

ActionAid International
Taking Stock II
Report on the Reports
2004
by
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I. Introduction.....	3
II. Important Lessons to Share Widely within and outside of Action Aid	4
III. Gender Lags	5
IV. Rights Based Approach and Uncertainties	6
V. Partnerships	7
VI. Use of Language	8
VII. Internationalization	9
VIII. Resource Mobilization and Allocation	9
IX. Accountability and Learning	10
X. Internal Organization	10
XI. Conclusion	11
XII. FURTHER REFLECTIONS on TAKING STOCK 2.....	12

I. Introduction

Our team reviewed Fighting Poverty together within the framework of Action Aid's values, goals and methodologies. The Taking Stock 2 Team worked to understand how to make its review manageable and productive by using the original Terms of Reference (TOR) and then focusing on seven themes:

1. Advocacy
2. Gender
3. Partnerships
4. Internationalization
5. Resource mobilization and allocation (finance)
6. Accountability and learning
7. Internal organization (relationships)

There were visits to different countries: Kenya, United Kingdom, Ethiopia, Italy, Sierra Leone, India, Vietnam, and Guatemala. In addition there were phone conversations with people in different countries, meetings with program staff, team meetings in London, Ethiopia and India. In addition there was a meeting with international Directors in London and a meeting with Ramesh Singh, the Asia Director and the Country Directors of India and Afghanistan in New Delhi. There was much reading material added to by Action Aid's process of organizational documentation. Writings from Ramesh Singh and Koy Thomson added to the richness of the materials received. As did phone conversation with three Board members.

The visits to the countries enable the team to choose which stakeholders to see. Managerial and non-managerial staff participated in the review. Stakeholders were seen independently thereby allowing freer and fuller discussions. Each time at the end of the meeting there was a de-briefing with staff members invited by the Country Director.

The team was very careful to always state that it was not doing an evaluation. Instead we said that we were trying to learn as much as practicable. We limited our comments to observations. The observations do not always agree and that in itself may be worth exploring to see where the disagreement lines fall and why. This has not stopped us from making recommendations although some object to making them as recommendations. . Among us we come down on different sides of the line whether or not these can be called recommendations. What we do think is that we owe Action Aid our judgment after this effort was made. It goes without saying that we do not feel we have the authority or legitimacy to do more than state what our thinking is.

The process received the full cooperation of the Action Aid International staff and logistical details were well carried out within country by individual administrative officers in country. The active work of Antonella Mancini and Ethlet Chiwaka merit special attention for consistent excellence over a long period of time. Field visits ran the gamut of quality and some of that is reflected in the individual reports.

Three items stand out and deserve mention because they are shared by the whole team and it is reflected in the individual reports.

- 1. The Action Aid staff is uniformly dedicated and committed;**
- 2. In many situations it faces risky and adverse circumstances and acts courageously.**
- 3. The process itself reflects well on Action Aid as an open organization.**

Therefore it is important to recognize that our respect for Action Aid has an organization has increased. We all respected its work before we started. Why else would we undertake this assignment?

A word is in order about the hard working team. It worked well together. It operated under difficult time constraints and some of the inattentive travel arrangements made a difficult situation more difficult. This was not a last minute crowd but each of us profitably could have used more time for reflection and writing.

A word is also in order about the reports. We brought our own experience and style to these reports. We are also influenced by our own experience and I am confident that the reader will respect that experience. Therefore, we do not necessarily agree on all points. Sometimes I suspect that we do not agree with ourselves but want to find ways of exploring critical points. These matters are stated in part to stimulate discussion so Action Aid can work its way through important matters. These differences do not diminish the value of what has been produced. You are receiving the thrust and substance of what each writer attempted to convey.

What follows is my effort at trying to place the work of the reports in some context drawing on the individual's own contributions.

II. Important Lessons to Share Widely within and outside of Action Aid

Here are five illustrative lessons that should be trumpeted within the organization. There are obviously others. They deal with Action Aid having an effect on improving people's lives. But there is not enough of the right kind of organizational story telling that takes pride in achievement and imagination without bragging.

