

ActionAid International
Management Response
To the Reports
2004

ActionAid International

Management Response to Taking Stock Review II 2004

1. Introduction

An external Taking Stock Review (TSR2) of ActionAid International's work against its global strategy 'Fighting Poverty Together' (FPT) for the period 1999 – 2004 was carried out in the first half of January 2004. The main review team consisted of four persons: Kamla Bhasin, David Cohen (Team Leader), Alex Jacobs and Simon Matsvai. Irene Guijt, another external reviewer, reviewed our current Accountability Learning and Planning System (Alps) and worked closely with the main review team. Margaret Bennett reviewed the ActionAid UK marketing functions and provided technical input into a self-review of the fundraising and communications work of ActionAid International across the globe. An external stakeholder survey was carried out to gather independent views of various stakeholders.

The reviewers presented their individual reports and a summary of the external review was presented by Kamla Bhasin and David Cohen at the International Conference in Bangkok in July 2004.

This management response is a part of the process of follow-up of the TSR2 whereby the International Directors' Team, the international management team of ActionAid International have identified key issues emerging from TSR2. This response is based on inputs from International Directors but the interpretation, consolidation of inputs and the presentation in this form is done by the Chief Executive. This response in the current form and format has also been informed by the discussion in the International Directors' Meeting in September and has also been seen by the International Board of Trustees at their meeting in September.

The response is presented in three sections: an overview, gaps in terms of key issues not covered by TSR2 and the key issues from reviewers' observations and recommendations that we must address.

An Overview of the TSR2 results

The TSR2 generally commended our bold direction and strategy of FPT, our embracing the rights-based approach and various examples of specific successful results across many countries. Beyond the general vote of approval to what we have done and achieved, the inadequacy of our work and progress on women's rights and gender inequality was perhaps the biggest and the sharpest criticism from TSR2.

The TSR2 team were particularly impressed by the quality and commitment of our staff and team right across the board. There was a great deal of appreciation of the way we have brought about many structural changes in the organisation in line with the ambition of FPT.

On balance, the review focused a lot more on the country level work than on the international work and on how we are doing things than on what we are doing. The review findings, presented mostly in the form of observations rather than recommendations, have many explicit and implicit

criticisms of various areas of work. Perhaps with the exception of our work on women's rights and gender which asks for fundamental changes in concept, strategies and implementation, the TSR2 points out criticisms and recommends that ActionAid International refines and deepens its strategies, approaches and investments without necessarily changing direction or track fundamentally.

The TSR2 scores ActionAid International quite low in following-up the recommendations of the TSR1 (1999) well and comprehensively as it finds itself repeating many of the observations and recommendations that were made by the earlier Taking Stock review.

Key gaps

With the benefit of hindsight, we now see a number of key gaps in terms of missed opportunities or things not covered and addressed in the TSR2 processes and results:

- An analysis and presentation of the external context of our work and the organisation would have made the TSR2 observations and reports much sharper
- A better and balanced attention to and interaction with our international structure, staff and programmes (themes and campaigns) would have provided a much fuller picture of the organisation as a whole.
- The TSR2 has made very few remarks about the content of our work (mission-related work) and has failed to provide us with any views of whether we should do different things as opposed to doing things differently. However, the Stakeholders Survey results provide a useful list of mission related issues that we should focus on in our future work.
- The human resource related systems, structure and issues are much less systematically addressed.
- The TSR2 has not covered the Trustees, Board and Governance issues as it is or has been over the period of the current FPT strategy and has provided no pointers to governance improvements in the organisation.

Response:

- With the exception of the issues related to governance, the discussions and deliberations in the International Conference in Bangkok compensated for the issues that were missed out by the TSR2.
- These issues will also be seriously pursued also during the process of drafting the new international strategy.
- Trustees, board and governance issues related to ActionAid International will need to be continually reviewed so that we can continue to learn and strengthen the boards and governance as ActionAid International evolves and develops.

Key issues to address

The TSR2 raised a large number of issues some more strategic and others more operational. Many of the issues raised can be clustered together into different bigger strategic issues. Following are key strategic issues (presented in no particular order) coming out of the TSR2

results and reports. Many of these have inter-linkages and overlaps. Beyond identifying the key issues, we also make an attempt to propose and commit to specific actions in response.

