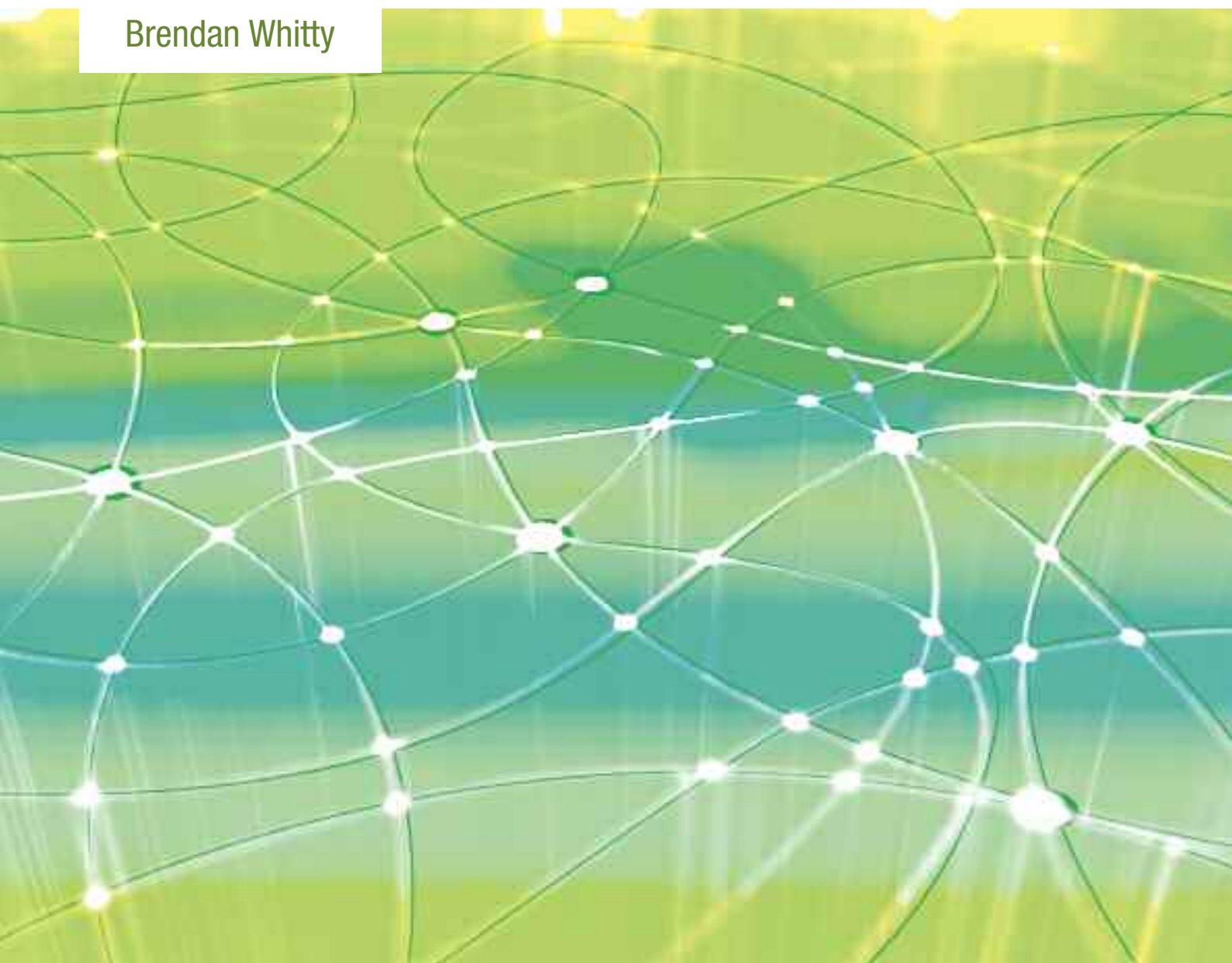




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Accountability Principles for Research Organisations

Brendan Whitty



TOOLKIT

The **One World Trust** is an independent think tank that conducts research, develops recommendations and advocates for reform to make policy and decision-making processes in global governance more accountable to the people they affect now and in the future, and to ensure that international laws are strengthened and applied equally to all.

The project **Accountability Principles for Research Institutes (APRI)** was initiated to explore the meaning and use of concepts of accountability amongst organisations that conduct research which individually and jointly proves in many cases highly influential in the formation of public policy. These organisations come from a wide range of backgrounds. Yet in many cases, researchers, their work processes and their outputs remain relatively invisible, and there is to date no common understanding of accountability principles which touch on the different stages of the research process and the relationships it entails with a broad range of stakeholders.



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Accountability Toolkit for Research Organisations

Brendan Whitty

This toolkit provides a set of good accountability practices for research organisations working in developing countries. The good practices are based on four key principles of accountability: participation, evaluation, transparency and feedback management.

Drawing on a study conducted with sixteen research organisations, which reflect the diversity of innovators and evidence-gatherers in developing countries, we have identified nine processes which are common to most research organisations and which offer opportunities for improved accountability. We also present two key policies which can help research managers to structure and formalise their accountability.

For each process, we indicate why it is important and what the benefits of accountability might be for the research organisation. We provide suggestions for implementing the principles of accountability in each process while noting the challenges and tensions which organisations may face.

Principles of accountability for research organisations

What do we mean by accountability?

The meaning of the word “accountability” has been stretched as it is applied to an ever-widening set of circumstances. Traditionally, it referred to an agent rendering account to his principal for the activities carried out on the principal’s behalf. This assumed an actual contract between them, giving the agent authority to act on the principal’s behalf, and conferring on the principal the power to demand that the agent render an account. Nowadays the media often say that particular organisations, industries or people should be “held to account” or “more accountable” for their actions, without necessarily implying the existence of a prior recognised accountability relationship. Thus, “accountability” now includes “softer” and non-legally binding duties; it includes the process by which the scope of the authority was defined and negotiated; from denoting an exclusive relationship between two parties, it now has reference to wider engagement.

