

Accountability Principles for Research Organisations

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Abstract: This project contributes to the understandings of accountability in the context of research organisations that engage in policy relevant research.

Both current practice and good practices were analysed in the light of an adapted version of the One World Trust's Global Accountability Framework, an analytical tool based on multiple stakeholder models of accountability which was developed for global organisations. The project was used to adapt this framework so that it is applicable for the accountability of RIs.

It involved engagement with a set of research organisations identified with a view to capturing the breadth of different organisations engaging in policy-relevant research. The research identified the *obstacles* and challenges that each encountered to developing their accountability.

Research organisations were found – as hypothesised – to have a range of stakeholders. There were significant challenges in balancing one stakeholder against another. The research also explored good practice identified by the literature.

The project has started to build a community of practice by building interest and engagement with IDRC programs, with the ultimate aim of strengthening their accountability. The core of this community of practice is formed from the organisations with whom we worked.

***Keywords:** accountability, research, development, evaluation, participation, transparency.

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The Research Problem

The aim of the project is to contribute to current understandings on issues of accountability in the context of research institutes that engage in policy relevant research (henceforth “RIs”). It is an ideal of good governance that policies are founded on a solid evidence basis. Research organisations, as generators of this evidence, can have great influence in shaping policy decisions. Their impact on developing countries growth and progress can therefore be extensive. Given their influence and potential impact, it is important that they are accountable to those on whom they will have an impact.

The purpose of the first phase of “Accountability Principles for Research Organisations” was to formulate a framework of accountability guidelines for research organisations founded on four principles of accountability: participation, transparency, evaluation and complaints handling.

Objectives

The project provides a framework that strengthens the accountability of research organisations that engage in policy relevant research. Originally stated, the projects objectives were to:

- a. “increase the understanding of what accountability means for research institutes (RIs) engaged in policy-relevant research”
- b. “adapt the Accountability Framework developed by the One World Trust to the specificities of RIs”
- c. “build interest and engagement with IDRC programs and RIs that are interested to further strengthen their accountability”

The objectives did not change markedly through the project, although early in the course of research it became clear that a deeper understanding of “research institute” would be necessary – rather than define exclusively what constituted a “research institute”, the project instead focused on the activity of research. The project therefore adopts “research organisation” instead of “research institute”.

Project implementation and management

Activities

The project explored the extent to which research organisations are accountable to the stakeholders identified in the foregoing discussion. That is to say, the extent to which they (1) allowed participation from these stakeholders in their internal process; (2) employed evaluation and learning techniques and processes; (3) were transparent to their stakeholders; and (4) invited feedback on their work.

It studied how research organisations prioritised the interests of different stakeholders in practice and how the principles manifested themselves in different key research processes. It drew out the good practices, but also the obstacles and constraints, which different kinds of organisations faced in their engagement with organisations.

In broad terms it involved the following steps:

- research on policy communities; coding and analysis of data
- typology of research organisations
- identification of research organisations representing diversity of types
- interviews with each organisation
- analysis of data from qualitative interviews
- preparation of reports and other publications
- continued building of a community of practice: online forum and other tools of engagement

This approach – detailed below – was a methodological response to the challenges identified in the literature review phase of the research: that is to say, that to consider the accountability of research organisations adequately, it would be necessary to consider a very diverse set of activities and a diverse set of organisations. Only in this way could the different stakeholder ‘profiles’ be identified and the challenges of balancing stakeholders and overcoming research challenges examined.

Typology

The project started with the hypothesis that policy-relevant research in developing countries covered a great many activities: research comes in a wide range of forms, and it is made policy-relevant through a number of different advocacy and communication methods. To test this conclusion, a number of specific features relevant to accountability for research institutes were identified. These could be grouped into two “clusters” of features: one cluster described the legal form of the organisation, and indicated its formal accountability relationships; the second described the location of the research institute in the policy field, and the accountability owed to those in the policy community. These hypotheses were tested in populating the typology for six distinct policy communities, defined by policy area (governance, agricultural science) and country (Kenya, India and the Philippines).