1. Women's rights, gender and patriarchy

The TSR2 appreciated the way that ActionAid International has prioritised gender equity as both a vertical as well as horizontal (cross-cutting) issue. The issues raised by the TSR2 are:

- Absence of conceptual clarity particularly about patriarchy and prevalence of limited understanding of gender which often neutralises the issues of power relationships between men and women and depoliticises the issue of women's rights and equality.
- The need to view poverty from the overarching framework of patriarchy instead of looking at gender from the framework of poverty. In other words, confirm that fighting patriarchy is a pre-requisite to fighting poverty.
- The massive gap in the investment and consequently the capacity of the organisation in terms of staff, skills and attitude.
- As a result of all this, ActionAid International has not had substantive, high quality and relevant programmes or partnerships whether organised vertically or horizontally as a cross-cutting work across other key programmes.

Response:

- Understand the concept of patriarchy better and incorporate it as one of the political analytical frameworks for defining and designing our work. Patriarchy as a wider and the primary framework for our thinking and work is not necessary.
- Ask the Strategy Drafting Team (SDT) to respond to the TSR2 observations and recommendations and ensure that a higher priority and clarity is accorded to women's rights work both as vertical and horizontal work in our new international strategy.
- Increase our investment in women's rights staff and structure as well as in the systematic capacity strengthening of all other staff across all functions and all levels but particularly those working on other themes so that the work for gender justice is mainstreamed in all our work.
- Invest in developing and strengthening women leaders and women's leadership in all parts of ActionAid International.

2. Partnership

The TSR2 appreciated ActionAid International's approach of developing and supporting partnership with a range of civil society organisations and movements. However, a number of important issues which are currently impeding the chances of getting maximum synergy and solidarity out of partnerships have been raised by TSR2. Partnership here, for our purposes, is understood as a relationship of joint work with pro-poor or poverty focused organisations, particularly peoples' organisations and civil society organisations.

- Dominance of fund and funding relationship which imposes ActionAid International's programmes and standards on partners
- Competition for building profile is stifling the potential for cooperation and collaboration

- Absence of strategic partnership at regional and international levels. General absence of clarity or strategy for partnership

Response

- Build a greater understanding of our current range of partners and our partnership practices through the completion of the ‘partner census’ on a regional basis that was started at the end of 2003.
- Highlight key partnership strategies in the new International Strategy.
- Develop and implement conceptual clarity, approaches and best practice guidelines for partnership with other organisation.
- While respecting and acknowledging others’ contributions, it is important not to shy away for playing leadership role or highlighting the achievements honestly.
- The revised ALPS to have clear guidelines on partnership standards and accountability.
- Participation, accountability and transparency both in concept and practice to remain the cornerstone of our partnership with others.
- Systematic approach of exploring, connecting and developing key strategic partnership at the international level by the Chief Executive and the International Directors.

3. Communications

The TSR2 did not specifically focus on communications. The internal self-review of communications highlighted very low organisational investment and capacity for external communications. The TSR2, however, made the following two strong points which may, at face value, seem like an internal communications issue but they are perhaps much bigger external communications issue. It is obvious that internal clarity is a pre-requisite for any external communication.

- ActionAid International has a lot of stories to tell, stories of what it is doing, the changes it is bringing to the lives of many poor and marginalised people and communities and lessons learnt but it has not been able to do so in the relevant space or on the scale required.
- ActionAid International’s identity and profile are varied but also conflicting (e.g. donor or donee, implementer or facilitator, partner of World Bank or partner of their strong critics, social movement or supporter of social movement, national or international).

Response

- The new International Strategy will clarify our key identity(ies) and the strategy roll out process will develop clarity and capacity of all parts of the organisation to express as well as use to the best effect our identity(ies) and profile(s).
- The creation of the new Communication and Public Affairs directorate will be strengthen together with an increased investment of communication staff and capacity at the regional and country levels.
- In addition to strengthening the communication function, staff and capacity, we will explore the mechanism for capturing, processing and promoting our experience,

knowledge and ideas towards influence and change and ensure that voices of poor and marginalised people are conveyed and amplified.

- Also strengthen internal communications within the overall function of Organisational Effectiveness.

4. Capacity and quality: staff, knowledge, programmes

While the TSR2 has commended ActionAid International for taking a rights based approach to the eradication of poverty and injustice and for the quality and commitment of staff it has attracted, it has raised a number of issues pointing out the need to invest and strengthen our capacity to deliver the promises of FPT.

- There has been limited investment in ensuring adequate clarity of core concepts among the staff for deepening the rights based work and empowerment work promised by FPT.
- Staff and teams have limited clarity of various concepts (political education) such as patriarchy, human rights, equality, governance etc. and lack the necessary tools and methods for advancing rights based work.
- Skills and capacity for creating political space, building public constituency and discussions, strengthening networks and alliances are limited.
- ActionAid International does not have systems and mechanisms for assuring the quality and coherence of our mission related work and experience beyond the patches of excellence.
- ActionAid International currently lacks a systematic approach and mechanism for continually capturing, assessing, processing, packaging, promoting and scaling up of innovations, knowledge and ideas.