The One World Trust has formulated the following definition:

“[Accountability is] the processes through which an organisation makes a commitment to respond to and balance the needs of stakeholders in its decision-making processes and activities, and delivers against this commitment.”

(One World Trust, Pathways to Accountability, 2005, 20).

The stakeholders of an organisation are those to whom an organisation is accountable. “Corporate stakeholder analysis” argues that a corporation has a variety of stakeholders beyond simply the shareholders who have formally “bought into” the company. While this was one of the first conceptualisations, most managers look beyond clients and donors to other key people who can impact on their work, so that the principle applies to among others research organisations, be they corporations, civil society, university institutes, think-tanks or the like. Caution is necessary however. The usefulness of “stakeholder” as a word is precisely in its lack of content: it means no more than “an actor who has an interest in or recognisable claim on another actor”.

Four principles of accountability

Informed by the *Global Accountability Framework* (One World Trust, 2005), we start with four principles of accountability:

- **Participation** concerns the way in which an organisation involves stakeholders in its decision-making processes and activities. Participation gives stakeholders a voice in the activities of the organisation, creating ownership of the results – and thus a greater likelihood of uptake and legitimacy.
- **Evaluation** comprises those processes by which an organisation reflects on its activities. Evaluation frameworks enable organisations to learn from their experiences, and only through a transparent evaluation process can a research organisation report on its activities.
- **Transparency** describes the way in which an organisation makes available information about their activities and aims. With research organisations, this may include the information that they collect, which they analyse and which forms the evidence-basis for their policy recommendations. It will also include information about their work, their expertise and their key stakeholders.
- **Feedback mechanisms** describe the way in which an organisation invites comments and critique of its activities. A feedback mechanism allows stakeholders to comment and if necessary require redress for past acts.

Benefits of accountability

Before developing the application of these principles, we will discuss the benefits that may accrue to research organisations from being accountable. These benefits we divide in two: the first is the normative or ethical reasons prompting accountability, while the second comprises the instrumental reasons or practical advantages that an accountable research organisation may have. Each argues that a research organisation will benefit from engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, consulting them, communicating with them, and inviting their feedback.

Normative benefits of accountability

Ethically, it is important for research organisations to be accountable. We have identified a series of “triggers” or “sources” of accountability. Three groups may be identified.

1. *Formal transfers of authority*: Most of the core or “traditional” accountability relationships are founded on legal accountability obligations or contractual commitments to donors and partners made by the organisation.
2. *Claims*: Accountability relationships may be triggered when a research organisation makes a claim of a particular sort, whereby it represents itself to the wider policy community to be acting in the interests of another. These include claims to benefit a particular group through its research, claims to represent a group or community and claims to objectivity. We argue that all of these claims create accountability relationships. Throughout the processes described below, we emphasise one group in particular amongst these: the “claimed beneficiaries”. These are the people and communities in whose interests the organisation claims to be acting.
3. *Impact*: We argue that if a research organisation has an impact on a person or group, particularly if the person or group has no other means of recourse, then the research organisation should be accountable to the person or group.

Instrumental benefits of accountability

The instrumental motives for accountability have developed from an understanding of how research can best serve policy. The argument is that organisations who are accountable in the relevant sense – who are participative and transparent, and who conduct evaluations and invite feedback – are more likely to be effective than those who are closed in their operations.

The justification for this statement lies in the evolving understanding of research organisations. Research seldom changes policy in a single blow. Increasingly studies have shown that policy processes are not linear: research is not transferred to the users in complete report form. Often its uptake and use is subtler. Frequently, a successful research programme will “percolate” slowly, acting to reframe the debate, to change the terminology, and to shift the narratives. For the uptake to be maximised, studies emphasise the importance of interacting with the wider policy community from the beginning of the research, to ensure that it is tailored to the needs of the policy-makers and the research community. To do this, links to the policy-makers, developed through participative processes, are vital.

While prevailing political pressures can mean that high quality research outputs are ignored, such outputs can nevertheless have intermediate impacts – not necessarily on the policy-makers, but rather on the behaviour of the wider policy community. They can act to change policy by involving the wider policy community through persistent communication, and debate, for example by the increased use of networks and research partnerships to plan, conduct and communicate research. These offer special relationships and open communication channels. An organisation which follows the principles of accountability – transparency, participation, evaluation and feedback management – will therefore normally meet the necessary criteria for a successful research organisation.

Policies and processes

This toolkit describes applications of the four principles of accountability to a series of key processes common to most research organisations. For each process, we establish how they may be participative and transparent. To this we add a specific process for evaluation (and how it can be participative and transparent). Finally, we address two policies – one, the information release policy, deals with a specific commitment to transparency. The other, complaints handling, addresses the final principle, that of feedback management.

For each process, we describe the benefits of accountability, possible challenges faced in implementing accountability, and offer some practical measures which organisations may adopt. Where appropriate, we highlight some key tools that have been developed which can be employed by organisations to improve their accountability. We complete the section with a discussion of two specific policies which can benefit from formal commitments.

Process 1: Defining the strategic plan

The strategic plan of an organisation is a vital document and marks the end product of an important process. It will **interpret the organisation's mission, identify the goals and objectives** of the organisation, and **set clear means by which they will be achieved**. We describe here the role of accountability in the process of drafting the document and in its final form.

