

ActionAid International
Taking Stock II
Summary of ALPS Review
2004

ALPS Review 2004 - Summary of key issues, lessons & recommendations Irene Guijt – July 2004

General. ALPS is, in many ways and parts of the ActionAid complexity, is alive and kicking. It was introduced, in parts, mainly in 2000 and 2001 in almost all AA countries¹.

- Ways of dealing with 'balanced multiple accountabilities' have received particular attention, and within in that financial in particular (less clear/less on strategic/impact accountability).
- Across the board - the need for planning with the people who are to live with the changes is generally well understood and community-level plans are created with considerable investment made by ActionAid to have a diversity of people and inclusive methodologies (eg India 344 micro-level planning).
- There is ongoing learning at least at operational level, and in some places at the strategic level. Many efforts are invested to continually question the core directions through PRRPs, partner meetings, thematic assessments and function assessments, performance appraisals. ALPS-related processes are themselves also subject to reviews and improvements in some countries.

However, ALPS is not yet being applied systemically or systematically within each country or across the countries, themes and functions. There are some critical gaps in ALPS logic and application.

Source of good practice and understanding. There is great variation in the understanding of what ALPS is and is not. For some, it is PRRP, for others it is about being financial accountable to communities, for others it is about generally increased consultation and being open, for some it is all this and more.

Indications are that much of the good practices visible in the AA system is not due to the existence of a set of documented guidelines but rather due to good HR (Kenya) or solid RBA, in which some of the more participatory aspects of the work are automatically included. Many people I spoke with were not familiar to any degree with the ALPS guidelines (they had never read any of the documentation they knew they had been given)– but their daily practice with partners and communities strongly reflected the principles. This is not a problem – if it is true, then it simply indicates the direction of investment for further improvement.

In some countries, ALPS qualities are supported by diverse management processes that encourage timely sharing of problems and frustrations and that encourage development of common understanding of ALPS related (e.g. Jadilis and staff retreats in Kenya) *and* clarity about non-negotiable values (e.g. zero-tolerance on fraud).

Innovation. There is considerable innovation happening with ALPS related processes and systems that well and truly carry the RBA values, eg Kenya financial accountability, India (social audits, 360 degree appraisals, partner reviews, peer reviews, micro-level planning, citizens' juries) but it is sporadic rather than systemic and there is no systematic implementation of each of these as yet across the board. It appears that these innovations are not being widely shared within the AA system, or even within the countries.

Partners and ALPS. The implementation of ALPS via the partners is considerably more varied. In some countries (sub-national regions), it is part and parcel of the organizational strengthening work that AA undertakes with its partners (e.g. Brazil, India). In part, this variation of insertion of ALPS into the quality/focus of work with partners is a result of differing interpretations of how ALPS should relate to them. For some, ALPS was supposed to be AA-internal, and if it rubbed off then that was fine but

¹ Zambia and Belgium (Brussels office) report that they have not yet started 'implementing ALPS' but it is possible that they already practice some aspects of ALPS. Source: Survey – analysis by R. Kantelberg.

not necessary. Others give partners copies of the ALPS Notes and expect the essence to shape the quality of the work. For a third group, it appears that ALPS has become more of a way of working and in their organisational strengthening work, it is incorporated without it being seen as a separate requirement, but simply part of 'good development practice' (e.g. Orissa, India).

Capacity-building on ALPS. The introduction on ALPS has been undertaken with considerable variation (but generally less than half of the countries across different staff/partner groups). In most but not all countries, ALPS-specific workshops were held at the onset and staff (and some partners) receive copies of ALPS documents. However, after this first organisation-wide introduction of ALPS, it does not seem to be pursued as a continual skill-building process or as standard part of new staff induction. For example, Kenya invests heavily in its own internal *and* in partner capacity to deal with financial accountability but gender/power analysis skills are quite weak both internally and with partners. Induction processes on ALPS are not systematically available and their quality does not exceed in some cases limited two hour 'this is ALPS' sessions. Follow-up training also varies, with facilitation skills that are arguably essential in PRRPs, receiving far less attention than, for example 'finance for non-finance staff'.