Action Aid has created a rich experience in the work it is doing to advance the Rights Based Approach (RBA). There was clarity in RBA as a driving force within Action Aid International (AAI). In candid moments of joy and pride it comes through as a soul force to those who are in the midst of its work. Clearly fighting poverty and RBA are linked. Each needs the other.

Innovation is possible in demanding situations. We saw this in Sierra Leone with the efforts made at giving women a chance to work away from their family but receive an allowance in the form of days off in order to have more time with family.

Rights based work can take place in violent and conflict situations. Look at the work done by Peace and Justice workers in Gujarat after the communal violence broke out.

A passion exists for zero tolerance for corruption. The zero tolerance is a matter that permeates the organization.

No consistent steps have been taken to assure that these matters are well known within the organization. The advantage of their being well known goes beyond telling a story that beams with pride. Good examples are actions to learn from and some of them may course through the organization. We know there are many other examples.

At the same time it is important to note that Action Aid is part of something larger than itself. It has value and it does not have to be unique to have value. A noting of its achievements are in order and so is modesty about being unique.

III. Gender Lags

Eighteen examples of Action Aid advances were made in Kamla Bhasin's report. These advances have been made since Taking Stock 1. They include a range of matters flow from Gender goals being centrally located in Fighting Poverty Together (FPT). They encompass central and practical steps such as putting a comprehensive gender policy and a policy against sexual harassment. The organizational advances are important and go so far as to integrate gender issues in marketing, development and media work. That has its credibility assured because of the policies in place and gender's incorporation in ALPS, REFLECT and Stepping Stones. Lots of country activities are also cited which adds to the advances made by women.

So what is the problem? It is real and is central to achieving an effective RBA as Kamla Bhasin's report makes clear. The observation, well grounded with documentation, is that the cross cutting aspects of gender are, an important AAI principle, "is not internalized by a large cross section of the staff." That leads to the women being made invisible, and therefore ghettoized, and therefore ignored except as an occasional afterthought or when reminded to include it.

Illustrative examples include gender free documents, an absence of the analysis of gender subordination, limiting gender inequalities to poverty elimination. The effect of all of this is to take the politics out of the issue. Taking the politics out of gender has larger implications for the whole RBA which if it is to advance must be political. That is critical because there is a lack of clarity about what gender means as a concept.

One matter that clearly comes through: in Action Aid the time for dealing with matters of patriarchy has clearly come.

Appropriate interventions do not take place by the Action Aid staff. The example cited in detail in Simon Matsvai's report, and referenced by David Cohen, are noted not to criticize Sierra Leone but to demonstrate what probably reflects a pattern within Action

Aid. Gender free in publications translates to being gender neutral in vital situations. Here is what Simon Matsvai reported in rich detail:

In Wellington, Sierra Leone, the Area Development Committee (ADC) of one of the localities started off with enthusiasm. It set itself to address the basic needs of the community including water, shelter and income generating activities to help communities meet their basic needs. At the beginning of the leadership of the AADC, the community organization was made up of 6 women and 5 men. They worked well. Women's group in water and traditional birth attendants worked well and were making some income for the members. Men's activity groups were not working well and the members were not making any income.

The upshot of all this is that the 6 women did not chair or hold leadership in the ADC. They were intimidated. The 6 women soon became 4 and the 5 men became 7. AASL and the Program Manager chose not to intervene. The Committee failed to report back to the community groups. The men's groups have collapsed.

We are all familiar with an organizer's judgments of allowing groups to make their mistakes and learn from it. But with 6 women, and none to serve as a leader, and with intimidation, should there not be intervention by AASL.

The larger issue is how does AAI facilitate conversation on the kind of question of supporting people who are not familiar with various organizational and democratic processes and need coaching and mentoring. Is there capacity to sustain such help?

IV. Rights Based Approach and Uncertainties

The important advances in RBA outlined in David Cohen's report hang with uncertainty and made more so by the problems identified in undermining women's equality.