Benefits of accountability

The strategic plan defines the “research niche” which the organisation will occupy. This comprises the specific expertise of the research organisation. The chief role of accountability is in encouraging the participation of key stakeholders in the formulation of the strategic plan. This ensures that the research niche is relevant to the interests of the following stakeholders:

- *Internal stakeholders:* The buy-in of internal stakeholders to the strategy will be important for the successful positioning of the research organisation. Two benefits arise: first, by engaging them, the research organisation will draw on their expertise and insight. It will often be useful to consider close external partners as well. Second, participation fosters ownership and belief in the goals and objectives of the strategic plan.
- *Claimed beneficiaries:* By offering the opportunity to participate in the formulation of the strategy to their intended or claimed beneficiaries, a research organisation can ensure the relevance of their work to their intended (or “claimed”) beneficiaries.
- *Research users and policy-makers:* For policy-uptake to take place, organisations may consider consulting research users and policy-makers in order to ensure that the research strategy addresses relevant questions and policy issues.

The strategic plan positions the organisation and defines where its competitive edge lies, in part to ensure its long-term sustainability. To cement this, understanding the market will be important to ensure that it is financially sustainable. By engaging with key donors and clients, organisations can help establish their financial sustainability.

Challenges and tensions

The valuable and sometimes unique expertise possessed by most research organisations can present challenges in participation when experts try to talk about their specific subject-matter to laypersons. Researchers working in an organisation may feel that engaging laypersons is of small use.

The strategic plan is both an example of this problem, and offers a solution to it. As an example of the problem, the strategic plan will often comprise an expression of both values/objectives and technical positions – the latter being inaccessible to laypersons. As a solution to the problem, the strategic plan provides the

possibility of engaging key stakeholders on its values and objectives, subjects on which laypersons can engage meaningfully.

Practical measures

- Have you ensured internal stakeholders have engaged in the process, and have had the opportunity for substantive input?
- Have you ensured the relevance of your strategic plan to the claimed beneficiaries?
- Have you considered the financial sustainability of your strategic plan? Do you need to engage with specific key clients or donors?
- Have you engaged stakeholders at an appropriate level? Have you opened both technical expertise and the organisation's values to discussion?
- In defining values, have you identified a “space for participation” – do you render explicit both non-negotiable values, as well as those which may be open to discussion.
- Has the strategy been published on your website?
- Do you make clear your intent in policy change, and the research and innovation activities you conduct?
- Is it necessary to make special efforts to communicate the strategy to your claimed research beneficiaries/end-users, research communities, partners and fellow coalition members?
- Have you set a clear process by which the strategy can be revisited? Do you conduct ongoing organisational assessments to facilitate this?

Practical tools

Financial sustainability: the SWOT tool (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) may be used to assist organisations to design their strategy to capitalise on their strengths, while understanding and negating any weaknesses in their positioning.

Stakeholder identification: There are a number of tools which aid organisations to map complex policy networks, which can assist the identification of claimed beneficiaries and policy-makers to address. These will help to position the organisation in the policy community. **Social network analyses** are tools rooted in social science to understand networks. **Actor linkage maps** and **actor linkage matrices** enable an organisation to understand the links that exist between its own actors and other stakeholders.

Process 2: Defining programmatic structure

Many research organisations are structured by **programme**, whereby each programme comprises a reservoir of expertise containing staff members with more or less homogeneous disciplinary backgrounds reflecting and refining the research niche that the research organisation wants to occupy. We consider here the role of accountability in formulating these programmes, and in the interactions between such programmes.

Benefits of accountability

The programmes of a research organisation structure what expertise the organisation will bring to bear to achieve the goals and aims specified in the strategy. Its formulation will often be addressed at the same time as the formulation of the strategic plan. However, the programmatic structure may need to develop in a more flexible manner than that of the strategic plan, and should therefore be reviewed more frequently than the strategy.

In the formulation of the programmatic structure, participation and consultation can be useful to ensure that it is fit for the purpose for which it is designed. This may involve regular refinements to each programme's terms of reference and direction.

Accountability therefore provides the research organisation the opportunity to open a more technical discussion about how expertise will be applied to the values and mission of the organisation. The technical nature of the discussion, framed in terms of the necessary expertise to achieve the goals, means that the stakeholders will usually be experts:

- *Internal stakeholders:* Engaging internal stakeholders in defining the research programmes, and setting their boundaries, will be invaluable. This may be streamlined into the process of defining the strategy plan.
- *Research partners:* Partners can offer valuable support in this process. Partners will offer expertise not possessed by the research organisation and will therefore be able to provide insight into the formulation of the programmatic structure.
- *Policy-makers, research users:* Have you ongoing processes by which the research products of the programmes are evaluated for the relevance to research users and policy-makers?
- *Donors, clients:* Managers of this process may usefully take into account the perspective of the donors and clients, and what types of research they will fund. By consulting these stakeholders, the organisation can reinforce its financial sustainability.

Since the discussion will mostly be framed in technical terms, it is less useful to engage laypersons – including often the claimed beneficiaries.

Practical measures

- Do you consider what other research is being produced, by whom, and what that means for your organisation in terms of possible partners or competition?
- Do you have processes by which the research users and policy-makers are systematically revisited and asked what research they need? While the strategy plan will remain the same over the long-term, it may be useful to ensure that processes are put in place to revisit and review the position in the research network, and the interests of their clients.
- Do you actively communicate the expertise and services your research organisation provides to donors and clients? Do you have a way of doing this in a systematic fashion?
- Do your internal processes encourage communication across programmes, interdisciplinary approaches to problems and joint work on projects?
- Do you require special group and organisational meetings, common filing systems, modifications to internal reporting structures or special training in sharing information?
- As with all key decision-making processes, we argue that the process for defining the structure should itself be transparently set forth.
- Do you expressly state your programmatic structure on your website?
- Do you make available the curriculum vitae of your staff, specifying their expertise and their areas of interest?
- Do you make specific efforts to communicate your expertise to specific clients or funders?