In some countries, where capacity limitations are perceived among partners, staff consciously invest in improving skills (e.g. Brazil, including gender perspective, providing funding for this, Kenya – setting up CBOs, etc.). However, there appears to more investment in some aspects of ALPS than an equal distribution.

Gaps. The form and focus of ALPS – as described in the Guidelines – appears to be largely based on the perception of AA as an implementing country programme and of the DA/DI level specifically, and assuming that child sponsorship is the sole source of funding. AA today is a far more complex kaleidoscope of faces and realities. What does ALPS mean for each of these issues, mechanisms, structures? Key aspects that do not have a place in the current conceptualization of ALPS and that represent critical areas for future improvements are:

Issues and Aspects

1. Policy, advocacy and rights-based work (currently being tackled by Jenny Chapman's action research initiative);
2. In areas of conflict and emergencies – how is ALPS different/the same?
3. MIS (country programmes are working on this but it is weak) that can provide some basic data for reporting and tracking of certain trends;
4. ALPS in the context of increasingly diverse funding sources, each with their own Accountability, Learning & Planning requirements;
5. ALPS in relation to partners that are organisations but in particular CBO federations networks, as that is a different and more complex organisational form;
6. National Boards – how will Board processes and mandates be integrated into ALPS, reflect and understand ALPS²?

² The current Governance Manual does not include ALPS related issues in the selection criteria for Board members, although reference is made to the need for them to embody AA's values. The Governance Manual highlights accountability but does not discuss what is expected of learning issues, nor of the quality of planning. Board members need to approve a wide range of strategic documents but do not seem equipped with clear quality criteria for this. How will National and International Board processes and mandates be integrated into ALPS, and how can Board members be strong champions for ALPS? How will the Board itself be accountable? What do THEY have to do in terms of downward accountability, planning, learning? There is a risk of ALPS being diluted if National Board members are not consciously monitoring their national AA offices on this. So their tasks should/could include a specific one related to ensuring the upholding of ALPS, regularly monitoring innovations and the implementation of ALPS goals

Levels and Functions

1. Marketing and child sponsorship (is there genuine learning as *part of an RBA focused AA*). Child sponsorship, in particular, places heavy reporting demands on CPs. These reporting demands have not been incorporated in the ALPS logic yet they are integral to being accountable. Not always is this carried out in a mutually respectful way. Some fundraisers accuse some CPs of taking them for granted, while some CPs accuse some fundraisers of being unconsultative and autocratic. There appear to be considerable variation between the European programmes in how they relate to the CPs.
2. *Human Resource Development* is critical to the success of ALPS. It carries the quality of induction processes, performance appraisals and personal development plans, incentives to stimulate learning within and across programmes, the space to learn from mistakes, and so forth.
3. Functions – some are considered in some countries (but are all – eg Kenya finances is ditto Brazil but what about the others?)
4. ALPS does not talk about communication! To learn from others requires communication. It is perhaps an *inadequately articulated missing principle or value* in ALPS. Much more is needed to support the flow of information on mistakes and achievements, so that learning can genuinely take place³.

Quality.

1. While Accountability, Learning, and Planning are happening, the quality of each is not clearly defined and tracked or used to guide implementation, particularly the Learning. For the financial Accountability, there is some sense of quality – see Kenya guidelines. But for others, there isn't. For example, is there any attempt to ensure that learning is distributed equally between partners, AA and marginalised citizens? How does a gender perspective or the quality of RBA work undertaken inform the focus of the partner meetings or of the performance appraisals? What kind of minimum quality criteria are the different ALPS processes expected to attain? Is ALPS viewed systemically as part of the rights articulation and assertion – an 'imminently political task' activity?