The research process confirmed that a wide range of organisations with different profiles occupied the diverse policy communities. While the policy community in agricultural science was homogenous, it was completely distinct from the governance community, and within the governance policy area the research communities bore very different imprints in each of the countries examined. It follows that a single coherent typology will be extremely difficult to develop, since organisations working in each research area will be expressed in very different forms.

Case study selection

We sought to identify a set of research organisations to collaborate with us who would reflect that diversity of types of research organisation – university centres, public institutes, civil society groups, etc. The method of case study selection was piloted first in a regional feasibility study, before being adapted to a national level. To make the approach manageable, the methodology followed Sabatier (1988) to understand policy communities as occurring at a “subsystem” level, as being contested and typically embedded in national systems.

Identification of subsystems

Our methodology for identifying research organisations followed Sabatier (1988) by understanding research as political and research organisations as typically embedded in advocacy coalitions. According to this conception, within a sector there will be a number of policy subsystems which include “actors at various levels of government active in policy formulation and implementation, as well as journalists, researchers and policy analysts who play important roles in the generation, dissemination and evaluation of policy ideas” (Sabatier 1988, 131).

These actors can be aggregated into a number of advocacy coalitions, each of whose members “share a set of normative and causal beliefs and who often act in concert” (although between which there will frequently not be consensus on key policy issues). Policy subsystems were defined by disciplinary sector and country. We therefore started from the perspective that research organisations would be based in diverse “policy subsystems”, defined in terms of national¹ responses to a particular field or sector.

Two broad sectors were selected – agricultural science and governance (which had already been included in the typology exercise) – on the basis of the difference in nature of the research conducted. Thus agricultural science is driven by scientific research and technological innovation, including technological investigations in the highly contested area of the application of genetic technology. Governance, in contrast, was identified as a highly politicised area where research concentrated on understanding society, and the accountability, shape and constitution of the state both locally and nationally.

Notes on the selection of agricultural science and governance

Agricultural science: Agricultural science, and particularly application of the modern developments in the fields of biotechnology, proved to be a hotly contested field. In the course of this research project, the food security “crisis” broke in the mainstream media, and efforts of the international institutes to provide technical advances which would resolve the crisis by offering a “gene revolution”, similar in scope to the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, redoubled. Several issues could be identified in this field, many of them to do with the role of biotechnology in research (heavily restricted, unrestricted, or harnessed to pro-poor perspectives) and the impact post-Green Revolution economies (at least in India and the Philippines) has had on rural populations.

Governance: ‘Governance’ has grown as a distinct field, particularly in the field of aid and development interventions, where governance specialists and governance-focused organisations, such as the One World Trust, are common. Governance, however, is a cross-cutting field, which penetrates into every sphere of public activity and every field of research. As such, there was no discrete governance discourse or subsystem, in the sense meant by

¹ While debates are increasingly international (see e.g. Carden and Nielson 2005), through a pilot we observed that the decision-makers remained national, and the advocacy coalitions, while sharing information across borders, focused on national issues.

Sabatier, in any of the three countries we studied. Governance debates were interwoven throughout. Thus a governance failure in the field of health will not necessarily be debated solely by governance experts, but by health experts too. No common epistemology may exist. Nor is governance governed by any single discipline: our research identified human rights groups, economists, civil society organisations focused on empowerment and participatory methodologies, public administration experts and lawyers all engaged in the field. This is not to say that ‘policy issues’ could not be characterised as ‘governance’ issues. Decentralisation narratives were hotly debated in all three countries. In Kenya, it formed the core of the disputed election; in India, the recently-promulgated Right to Information Act (2005) offered to civil society organisations a tool whose use and even existence was still under debate; and in all three countries, government capacity and corruption were matters of concern and their mitigation an issue of considerable importance. All are ‘governance’ issues – it’s just that these are also cross-cutting debates regarding process and authority which exist in all sectors.