Process 3: Forming partnerships and engaging in networks

Links to the wider policy community can help organisations harness additional external expertise in their innovations and research. **Partnerships and networks provide clear channels enabling the communication of research.** Communication and transparency are both central to a strong partnership or networks. Here we discuss accountability – in terms of consultation, transparency and evaluation – in the context of the bundle of processes involved in engaging in partnerships and networks.

Benefits of accountability

Research and innovation – both in the “North” and the developing world – are gradually moving away from in-house research that takes place in fenced-off research silos, towards more collaborative research projects. Partnerships improve research by harnessing the different expertise and knowledge that exists between organisations to build a stronger research team.

These collaborations with external organisations through partnerships and networks require strong accountability processes to ensure their sustainability. This is because each partner relies on the other, and since they will typically involve organisations which will have different perspectives.

Challenges and tensions

Partnerships are formed to bring in expertise an organisation does not have. The positive differences in research expertise between partners may come packaged with more challenging differences – in organisational culture, in aims, approaches and practices. Partnerships can also act to constrain research independence, particularly for a smaller organisation offering, for example, its context-specific knowledge to an influential larger research institution. To the extent that the project sets goals and responsibilities, it limits the possibility of flexibility.

Who can be a partner?

Partnerships entail harnessing the expertise of other organisations to aid research. Increasingly, however, development practitioners are realising that meaningful partnerships can be forged with a broadening range of organisations.

In agricultural science, for example, public organisations tended to structure their relationships with universities. More recently, however, they are increasingly forging relationships with private companies on the one hand, and with farmers’ groups on the other. Both offer expertise – the companies in the form of technical expertise, the farmers the context knowledge of those who comprise the “end users” of their innovations (those who use the improved agricultural inputs or new farming techniques or tools) that they have developed.

Good consultation and transparency practices in the formulation and conclusion of the partnership agreement can minimise the potential challenges and tensions that can sometimes arise from a close collaboration between research organisations.

Practical measures

- Are you clear about what values and goals the partnership has, including the proposed beneficiary of any piece of research?
- Are both you and your partner transparent about the expertise and experience of your personnel?
- Are you transparent about your expectations?
- In conducting your partnership, have you engaged in collaborative discussion of research planning (see Process 5) with your partner?
- Have you canvassed donors or other sources of funds to ensure sustainability?
- Is it clear from the agreement by whom precisely each research activity is being conducted, and who is responsible for each deliverable? Is there a mechanism for reporting these?
- Are the communications channels clearly established between the partners, including regular meetings and contact people?
- Are you clear at which ‘vertical’ level integration occurs? Have you specified clearly who will interact with whom, and at which level?
- An inter-partner advisory board or steering committee may be useful as a coordinating and transparency mechanism.
- Do you have a clear evaluation framework which sets out duties for evaluation of research outputs, outcomes and inputs (see Process 6)?
- Is it clear who has intellectual property and publication rights for the product of the research?

Networks

This section has dealt primarily with partners. Networks constitute a less intense collaboration to partnerships, but one to which many of the same principles apply. Thus transparency in communication channels, clear expressions of values and expectations and good management are all vital.

Process 4: Identifying research priorities

Accountability plays an important role in the identification and prioritisation of research projects, focusing on the need to consult and balance the interests of their internal goals, their claimed beneficiaries, and funders in the preparation of their research agenda.

Benefits of accountability

In identifying and prioritising research projects, there are two primary goals to be balanced: first that the research agenda is relevant to the claimed beneficiaries, second that the projects are financially sustainable, and will be able to meet their objectives in the long run.

Accountability in prioritising research will involve engaging with the following groups:

- **Claimed beneficiaries:** Conducting accountable and transparent assessments of the needs of beneficiaries can ensure the relevance of the projects. The participation of claimed beneficiaries can therefore be invaluable to further the aims of the organisation. Of course, those who do not have claimed beneficiaries have no such obligations.
- **Donors/clients:** To guarantee the financial sustainability of the project, it will normally have to be tailored to the interests, agendas and goals of donors. By engaging them in the process, an organisation is more likely to get them on board, and to develop common interests and goals.
- **Internal stakeholders:** By drawing on the insight and expertise of the researchers working within the programmes, research organisations can help to formulate convincing projects which are tailored to the real needs of the claimed beneficiaries and donors. This will also encourage internal buy-in into the project.

Challenges and tensions

Accountability in the process of identifying research priorities involves balancing the need to be relevant to its claimed

Supply and demand-led modes of identifying projects

In our study with research organisations (see Accountability Principles of Research Organisations, One World Trust, 2008), it transpired that there was a wide range of ways in which projects were identified: on the basis of technical criteria identified by the researchers themselves (internal supply-led), community-prompted (beneficiary supply-led) or donor/client driven (demand-led). Most organisations contained a balance of supply and demand-led projects, or had projects defined by the negotiation and cooperation between donor and research organisation. The role of accountability is in how priorities between seeking and deciding on funding are set.

beneficiaries and the need to be financially sustainable. For those who do claim to work in the interests of a particular set of beneficiaries, there is 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.

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 the rise of “corporate social responsibility” increasingly means companies also make some claims); public organisations focus their claims on the government bodies which form the main market for their research; non-profit organisations will often make explicit claims that they are acting to benefit a group of people.

Participatory and transparent processes, including the definition of the strategic plan, programme design and research prioritisation can help to ensure that the needs of both donors and claimed beneficiaries are met.