Accountability

1. AA needs, to some extent, to assert its own identity and its own success, as much for accountability reasons as for marketing and fundraising reason. This sits uneasily with its role as one of many voices in local, national and international advocacy efforts. A challenge recognised by AA Ireland in the Communication self assessment was "getting recognition for the AA brand while working in coalitions (which we have done for strategic reasons related to establishing our legitimacy). On the ground it is difficult to identify the impact of ALPS when the actions may not be immediate within the community or even in the mid term.
2. Definitely visible is an ethic of being accountable to communities – which is in marked contrast to many other INGOs where this is not (yet) commonly accepted, understood or practiced.
3. Accountability is mainly interpreted as a financial requirement. It is less clearly understood and implemented as parts of RBA and the gender equity priority. If there is not enough depth of understanding and clarity of definition on either rights assertion and gender equity, then how can AA check its performance vis-à-vis these core ideas?
4. Financial accountability towards communities and partners (NGOs, CBOs, networks) are powerful as a symbol of intent at transparency, and appears to trigger a certain quality of relations. It has been noticed by many as setting a new norm for development NGOs.
5. Accountability towards achieving objectives, by and large, are structured around the (P) R&R (P) – there are varying acronyms in use. But not all aspects of the work appear to have clear objectives,

³ AA should consider undertaking an ALPS 'audit' for all communications issues, not just media work but internal communication and inter-programme communications. Currently, for example, marketing people use images of marginalised people to sell 'products' without consulting with those people in the images on how they are portrayed. Attitudes from fundraisers like that heard in one case "They should trust us to do our job!" sit uncomfortably with the value of "Behaving in a way that is not domineering or patronising but that genuinely shares power with others rather than keeps it for oneself"

which makes this level of accountability difficult to achieve. For example, not all functions, themes or the regional level have clear aims – although the country strategy of course, is the red thread.

Learning

1. There is much learning happening through R&Rs, which has become institutionalised to a considerable extent in the AA family.
2. The 'learning' seems to happen at all layers of the organisation – community, regions, partner relations, themes, functions, international.
3. There is a palpable sense of openness to learning in the AA people encountered and this seems to be appreciated by partners as well.
4. Two critical and related aspects of learning – that determine if the *quality* of learning is good appear less well understood and implemented:
 - a. Understanding not only *if* worked but especially *what made it possible* - e.g. more focused efforts are needed to gain insights on effectiveness of policy/advocacy strategies and processes – “If advocacy related questions are not asked, the analysis will not happen”
 - b. There appears to be little consolidation of learning. The R&Rs (ironically) don't always lead to *organisation-wide* learning, although those directly involved might have picked up some ideas. This requires more horizontal dialogue to embed learning (across regions, across Country Programmes, but also from field offices to national offices).
5. AA across the board appears to lack mechanisms to identify shared learning needs, eg on networks as partners in India or on how to work on gender relations not just with women, etc. Nevertheless, there are various conscious attempts to fill knowledge gaps through innovative action research projects, eg Stepping Stones and REFLECT in their early phases, Assessing Advocacy, etc.
6. Is it clear what people mean by learning through a reflective process focusing on identifying improvements? Around the globe, people confuse learning with change, not always realising that change is not necessarily triggered by reflection. Similarly, there appears to be little conscious effort invested in the notion of 'lessons' and how these help shape strategic rethinking. Questions that could help shape a learning agenda should relate to the RBA and gender priorities that AA has set. A question such as 'What are the key questions, dilemmas that are faced in our work on RBA/ our focus on gender equity?' could help focus the analysis globally, nationally, thematically, functionally.
7. Related to the issue of 'what is learning', consideration of the question 'who is doing the learning' does not appear embedded in ALPS. I have not seen evidence of any AA learning strategies in the programmes in terms of questions, who should be doing the learning, mechanisms for ensuring exchange and dialogue and collective analysis, etc. This is also important in relation to partners, as it can help clarify the expectations, relationships and could help to consolidate good practice.
8. Learning fed by information from an MIS is not happening as there is a definite lack of MI systems in most programmes. This constraint needs concerted attention.
9. To facilitate organisation-wide learning, it might be interesting to do a 'communication flows' scan of the AA system, as information does not seem to be reaching the field level or flowing up/across the system.