Table 3: Engaged Organisations

Type	Agricultural Science	Governance
International Public	International Rice Research Institute	World Bank, Development Research Group
International non-profit	International Institute for Environment and Development (*) (United Kingdom)	
International private	Monsanto(**)	
National Public	Kenya Agricultural Research Institute	Congressional Budget and Planning Department (Philippines)
		Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA)
		Philippines Institute for Development Studies (PIDS)
National Private	Marsman Drysdale Biotechnology and Research Corporation (Philippines)	
National Non-profit	Gene Campaign (India)	Centre for Governance and Development (Kenya)
	The Energy and Resources Institute (India)	Kenya Human Rights Commission
		Public Affairs Centre (India)
		Society for Participatory Research in Asia (India)
University	Tegemeo Institute for Agricultural Policy and Development (Kenya)	La Salle Institute of Governance, De La Salle University
(*) The IIED was approached opportunistically.		
(**) Monsanto did not engage with the project. Our findings are based on secondary research.		

Three countries were selected: Kenya, India and the Philippines. These were chosen on a combination of objective and subjective reasons – they are culturally different, have very different economic profiles, and are all English speaking countries.

Identification of policy “issues”

Each subsystem contains a set of strategic issues which are contested by various advocacy coalitions (Sabatier 1988). These often employ different disciplines and are founded on different values. The approach was therefore to construct a picture of the policy communities by identifying the important issues. This allowed us to identify the main advocacy coalitions addressing the issues. To identify issues and advocacy coalitions we used two techniques:

(1) we identified relevant academic literature emerging in the areas; (2) we interviewed key informants engaged in the policy subsystem.

These established the main contested policy issues and the orientation of advocacy coalitions. Approaching organisations through the broader policy context was felt necessary because the accountability of organisations is dependent on their position in advocacy coalitions. Their relationship with different stakeholders will be determined by their context.

Identification of collaborating organisations

Having determined the key policy issues and advocacy coalitions, we then identified organisations that generated research and analysis to support or attack these narratives, using internet “snowball” research (searching for participants in workshops, publications, exploring network members, and following website links) and key informant interviews as the primary tools. These were scored on the basis of their research scope and formal status. From the groups of research organisations we identified in this process, we selected twenty. These were chosen to represent the most common accountability profiles.

We approached each, and invited them to participate. Where our invitation was declined, we proceeded to another research organisation which, insofar as possible, had the same profile. In the end, we were able to work with sixteen organisations.

Engagement with collaborating research organisations

For each collaborating organisation we analysed the publicly available information, including strategic documents, policy documents and research products. We then identified senior research managers in collaboration with the management of the organisation. For each we interviewed them using a semi-structured interview over the telephone. These interviews addressed their accountability and processes of interaction with the research community. The interview teased out information on the transparency, participation, evaluation and feedback mechanisms they had in place. It also invited an understanding of who their stakeholders were, and what tensions they felt between the interests of their different stakeholders. It also explored possible obstacles to putting accountability into practice? On the basis of these interviews, we invited them to contribute specific case studies, which, where appropriate, are included in Part 4 of this report.

Online forum

An online forum was held to explore with experts and practitioners their perspectives on accountability and, in particular, their stakeholders. The two questions posed were as follows:

- Who are the stakeholders of a research organisation? Open from 25 February to 14 March 2008.
- How should research organisations engage with and be accountable to their stakeholders? Open from the 3 March to the 14 March.

Username and passwords were provided by email to all those who requested them. Only the administrator could start new topics. Members could post responses to any of the topics, which were shown in thread format. Non-members could see the forum but had no other access or interaction privileges. A total of 122 participants from across the world received usernames. A substantial interest was generated, with in excess of 5500 views of the topics. Twenty-six substantive posts were added to the forum, in addition to the introductory posts made by some contributors. The forum was advertised through a variety of means, chiefly web-serve lists and the newsletters of the One World Trust and International Development Research Centre, and those interested were invited to participate.