Practical measures

- Do you allow claimed beneficiaries to contribute to the prioritisation of research needs and the identification of research projects?
- Have you ensured that your researchers are trained to use appropriate participatory methods to identify and assess the research needs?
- Do you have ongoing interactions with key funders to ensure the relevance of your research prioritisation?
- If your “claimed beneficiaries” consist of a large or indefinite group (e.g. “the poor of the world”; “children in Africa”, etc.) have you considered how to access these groups for their needs?
- Do you encourage your researchers to recommend projects? Do you have processes for this?
- To the extent that you use purely internal expertise and technical criteria for identification of priorities, do you test these methodologies by peer review?
- Are the method of identifying research needs and the prioritisation of policy processes openly advertised to claimed beneficiaries and funders?

Process 5: Planning research projects

Closely related to the identification of research priorities is the process by which research proposals are planned, once the needs have been identified (process 4 above).

Benefits of accountability

Accountability in the planning process can strengthen the relevance of the research, by engaging with actors in the policy community and building on their expertise and insight. Engaging with several specific stakeholders can help the relevance of the project.

- *Policy makers and research users:* By engaging the policy-makers or research users early in the research, the research organisation can ensure the relevance of the research to their needs. This will foster ownership of the research amongst these key stakeholders, and will therefore help to improve the project's impact. This will improve the likelihood of the uptake of the project's outputs.
- *Claimed beneficiaries:* As with previous processes (Process 1 and 4 above), engaging claimed beneficiaries in the planning process will help to ensure the relevance of the project to their needs, and thus to the aims and goals of the organisation.
- *Donors/clients:* Research managers may wish to engage potential donors and clients. The value of this will be linked to the funding structure of the organisation and whether they require funds for specific projects or have core or unallocated funds.

Challenges and tensions

Traditional planning techniques strive to work backwards from the desired result a set of activities which will bring the result about, through logical deduction. The complex nature of policy processes presents a challenge to this approach to planning,

Featured tools: 'Innovation histories' and most significant change

These are both methods for recording and reflecting on an innovation process, and on noting how impact occurred. An Innovation history is a means for recording and reflecting on an innovation process and tracking successes and failures, with a view to take their understanding forward.

The "most significant change" (Davies and Dart 2005) techniques provide a method which identifies positive changes in past projects and the way that these changes happened. It helps organisations reflect on their work, understand better who they are targeting and what changes in behaviour are desired and will have impact in the future.

and recent developments in practice emphasise the importance of conducting analysis of the networks of actors in the policy community as part of the planning process. This will help to identify key potential participants in the planning process.

Where an organisation engages donors in the planning process, it runs the risk of the "capture" of the research by the process, rather than its application to the identified needs of its claimed beneficiaries. Conversely, where research organisations engage too closely with either policy-makers or claimed beneficiaries, they may be considered to have sacrificed the independence of their research. Research planners must therefore walk a delicate path when encouraging participation in their planning processes: they must ensure the relevance of the research and at the same time the objectivity. Robust and transparent planning methodologies will help to convince observers of the quality of the research.

Planning a research study will involve the application of the expertise of the researchers to a research problem. Laypersons may struggle to engage meaningfully in aspects of this. Planners may face challenges in structuring means by which the research plan is relevant in these circumstances.

Practical measures

- Have you considered engaging policy-makers or the ultimate intended users in the planning process?
- Do you need to conduct a form of stakeholder analysis to identify who the key policy-makers and/or intended users of the research are?
- Do you need to engage your claimed beneficiaries to ensure that the project will meet their needs?
- In signing funding contracts with donors, were you constrained by their requirements – either substantive or procedural? How can you mitigate this threat to the research relevance to claimed beneficiaries in particular?
- Has the basis for planning decisions been communicated to all interested stakeholders?
- Are your plans and your research methodologies publicly available? If sensitive in nature, do you have processes by which you control release or justify non-release (see Policy 2 below)?
- Do you review proposals for methodological rigour? Do you need to open your proposals to external peer review?

Process 6: Evaluating and Learning

Evaluation is the process by which an organisation formulates criteria for evaluating its operations, analyses its success or failure, and learns from its past experiences.

Benefits of accountability

Evaluation is one of the key principles of accountability. Unlike transparency and participation, both of which comprise characteristics of a process, evaluation is a process itself.

Evaluation offers the opportunity to research organisations to reflect on the research process and to learn lessons from the experience. To evaluate successes, it is important to consider what the targets are from the start of the project. For this reason, as a process, it is normally treated as being inseparably interwoven with the planning of the project activities. It will normally happen simultaneously with Process 5, and yet it will be ongoing throughout the conduct of the research project.

Internal stakeholders and partners (where relevant) should be engaged to ensure that the targets are appropriate from the beginning, that previous lessons are learned. For participatory projects (see Process 8 below) research participants should also be involved.

A second consideration is that most donors or clients will require that research proposals specify targets and deliverables. Research organisations will have to report back to their donors or clients on the success or failure on the basis of these targets.

Challenges and tensions

There are significant difficulties conducting quantitative assessments of research impact. Policy-relevant research can have far reaching but very subtle impacts, which take an uncertain and often very long period of time, and which are not easily attributable to any single project. Impact is usually impossible to prove.

Moreover, an evaluation framework which fails to take account of these challenges can result in inappropriate research targets

Featured tools: Outcome mapping

Outcome mapping is a planning and evaluation technique developed as a response to some of the difficulties with measuring impacts. They are results – or “outcomes” – that fall within the program’s sphere of influence. Outcomes are defined as only those activities where the program can claim it contributed to a direct effect – it therefore sidesteps the conundrum of proving changes in policy.

which can distract researchers from producing successful research in favour of meeting criteria which do not adequately summarise the intended goals.