Planning

1. The presence of local-level planning as the basis for DAs/DIs/regional plans is clear. There are conscious efforts to engage communities and partners and to work with partners to engage communities through qualitatively better processes. AA appears to invest substantially in capacity-building of partners to undertake participatory local level planning.
2. The planning process for themes and functions at any level is far less clear.
3. However, as planning moves up the system, it appears to become an increasingly empty financial exercise. There do not appear to be strategic efforts or debate beyond the regional level (particularly in larger countries).

Threats. The current advances in exciting practice appear subject to several threats:

- *Diversity of funding.* As more countries raise funds nationally/through non-child sponsorship avenues means that country programmes will be subject to the M&E requirements of diverse donors. This means that the constraints of conventional, data and upward accountability-focused processes will return to AA.
- *Centralised M&E is likely to decrease with internationalization,* thus potentially exacerbating the existing problem of ensuring coherent information reaches the global level to inform international campaigns and global reporting.
- *Lines of accountability will shift away* from the international level and towards National Boards. This has implications for the quality of the Board, for the rigidity of core requirements, and for what levels above the national level can be expected to receive.
- *Diversity of ALPS* is likely to increase as Country programmes gain greater autonomy. Nepal has already, for example, let go of DA/DI strategies and is, instead, producing thematic position papers.
- *New Affiliates will join AA.* As diversity is likely to increase, ways should be identified to maintain minimum quality criteria. ALPS may usefully inform the criteria for selection of CPs to become Affiliates.
- *Working through partnerships* is only likely to increase with internationalization. This will require *solid clarity about the partnership-ALPS issues*.

Other key challenges:

1. *The time-consuming nature of ALPS* means that shortcuts are made in applying principles “nor is there a continuous process of ALPS in the work that country programmes do” (Kantelberg 2004). The lack of time thus far to develop a full suite of ALPS processes means that gaps occur, for example “using ALPS to assess impact of policy/advocacy and putting lessons into action” (Kantelberg 2004).
2. *Slow lead time for ALPS-related changes to become visible.* As much as ALPS tries to inspire change in attitudes, behaviour, and culture, there are still challenges associated with these types of changes especially the time it takes before results can be seen and the adaptation of ALPS where local practice is very different due to local government common practice.
3. The *lack of staff capacity* is stifling the further uptake of ALPS. Competency gaps exist in analytical writing, facilitation, gender and power analysis, as well as limited understanding of the need for ALPS (Kantelberg 2004) and in particular of how to operationalise the principles.
4. *Attribution.* AA needs, to some extent, to assert its own identity and its own success, as much for accountability reasons as for marketing and fundraising reasons. This sits uneasily with its role as one of many voices in local, national and international advocacy efforts. A challenge recognised by AA Ireland in the Communication self-assessment was: “*Getting recognition for the ActionAid brand while working in coalitions (which we have done for strategic reasons related to establishing our legitimacy)*” (Communication Europe report, pg 6). On the ground it is difficult to identify the impact of ALPS when the actions may not be immediate within the community or even in the mid-term.

5. *Learning with respect to the global goals and objectives.* The purpose of learning and processes for ensuring learning with respect to the global strategy is not clear. Countries use their CSPs to structure their reflections. At the moment, global reflections appear to occur mainly through annual PRRPs with the International Directors and the writing of the Global Progress Report. But are key lessons truly being learned with respect to goals 1, 2, 3 and 4? (and their interaction)? Is this also the case for strategic objectives 1 to 6? How was this learned? Whose lessons are these?
6. *Lack of clarity between ALPS and M&E.* Much confusion exists between how ALPS and M&E relate to each other. Evaluations are being fairly well dealt with through PRRPs, and thematic and CSP reviews. However, with the advent of ALPS, monitoring processes in particular seem to have all but disappeared in some cases. The use of comparative data to deepen the understanding of what does and does not work and why is not a common practice at all. This extends to the comparative tracking of changes in power relations and gender equity concerns.

Summarising ALPS in ActionAid

ALPS represents an organisational paradigm shift that should be nurtured. For Country Programmes not yet thinking along RBA or advocacy lines, the advent of ALPS gave a necessary push in the new direction. But for those Country Programmes and Directors passionate about these issues, ALPS served to reaffirm this position and gave the space they needed to work.