Project Outputs and Dissemination

Main Report

Accountability principles for Research organisations – Report, November 2008

Accountability principles for Research organisations – Toolkit, November 2008

Accountability principles for Research organisations - Executive Summary, November 2008

Participatory research and communications

Engagement and interviews, January to April 2008

Online Forum, February to March 2008

Feedback of Research Organisations on the draft report, June to October 2008

Harmonizing donor practices and accountability, presentation at the American Public Health Association Annual Conference, San Diego, October 2008

Can we measure democracy? The politics of measurement and accountability of research and standard setters, presentation at a panel event at the London School of Economics, November 2008

Exploring the science of complexity in aid policy and practice, Participation in discussion, July 2008

Complexity in aid: strategy in a complex world? Participation in discussion at CAFOD, January 2009

Global go-to think-tanks: what works where? Participation in discussion at Overseas Development Institute, March 2009

Project documents

Annotated Bibliography, December 2008

Online Forum Report, April 2008

Papers and other publications

Stretched in all directions: the demands, pulls and pressures acting on policy research organisations, January 2008

Interpreting the state of the art: transparency and accountability of policy research institutes, Accountability in Action, April 2008

Evaluation of academic research quality, Accountability in Practice, Accountability in Action, April 2008

Who do you work for? Establishing a better match between justifications of research and effective accountability to claimed beneficiaries, May 2008

Spotlight: Accountability Principles for Research organisations, Accountability in Action Newsletter, November 2008

Accountable Lobbying of Parliament, a reaction to the Select Committee Report on Lobbying in Whitehall; supporting transparency and limiting opportunity for inappropriate lobbying, January 2009

Instrumental benefits to accountability for technological and policy relevant research in developing countries – a literature review, including case studies from the agricultural science and health sectors, for submission in April 2009

Adapting the Global Accountability Framework for use with Research Organisations – lessons learnt and methodological considerations, forthcoming, April 2009

The implications of normative and instrumental considerations of accountability of research, forthcoming, April 2009,

Outcomes

As noted above, the initial proposal specifies three objectives: the first two, being concerned with an overall research framework, will be treated together, before addressing the last.

Objectives 1 and 2: developing a framework for research accountability

The research was underpinned by three key conceptual advances (the need for which being unclear at the outset of the project): first, developing a conceptual distinction between normative and instrumental principles of accountability; second, applying the principles of accountability to different *processes* within the organisation; and third, moving beyond 'impact' as the nexus of normative accountability (difficult given the diffuse nature of accountability), and towards 'claims'. The most significant outcomes of the project, therefore, have been to deepen the understanding of what an overall conception of accountability may mean. In more detail, our research suggests that accountability offers two different forms of benefit to research organisations. The first form expresses the normative or ethical reasons prompting accountability; the second way comprises the instrumental reasons or practical advantages that a research organisation may accrue if it implements the principles of accountability in its key decision-making processes.

Normative reasons for accountability: Throughout its life, a research organisation will form relationships to different stakeholders through its actions. Some of these actions will trigger the need for accountability, based on normative principles. There are three core forms of accountability:

- Formal accountability: Core or "traditional" accountability relationships are founded on legal obligations or contractual commitments to donors and partners made by the organisation. They are formal in nature, expressly stated, and their ethical roots lie in the contract or formal rule which creates them.
- Claims: Accountability relationships may be triggered when a research organisation makes a claim of a particular sort, whereby it purports through this claim to the wider policy community to be acting as an agent on behalf of another. These include: claims to benefit a particular group through its research; claims to represent a group or community; and – when advocating for policy change – claims that their research is objective. We argue that all of these claims create a form of accountability relationship.
- Impact: We argue that if an organisation has an impact on a person or group then the research organisation should be accountable to the person or group for harm that they may cause, particularly if there are no other means of recourse.