Increasingly, qualitative means of understanding impact are being developed that are less positivist, and more tailored to take into account the intermediate impacts of a piece of research.

Practical measures

- Do you ensure that evaluation takes place from the planning stage of the project?
- Do you engage relevant stakeholders in the design of the project?
- Do you have clear outputs and milestones set out in the initial research plan? Do you have clear responsibilities for meeting these outputs?
- Do you have processes in place for evaluating the quality of the research outputs? Do you need internal and external peer review mechanisms to ensure of evaluating outputs?
- Have you considered how you can evaluate the outcomes – if not the impact – of research?
- In defining your evaluation process for a project, have you balanced the need that they are sufficient to learn from the research, but the limitations on resources?
- Does your evaluation framework draw on the perspective that evaluators can provide, while still remaining cost effective and making use of internal evaluations?
- Do you need an independent evaluation unit, and if so, how will you divide evaluation and monitoring tasks between the specialist unit and the researchers?
- Are your evaluations designed to help your research managers learn? Are they in an appropriate format to permit this?
- Have you considered how you will monitor the project through its life to ensure that it remains on track?
- Do you involve the key beneficiaries in the evaluation processes throughout?
- Do you feed the information and learning back into the research project?
- Are your evaluations available on the website?
- Do you “close the loop” on projects after the evaluation, i.e. do you make special efforts to return to claimed beneficiaries and to the research communities, to inform them of the progress of the research?

Process 7: Conducting the research

The manner in which the research is conducted will be determined by the models employed in the research framework and the methods specified by a research discipline as appropriate for the collection of information.

Benefits of accountability

In this stage, we focus on three benefits of accountability: transparency in dealing with those involved in and impacted by the research; transparency of methodology, fostering trust in the credibility of the research; and the role of ongoing monitoring of the research progress.

Engaging communities involved in research: Being transparent to those with whom the researcher is working is not a new consideration: the principle of informed consent is fundamental to research ethics, and in many research disciplines informs all interactions with all research subjects. Often, the requirements will mesh closely with the principle of transparency, which is central to accountability. It entails requirements on researchers to explain the nature and purpose of the research, what will be done with the information, and must seek permission to carry on before proceeding.

Besides the imperatives of research ethics, additional practical benefits exist. By engaging people involved in the research, research organisations will increase their ownership of the research and thus will lower the risk of research fatigue. Research fatigue is a phenomenon whereby communities become tired of feeding their time into research processes for which they see no direct benefits – a threat highlighted by several of our collaborating research organisations who conducted primary data collection. It may also be important to approach local government and community leaders to ensure their awareness and acceptance of the project.

Transparency of methodology: Research organisations working in a disputed or contentious area can support the credibility of their research by making efforts to be transparent to the policy community – and particularly potential opponents of the study.

Monitoring research progress: Continual and ongoing assessment of the research will be useful for two reasons:

1. Monitoring ensures that the research remains on track and is meeting its goals. It allows research managers to highlight problems early, and to try to meet them.
2. Monitoring may also form a requirement established in the signed contract with the donor, which must be met by the research organisation.

Both are essential – wherever possible, research managers should resist the temptation to permit either the considerations of internal progress management or the needs of the donors to eclipse the other. Monitoring will normally and ideally be reported against goals and milestones set in the planning stage (see Processes 5 and 6 above for planning and evaluation).

Practical measures

- Do you report back regularly to your research communities?
- If your beneficiaries or research communities are diffuse and ill-defined can you use media outlets to reach out to wider communities?
- Do you invite peers to observe the ongoing research through the medium of advisory boards? Is it valuable to release interim working papers to introduce interim findings?
- Alternatively, can you use newsletters to communicate progress to stakeholders engaged in the project?
- Have you a clear work plan, which specifies milestones and outputs specified from the beginning of the project?
- Do you have clear processes by which progress of the research against these milestones is specified?
- Do you keep your claimed beneficiaries informed directly and regularly about the progress of the research project?

Featured tools: Advisory boards and steering committees

Advisory boards and steering committees can be used to monitor the progress of the research and to engage experts from the policy community in the research. They can be of use to bring policy-makers into the planning stage. In the case of highly contentious research, they can also be used to establish its credibility by enabling close review of the methodology and quality of the research.

Process 8: Empowering communities

Participatory methodologies have gone beyond a means to elicit information and are increasingly being used to support communities and research participants to conduct their own research and advocacy.