The shift to ALPS and the adoption of FTP have been mutually reinforcing. This is worthy of congratulations. Many other development organisations have adopted FTP- or RBA-like policies, yet remain firmly wedded to a count-and-control accountability and planning structure in which there is no room for learning, and no mention of principles, behaviours or attitudes. The table below highlights the main achievements and challenges of ALPS.

Progress and challenges of ALPS2000-2004 (based on the 7-S Model⁴)

<i>Organisational Aspect</i>	<i>Key achievements</i>	<i>Core challenges</i>
1. <i>Strategy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear articulation of a vision for A, L, and P that is consistent with RBA and gender equity priorities • Differentiating between procedures and principles – and stressing their interdependence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Filling the gaps with some functions, Northern CPs, themes, • Articulating strategy for and types of support needed to avoid that ALPS is left up to chance
2. <i>Structure</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising problems associated with centralised control and related focus on downward accountability • Shift from counting exercise of the APRS to stories and narratives of change via the PRRP • Critical reflection and learning is stipulated in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarifying the new lines of accountability with internationalization • Locating the regional level • More comprehensive ‘translation’ of ALPS for the Northern CPs and functions (HR, fundraising, communications)

⁴ The 7-S model provides a structure for summarising how an organisation performs when it implements a change, such as ALPS. http://www.1000ventures.com/business_guide/mgmt_inex_7s.html

	reports.	
3. <i>Systems</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible timeframe has been an advantage of ALPS • Starting attempts to link finance with programmatic side of work • Much room for innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of the A, L, P needs articulation • Workable balance between diversity (CP and below) and centralised information needs (above CP level) • Weak MIS • Ensuring that impact information <i>and</i> lessons are institutionalised outputs of any review process • Ensuring coherence between HR/OD, finance, governance, right to information policy <i>and</i> ALPS
4. <i>Style</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater understanding of the real value and inherent problems of ActionAid's work. • Great openness by staff to frank feedback from peers, donors, partners and marginalised citizens • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No clarity on expected or clear tracking of attitudes and behaviours • Dilemma between profiling AA and being part of coalitions • Strong dependence on management savvy senior management
5. <i>Skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some competency building with facilitation, participatory approaches, RBA, gender equity for staff and partners • Staff starting to engage with the value of a 'learning' perspective • Considerable progress with financial accountability innovations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need for more on RBA, power and gender analysis, and facilitation cannot be stressed enough • Care with asking too much too quickly from staff • More balanced invested needed to avoid excessive focus on financial accountability skills
6. <i>Staff</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing investment in HR policies compatible with FPT and ALPS • Capacity to attract highly motivated and talented staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring that programme and fundraising staff are informed about ALPS, included in a wide range of required competency-building efforts and ALPS innovation, and that their problems with ALPS are heard and responded to
7. <i>Shared values</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very clear set of values at international and country level that are widely shared 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater understanding needed of RBA and gender – and how to work with the analysis of power and gender • More focused attempts to deal with the attitudes and behaviours that are considered conditions for success of ALPS • Elevating the status of principles/ A&B so that ALPS is more than just PRRP and an Annual Report

Key Recommendations

Clarifying ALPS in ActionAid

ALPS is relatively new so some confusion, fuzzy areas and gaps are understandable, particularly given that AA's identity and structures have changed in parallel in recent years.

1. *Promote ALPS as a stool with three legs:* 'core requirements' as the minimum procedures, 'principles' as minimum quality standards, and 'attitudes and behaviours' as core success factors.
2. *Identify and clarify recurring contradictions and ambiguities.* Notable among these is resolving the tensions between the CP and global level about whether or not Annual Reports are needed for the Global level and whether or not some core information will be collected by all CPs to help assess progress against global goals and objectives. Another ambiguity is how CSPs and 3-year rolling plans relate to each other. Finally, it requires some terminology clarification, notably how M&E relates to ALPS.
3. *Critically assess the core requirements.* Given that the core requirements were largely based on a CP and DA/DI logic of ActionAid and that internationalisation will herald more rather than less diversity, the non-negotiable core requirements need some scrutiny.
4. *The original set of principles requires some reassessing.* It is not clear what the 'true' set of principles is. What would a revised list of principles look like, given AA's four years of experience with RBA and ALPS?
5. *Clarify the location of ALPS in the management structure* to help embed it as a cross-cutting responsibility. It will be critical to ensure an integrated ALPS function exists at international level that integrates the intentions of the Shared Learning initiative alongside the current A, L, and P functions.