Our research concludes that each accountability relationship creates a link to a particular stakeholder – just as a contract only creates obligations within the contracting parties, so for example a claim to be working to benefit a group only triggers the need for accountability to that group.

Instrumental benefits for accountability: While the normative reasons for accountability are based on ethical arguments, the instrumental motives for accountability are rooted in a practical understanding of how research can best impact policy. Organisations which are accountable – which are participative, transparent, who conduct evaluations and invite feedback – are more likely to be effective than those who are unaccountable.

The justification for this statement lies in the evolving understanding of the role of research in policy communities and innovation systems. Increasingly, studies have shown that policy and innovations processes are not linear: research is rarely successfully transferred to the users in a complete form. Often its uptake and use is subtler. Frequently, a successful policy research programme will "percolate" slowly, acting to reframe the debate, to change the

terminology, and to shift the narratives. For the uptake of the research to be maximised, our literature review shows that studies increasingly emphasise that research organisations should interact with the wider policy community from the beginning of the research. They should ensure that their research is tailored to the needs of the policy-makers and the research community. To do this, links to the policy-makers, which may be developed through participative processes, are vital. Similarly with technological research and innovation, involvement of the end users is vital. High quality research outputs can also have important intermediate impacts – not only amongst the policy-makers, but also in the behaviour of the wider policy community. They can act to change policy by involving the wider policy community through persistent communication, and through continually engaging in the debate.

Increasingly, in both policy-oriented and technological research, networks and partnerships are used to plan, conduct and communicate research, drawing on a wider set of stakeholders. Networks and partnerships offer special relationships and open communication channels which can be used by organisations to increase the impact of their research. An organisation which follows the principles of accountability – transparency, participation, evaluation and feedback handling – will, according to the developing good practices, be more likely to be successful.

Challenges and tensions in research accountability: While there are significant benefits to accountability, both normative and instrumental, accountability can also pose challenges to a research organisation. The APRO I report presents a study of the practices and policies of sixteen diverse research organisations, working in the fields of agricultural science and governance. The challenges and tensions in accountability may be arranged according to two sets of characteristics: the first set describes obstacles deriving from the formal status of the organisation; the second set is those that stem from the type of research conducted by the organisation.

Formal status and the alignment of stakeholder: The formal structure of the organisation will tend to determine what types of claims the organisation makes, and thus the nature of the balancing act they must make in prioritising different stakeholder groups. Thus private companies will often only claim to benefit their clients or stakeholders (although we found that, due perhaps to the rise in importance of “corporate social responsibility”, companies also make such broader ‘public benefit’ type of claims); public organisations focus their claims on the government bodies who form the main market for their research; and non-profits will often make explicit claims that they are acting to benefit a group of people.

The interests of key groups of stakeholders - funders, policy-makers and claimed beneficiaries – tend to align in different ways for different organisations. Where the interests of funders and claimed beneficiaries do not align, for example, research organisations face the threat that the donor dictates the terms of the research project (rather than the project being determined by its relevance to its claimed beneficiaries). Other organisations expressed the need to ‘manage’ their independence where they were perceived to have too close a relationship to a funder or, in the case of some public organisations, a government policy-maker. In dealing with the application of accountability principles to organisation’s processes, the report addresses these challenges.

Expertise and the space for participation: Our research suggests that another set of challenges to accountability were caused by the expertise of the research organisation. For a research organisation to be a sustainable and effective organisation, it will normally occupy a research niche for which they will be the experts. By virtue of the same expertise that makes a research organisation sustainable, the ‘space’ for participation is restricted. The challenge to accountability is to allow laypeople to participate meaningfully in the decision-

making processes of an organisation. In particular, those organisations which rely on mastery of complex causal models will limit the space for meaningful participation to any but fellow experts. We explore how this challenge can be overcome. The growth of participatory methodologies shows that the range of actors with substantive contributions to offer has become broadened. The value of 'indigenous' expertise is increasingly recognised. Moreover, opportunities will remain to engage stakeholders in discussion of the values of a research organisation, and its intended goals.