Response

- With the launch of the new International Strategy invest in a set of dedicated staff and structure that will broker and coordinate capturing, processing and promotion of our knowledge and ideas as well as training and education to ensure that the core capacity and competence for implementing the strategy is developed within the first 2 years.
- Prioritise, profile and strengthen mission related thematic work and the team so that the depth in capacity can be achieved.
- Develop strategic linkages and partnership with research, academic and think-tank institutions.
- Strengthen the system of staff capacity, competence and performance review and development.
- Strengthen the system of Trustee and Board capacity and performance review and development.
- Develop systematic mechanisms for ensuring that staff has opportunities for reflection and learning.
- Invest in leadership development.
- Our revised ALPS to include core measures of programme qualities and mechanism for programme quality assurance.

5. Work-life balance

The TSR2 has raised serious concerns about the 'strong puritanical work ethic' which expects staff to work long and unusual hours. Another related work culture that TSR2 raised was their concern about an overly busy and action-oriented work pattern. Such work ethic and culture is adversely affecting

- family and personal life of staff, particularly for women staff
- quality and sustenance of our work
- ability of staff and organisation to reflect, regenerate and innovate

Response

- Learn from the Asia region's on-going action-research to understand all aspects and causes of the work-life imbalance and bring them into staff discussion and debate.
- Review current HR-OD policies and practices and develop both positive/promotional and protective HR-OD policies that will help staff, particularly women staff, have a healthy work-life balance.
- HR-OD policies, Shared-learning initiatives and the revised ALPS to systematically promote team and staff reflection for regeneration and innovation.
- Ensure that human resources plan commensurate with the work plan/load.

6. Resource Allocation

The TSR2 have raised both the broader aspects of resource allocations in terms of overall energy and attention of ActionAid International and also specifically about the financial resources.

- ActionAid International is working on many issues and doing too many things thus lacking focus and causing dissipation of energy. The impact of this is seen not only on the quality of our work in terms of our ability to influence and bring about change but also on our staff both professionally and personally.
- ActionAid International resource allocation and planning method and process is not transparent and is not integrated in any way with the strategic priorities of the organisation.

Response

- The issue of apparent lack of prioritisation and focus of our work is simply not a function of how many things we do but it also has the qualitative element in terms of how we conceptualise and organise very many things we do. The investment in conceptual clarity will strengthen our ability to see the linkages between and intersection of the variety of things we do and this will help in organising our work in a manner that will clearly express the hierarchy of priorities.
- Our planning, budgeting and reporting methods and systems will be improved to integrate financial resource allocation with the prioritised strategic objectives. All new CSPs as well as the new International Strategy will express priorities (thematic, geographical,

groups of poor and marginalised people) and the linkages between strategic priorities and financial resource allocation.

7. Working Together

The TSR2 had a range of important comments about the way we are organised and related and work with each other internally. The following issues stand out:

- The TSR2 observed that staff are not tightly managed and internal decisions are political negotiations with high transaction costs and low predictability of response or results.
- ActionAid International is strongly vertically organised organisation with little incentive, system or practice for joint work across the boundaries between countries, or between themes, or between support functions and programme functions. This is the case not only between international and national entities but also within the countries.
- The role and quality of leadership of Country Directors with such a concentrated source of power is key to the success of the organisation. There is a need for improving the capacity and accountability (particularly downward accountability) of Country Directors towards a supportive and collaborative leadership style.
- There is an inadequate level of clarity and understanding about internationalisation in the organisation and staff are not yet able to internalise how they will be able to express or use the dual identity of being associated with the national as well as international organisations at the same time.

Response

- Through organisational policies, processes and practices we will strengthen the concept, system and practices of multiple accountability and matrix management.
- Through the revised ALPS we will strengthen the system for downward accountability of leaders and organisational entity across all parts of the organisation.
- Through the revised ALPS we will strengthen the system of joint and matrix planning, budgeting and reporting. In addition, also profile and resource thematic work and the teams in relation to geographical management and teams.
- Systematically discuss the issues of leadership style, quality and standards and incorporate the results to improve the current framework for Country Directors/Thematic Heads and support them with the necessary capacity strengthening inputs.
- Debate and develop frameworks, standards and programmes for new leadership development in ActionAid International.
- Immediately embark on a programme and process of knowledge sharing about internationalisation in those countries where the work on affiliate development is in progress. Then combined with the internal roll-out/launch of the new International Strategy, carry out the next wave of total knowledge sharing on internationalisation. Regional Directors with support from the Communications Director and Governance Coordinator to lead this process.

8th September 2004