Supporting the Ongoing Uptake of ALPS

Current levels of support for ALPS are largely inadequate. While the spirit of ALPS calls on people's creativity, not everyone has to invent the wheel and much hesitation and rushed attempts could be avoided by more time to think before acting.

1. *Fill the gaps!* See Section 6 for details on the key gaps (issues and contextual factors, governance and functions). Do not only fill the gaps relate to core requirements but also for the principles and attitudes and behaviours.
2. *Identify the most appropriate types of support for ongoing implementation.* Opportunities are needed for staff to reflect on implications, dilemmas and concerns they might have. What are the priorities for support per region, per function (national and international), and per country that can allow ALPS to thrive?
3. *Invest where your priorities lie.* Appropriate levels of investment commensurate with the equal importance of all principles are critical to strengthen the current weak areas of RBA, gender equity, facilitation skills, experiential learning and participatory M&E.
4. *Align the content and quality of capacity-building events with ALPS.* If training events are considered an important means then the content and quality of training events on related skills such as RBA, facilitation skills, MIS, etc, should align with ALPS.

Improving the Quality of ALPS

Currently the core requirements do not include explicit quality criteria for accountability or learning, and describe desired content of planning processes but do not detail the quality of the processes themselves..

1. *Explore the potential of ALPS health checks and identify mechanisms for undertaking these quality audits.* Responsibility for this function should be clearly allocated, as is that of financial accountability.
2. *Launch focused learning efforts to address existing ALPS dilemmas.* Many of AA staff struggle with ALPS in practice and establishing an active learning group across the CPs that identifies critical gaps in understanding, and then collects and shares 'good practices' should not be difficult.
3. *Streamline focused reports.* Core reports varies enormously in quality and quantity. Much clarity would be gained, thus enhancing the likelihood of quality uptake of ALPS, by providing clearer guidance on simple reporting options.
4. *Seek innovations and share them continually.* Continued conscious efforts are needed to identify gaps at all levels of the AA system, pursue innovations, document and share the findings. Do not seek 'best practices' – good ones will do just fine.
5. *Validate and invest in all principles as equally important.* It appears that in ALPS, the principles are not all equally weighted. Much more energy has been invested in the accountability and transparency principles than in power/gender analysis and devolved decision-making one.

Setting Clear ALPS Agendas

The Impact Assessment Unit in UK has its own strategy. More efforts can help the setting of organisation-wide ALPS targets.

1. *Set A, L, and P goals.* CPs, functions and themes can review the quality of their ALPS work and, where quality is lagging, set themselves annual or biannual learning, accountability and/or planning goals.
2. *Improve tracking of ALPS implementation and innovations.* At the moment, it is not possible to know who has complied with which part of their core requirements and with which quality.
3. *Provide open access to strategies and reviews.* With little effort, core documents can be posted to the web, which would be in line with AA's 'Right to Information' Policy and could be helped to track the implementation of recommendations.

Specific A, L, and P Recommendations

1. *Clarify what the 'A' of accountability stands for* for Northern CPs, international functions, national and international policy work, and the regional level, given that accountability to marginalized citizens is a critical feature of ALPS yet hard to envisage implementing beyond the DA/DI level.
2. *Clarify what learning means in AA.* Currently, it is used to cover any kind of reflection and change. More conscious efforts are needed to look critically at the idea of 'lessons' and how these help shape strategic rethinking.
3. *Consider the question 'who is doing the learning'* and assess whether reflective processes include those who could benefit most from learning.
4. *Invest in strategic planning.* Planning abounds in AA but not all of it is strategic. What (non-negotiable) quality criteria can be used to structure planning that ensures it is strategic?