Applying accountability in key processes: Our research explores how the principles of accountability can be applied to overcome these challenges in the context of nine processes. The processes were identified in the course of our case studies as being common to most research organisations. It also offers guidelines for formulating an information release and a complaints handling policy.

Objective 3: Building a community of practice

- Objective: build interest and engagement with IDRC programs and RIs that are interested to further strengthen their accountability

The initial phase of creating a community of practice remains in its initial phase. There has been initial progress has been made in initiating the community of practice:

- Of the fifteen organisations engaged in the initial research, five have expressed initial interest in engaging in the next phase. Feedback from the organisations engaged in the research phase has been positive about the relevance and quality of the research.
- The time-bound online discussion moderated by the project team resulted in positive feedback and interest. Some participants remain engaged in the project.
- At several stages of the research, links were developed to IDRC programme staff in offices.

However, the community of practice remains in its infancy. Several reasons may be put forward for this:

1. The research covers an extremely wide field, which comprises a number of communities of practice – such as those of monitoring and evaluation of research, participatory research techniques. Rather than build a community of practice, therefore, the project must *link in* with existing communities of practice.
2. The diversity of organisations for which APRO may be relevant is vast. The research entailed challenges in formulating the overall framework for accountability, and consequently is framed at a level of abstraction. This presents challenges in boiling the research down to specific examples.
3. The critical path of the research entailed the majority of key findings to be developed by the end of the project, which meant it was difficult to generate support on provisional information.

Much more work needs to be done to follow-up on the interest generated. The project is therefore making ongoing efforts to develop the academic credibility of the research and to raise awareness of the research and its implications.

Overall assessment and recommendations

Assessment

- The research framework is useful, robust, widely applicable, and a solid starting point for organisations wanting to consider their accountability in the context of research. This takes into account the breadth of applicability of the APRO framework, the wide ranging nature of the project, and the fact that it covers a number of existing communities of practice.
 - The framework's added value lies in its broad overview of these areas, and tying each into a holistic and integrated framework, which will enable research organisations to balance their different stakeholders.
- While the degree of abstraction of the APRO framework was necessary given the breadth of the objectives, it now requires more focused and practical work.
 - More work needs to be done on communication and developing the research framework to specific types of organisation, and communicating to these organisations the utility of the research in a useful manner.
 - To capitalise properly on the framework, toolkits should be made more specific to different types of research organisations.
 - We are currently applying for a second phase of funding which will look, broadly, at think-tanks working in developing countries.
 - Other projects for which we are seeking funding will construct toolkits specifically for community advocacy and for lobbying groups.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations for a second phase of funding for APRO. Much of the value of Accountability Principles for Research Organisations is to form a platform for future research. Further research might therefore usefully include:

- A second phase of APRO should produce a compendium of research good practices
 - This will reinterpret existing research tools and norms – including those in the fields of research ethics, participatory research, research evaluation, network theory – in the light of the accountability framework.
 - The compendium will be used to supplement the guidelines and tools identified during APRO 1.
 - The compendium will focus on linking into existing online communities of practice, and will develop a wiki to ensure that this takes place.
- While APRO 1 offers a robust framework, the framework still needs to be tested and applied on a practical level.
 - A second phase of APRO will build on the guidelines outlined in APRO 1. It will focus on adapting the guidelines to the practical context pertaining in each of our partner organisations.
 - It will focus on a specific type of research organisation: think-tanks and research centres. In the meantime, funding will be sought for other projects to develop the APRO guidelines in the context of advocacy organisations,
 - It will strive to develop practical and tested guidelines, in cooperation with well-respected research organisations, which carry credibility in the wider research community. To do this, it will engage with research organisations which have different stakeholder profiles and different research disciplines.