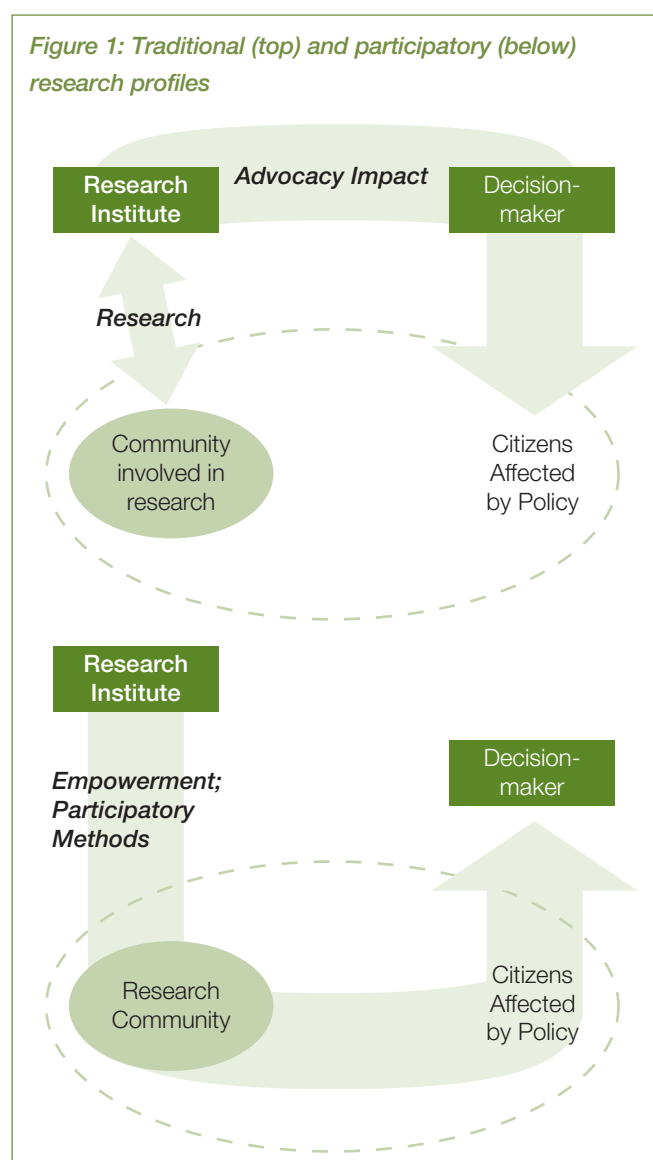
Benefits of accountability

Participatory research techniques aim to empower the “lowers”, and allow the community to participate in decisions on the delivery of aid. Figure 1 shows the two paradigms. In “traditional” forms of research, the experts conduct research, and then communicate the results. With participatory research methods, in contrast, the research organisation acts as facilitators and capacity builders to support the community in conducting their own research.

The techniques and methods of participatory research have become increasingly powerful. They allow researchers to support the communities to harness their own knowledge and institute policy-change themselves. They have been applied in contexts previously the preserve of “traditional experts”. They have been successful developing practical applications to innovations. As development practitioners have increasingly become aware of the expertise of communities in their context, the value of facilitating that expertise in harnessing innovation has become more common.

In short, participatory methodologies, if well conducted, are excellent ways to ensure accountability and responsiveness to the communities with which a research organisation is working.

Figure 1: Traditional (top) and participatory (below) research profiles



Challenges and tensions

Conducting participatory research is not appropriate for every organisation – participatory techniques, much as any other discipline, require special skills and expertise. Even as the participatory techniques have gathered increasing currency in the field of development, commentators caution against their application in token fashion. There are risks involved in empowering only part of the community, reinforcing existing community power structures. They remain, however, a powerful tool for empowering communities to effecting policy change, and if done well, will ensure the relevance of the research findings (Wheeler 2007).

Practical measures

This toolkit is not the place to review the ever-increasing multitude of techniques being developed in the field of participatory research, even if it were possible to do so. We therefore limit ourselves to two points, one pertaining to evaluation and the other transparency:

- As with any other form of research, or indeed any project, evaluation is an important aspect. Do you involve the participating communities in formulating the evaluation frameworks, thus allowing these communities to define what counts as success?
- Have you been transparent to the participants clearly explaining the purpose of the project and have you managed their expectations?

Process 9: Conducting advocacy and outreach

The role of researchers does not stop at the production of a report. To have an impact, researchers must be successful in communicating their research within the wider policy community or innovation system.

Benefits of accountability

We have defined accountability as the manner in which an organisation balances and prioritises the interests of different organisations. Studies emphasise the importance of active dialogue, engagement and transparency with policy-makers and intended research users, to successful research-backed advocacy. In short, communications and advocacy activities resemble accountability already. Moreover, in claiming recommendations are justified by objective research, research organisations can ensure their accountability by transparently revealing the authority for their assertions.

- *Policy-makers:* For research to be successful, it must be suited to the needs of the users. Accountability can help ensure that research is relevant, and to communicate it to the stakeholders. The key stakeholders can comprise policy-makers, but also the wider policy community.
- *Policy community:* As we noted above, research is often used in different ways within a policy community. It is a rare piece of research that will trigger on its own a change in (for example) a government's policy on an issue. Studies addressing the subject note the value of changing the behaviour and attitudes, not simply of the policy-makers, but of the policy community more broadly. Research backed by credible evidence can over time reframe the debate. In their efforts to impact upon policy, researchers play vital convection roles. Research organisations can offer the space for debate by holding events such as conferences, seminars and workshops.

Challenges and tensions

Neither scientific claims nor research policy recommendations are neutral. Scientific fact is socially constructed. Indeed, the act of research itself is not neutral but rather may be used to exclude laypersons from the debate. Research can be used for tactical reasons – to support existing policy decisions – rather than for the reasons intended.

Most research organisations make claims to objectivity, therefore, but these claims should be understood in the light of the intrinsically political aspects of research recommendations. Transparency of the support for their recommendations allows a research organisation to justify their position and invite criticisms

of their arguments. Moreover, a transparent and accountable research organisation can act as a broker between advocacy coalitions or create a space for calm, measured discussion, basing their claims on their transparency.

Practical measures

- Do you make an explicit and clear statement of exactly what contribution you are making to the debate, and how?
- Are your research outputs targeted to specific policy-makers?
- Do you make an attempt to formulate your problems in a comprehensible and sympathetic way, tailored to the targeted user of the research?
- Are your data and analysis transparent and available for analysis?
- Is it valuable to convoke seminars, conferences or workshops to communicate your research findings?
- Is it worthwhile to join (or create) formal or informal networks in order to share ideas? Such networks can encourage comments and policy debate, and can bridge the divide between policy-makers and research producers.
- When engaging in communication events, do you ensure that invitees come from different perspectives, including possible opponents to your positions (while bearing in mind the aim should be of fostering a non-strident debate)?
- Where the research concerns or criticises key actors, such as a government ministry, they should be informed in good time so that they can prepare a measured response.
- Have you considered engaging the media as a means of communicating the research to a wide range of stakeholders?

