Once available, these should be consulted by Country Offices as part of the project mobilization process.

3. Communities have access to safe and responsive mechanisms to handle complaints

RI recognizes the importance of establishing effective mechanisms that enable communities to provide feedback and complaints. This can be either through an RI-led system, or where feasible, a joint complaints mechanism with other agencies. This communication channel enables beneficiaries to voice their suggestions and for RI to listen to what is working and what is not working in order to adjust the program approach accordingly. In addition to incorporating learning at the project level, RI recognizes the need to monitor trends regarding feedback at the institutional level for lessons incorporated into future planning. Relief International aims to adhere to the following principles to ensure complaints are welcomed and addressed. We will:

- Ensure feedback mechanisms are in place in all RI programs. The type of feedback mechanism employed will be appropriate to the context and the kind of project[7]. Before beginning any feedback mechanism, it is important to involve community members to determine the best modalities for leaving feedback or complaints. Examples include complaint boxes, dedicated text/SMS numbers, as well as hotlines.[8]
- Clearly communicate to community members, the system for making complaints.
- As much as possible, manage expectations of communities, ensuring awareness of what is, and is not, within RI's control.
- Ensure feedback and complaints remain confidential and that community members can be confident that any issues raised are dealt with in a sensitive and prompt manner with no fear of retaliation.
- Consider the approach to dealing with the complaint according to the level of seriousness of the issue raised. For those of a significant or critical nature, RI's Serious Incident Reporting mechanism will be used to ensure it receives due attention at leadership level.
- Address urgently and in line with RI's Serious Incident Reporting process[9], any complaints evaluated as serious, including those related to child protection and sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Train staff in the design, implementation and monitoring of complaints-handling processes
- Act on complaints, and where not within the remit of Relief International, refer them to the responsible agency. We recognize that if complaints are received and not seen to be addressed, this can cause frustration and disappointment within communities.

Operationalizing the Principles and Measuring Organizational Progress

To realize these principles a range of steps will be taken by Relief International's departments and staff at all levels of the organization. With this in mind RI has developed an Operational Framework for Accountability to Communities, with responsibilities and timelines clearly stated. This Operational Framework is an action plan to guide RI in realizing our goal of being fully accountable to the communities in which we work. It is a live document to be periodically updated. We will track progress towards our goal at the global level on a quarterly basis through the following indicators[10]:

- Percentage of proposals designed with significant level of community participation
- Percentage of projects implemented with significant level of community participation
- Percentage of projects which make RI principles and processes for accountability available to communities
- Percentage of projects with effective feedback and complaints mechanism in place

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[7] As explained in 'Acceptance First, the RI Approach to Security', "If the mechanisms chosen for honest feedback from communities are culturally inappropriate (e.g., only male staff available to talk with women beneficiaries in some places), only technology-based or otherwise unusable by the local communities, or the methodology for communities to give honest feedback is hampered by the feeling that they have no one to turn to outside of their regular contact (who may be the focus of their discontent), then effective feedback will not occur."

[8] RI country offices may refer to the detailed guidance around appropriate modalities of feedback mechanisms which will be available by December 2016.

[9] Staff should refer to the Serious Incident Reporting Policy and Procedures which provides guidelines for determining whether an incident counts as 'critical'.

[10] Definitions for Key terms in these indicators as well as process and frequency for collection is outlined in the 'RI Program Management Indicators' and on the database, RI View.

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