Two policies: complaints handling and information release

In addition to the measures taken to implement the accountability principles as described above, organisations may also consider implementing policies and management systems which make a firm commitment to accountability. For larger organisations, policies are means of regularising their operations across many offices and possibly many countries. For such organisations, not only complaints handling and information release, but also many of the foregoing measures noted in relation to specific processes, may usefully be enacted in policies. Research organisations, however, will often be too small for such to be necessary.

We address two policies in this concluding section: complaints handling and information release. Complaints-handling refers to a process for dealing with formal complaints, and therefore deals with one important and sensitive form of feedback. An information release policy relates to the importance of data and information to a research organisation, and the corresponding importance that the research organisations react in a systematic way to requests for its release. These have been singled out in this section, not because the other measures mentioned above are not important, but because they in particular benefit from the formal commitments and standardised processes that an explicit policy, with its associated systems, can provide.

Complaints handling

What are complaints?

Complaints handling mechanisms are necessary elements of good governance and accountability. Their role is to handle appropriately formal complaints. By complaints we do not mean objections to a particular policy-position – which are subjects for policy debate rather than formal complaints – but rather complaints directed at the manner in which staff members of an organisation have conducted themselves.

Content of policies

Appropriate processes for dealing with all kinds of feedback form a key principle of accountability. A complaints handling policy specifies explicitly a defined process which invites complaints from anyone affected by the research organisation's activities.

Adequate communication of the policy is particularly important because it offers a means of redress to stakeholder groups who normally have no other means of redress. In particular, it is important for those stakeholders with no formal relationship to the research organisation: beneficiaries, communities involved in the act of research affected by the activity of research and partner researchers. A complaints handling process shows stakeholders that the research organisation takes its accountability to them seriously.

By showing this commitment, the organisation proves that and that it values their relationship, and forges stronger bonds between as a result.

Policy checklist

- Does your organisation have a policy which makes a commitment to receive, investigate and respond to complaints in good time and – where necessary – confidentially?
- Does the policy specify clearly what constitutes a complaint, and the process for dealing with it?
- Does the policy commit to providing justifications for the findings of the process, and an appeals process to a senior board member or external tribunal?
- Have you allocated responsibility to a senior member of staff or the governing board for the policy, and its implementation?
- Have you provided sufficient training and support to the complaints process?
- Do you need to allocate a member of staff to be responsible for complaints that are filed? What resources, including training of members of staff, may be necessary?
- Is the complaints policy publicly available? Is it, for example, on the website?
- Have you communicated the complaints procedures to claimed stakeholders, communities involved in the act of research, including the process for filing the complaint?

Information Release

What do we mean by information release?

For research organisations, transparency is particularly important, since the legitimacy of their work relies on the powers of rational argument and a strong evidence-basis for their data. In seeking to change policy on the basis of their findings, a research organisation makes a claim to the objectivity of their research. A commitment to release information on request (subject to key caveats) is an effective means of supporting that claim.

Information requests may address any subject that affects the claims that an organisation makes in its attempts to change policy. This includes two sets of information:

1. Information about the organisation which may throw a light on its positioning in the policy community, such as: the mission, strategy and research agenda of the research; key ongoing projects, and their methodologies; information about key stakeholders – donors, partners, research networks and advocacy coalitions of which it is a member; basic staff profiles.
2. Research data generated by the organisation on which it rests its claims to objectivity for its policy recommendations.

An information release policy will make, therefore, a general commitment to release information.

Justification for non-release

The general commitment is however subject to several caveats. There may be many reasons why research organisations wish to keep some of their data secret, and justifiably so. Each organisation is different, and we will not specify. However, we do note two particularly important exceptions here:

Protection of sources: Sensitive information which endangers the source of the research should certainly not be publicly available. Protection of sources is a key principle of research ethics.

Protect staff: For organisations conducting sensitive research – such as human rights investigations – maintaining a level of secrecy about the staff involved in these investigations will be a justifiable reason for rejecting a request for information.

Research data as an asset: For many research organisations, their data comprises a valuable asset. It is often bought by the expenditure of a great deal of effort and expertise. For a researcher to open the body of work to the public, and other

researchers, is for them to lose this asset. This may be termed a “transparency dilemma”: an organisation in an ideal world may wish to be transparent, but cannot afford to release the data to competition. Once the organisation steps into the public domain and uses their research to claim objective support for their position, there is an obligation on them to be transparent. The trigger, however, is the claim of objectivity for their policy recommendations.

In general, however, the presumption should be towards making the information available, and when an organisation withholds information it should present a justification why.

Policy checklist

- Does your information release policy make a commitment to make information of the organisation public on request?
- Does the commitment include substantive information which will allow a reader to understand better the organisation and its positioning within the policy community?
- Does the commitment extend to justifying why information might not be released? These may include protection of sources, and the need to maintain the integrity of information, and may extend to others depending on the nature of the research activities being undertaken.
- Have you considered what level of formality is necessary in formulating the policy?
- Have you allocated responsibility to a senior member of staff or the governing board for the policy, and its implementation?
- Do you need to allocate a member of staff to manage requests for information?
- Does your organisation manage intellectual property in an appropriate way, balancing the needs of the users of the research and your own rights?
- Is the transparency policy itself publicly available?
- Do you make efforts to communicate the policy to key stakeholders?
- Do you avoid signing contracts requiring confidentiality of data which also require you to make research-based recommendations in the public sphere?

Notes

Notes



one world trust

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