An effective RBA has to have a clear organizing strategy within countries and internationally, engage international policy systems, have a clear conceptual framework of RBA in the context of current governance institutions, have comfort with power analysis and an the exercise of a collaborative style of leadership. As Alex Jacobs points out it has to deal with understanding the process of oppression rather than the results of the oppression.

All of this is necessary to attack problems systemically, to create system change. There has been excellent RBA work but so far the significant matter is not that there have been no changes in power structures or the root causes of poverty have not been tackled at any level of governance. What is striking is that these matters, including systemic change, are not part of the discourse at Action Aid.

There is a need for political education within Action Aid and with its partners as well. I was shocked to learn from two senior Action Aid staffers that they had not voted in the recent Indian election. Somehow their registration was not right but they had not bothered

to have it corrected. I am familiar with one refrain that comes from some development workers about the general uselessness of voting. Since no fundamental differences exist between the parties, voting does not matter. (These staffers did not hold to such a view. It was just in a large country their vote did not matter all that much.) That is highly disrespectful to those who do vote sometimes at risk and often with long waits in line.

I bring this out because there is a clear need for political education in Action Aid. Absent conceptual clarification on RBA, gender and other matters that go to challenging systems, Action Aid will limp in its efforts instead of thinking through how to challenge power strategically.

A political education leads to a sharp conceptual understanding of core concepts such as Rights Based Approach, gender, power and other critical concepts. If an organization is to be political and non-partisan an active political education leads to core competencies.

What are the analytic competencies needed to deal with the state and its apparatus to set policies equitably that govern people's lives? My colleagues rightly ask what benefits come from international level issue based work, and the risks of engagement are raised in the various reports. At the same time the International Directors see the connection between RBA work, and how the emphasis on RBA, also means factoring in the International Financial Institutions and therefore a key question is what core competencies are needed to engage the World Bank, the IMF and other IFIs?

V. Partnerships

Partnerships are a strong mindset within Action Aid. They can be categorized in four ways as pointed out by Simon Matsvai:

1. Short term with communities or project groups and may be formal or informal.
2. Institutionalized projects that are between a CP and large international donors that are either bi-lateral or multi-lateral.
3. Partnerships with government departments or specialized agencies
4. Institutional relationships with CBOs created for sustaining Das through participation of the communities.

Action Aid has made a commitment to facilitate the strengthening of institutional relationships with CBOs. Alex Jacobs reminds us, in his report, that it is important to conceptualize the difference between direct implementation and working through partners.

Lots of issues emerged about partnerships. An issue that arose out of our visits is how the word is used to cover many different situations. The use of partnerships in the Action Aid lexicon leads to conceptual cloudiness.

In advancing an RBA agenda, connected to gender and elimination of poverty and patriarchy, partnerships needs conceptual clarification. In Simon Matsvai's list the

emphasis should be on #4 and their connection to CBOs. There is a special road to hoe in working with partners. Alex Jacobs rightly tells us in his report that Action Aid has to respect the principles of decentralization and the uses of power. At the same time a Partner has to reflect, or at least be consistent with, Action Aid values. Nobody in Action Aid would defend partnering with a group neutral on human rights or on gender.

Another danger in the expanded and current use of partnerships is that it misleads too much. Funding an organization of sex workers does not mean that Action Aid is working with sex workers when it is funding partner to work with sex workers.

Irene Guijt has added valuable observations in dealing with partnerships. They add to the comprehensiveness and depth of our understanding of the Partnership relationships. Let me include them as she identified them.

1. Well known to Action Aid (AA) are local partnerships with CBOs (new or co-created or pre-dating AA's arrival) and federations of CBOs that are the mechanisms through which much DA/DI work is undertaken. These are of two types: with funding and sometimes without funding but providing moral support, access to information, support on strategic planning and other related matters.
2. Networks or coalitions of CBOs and NGOs (e.g. the Drought Mitigation Network and the Disability Network each in Orissa and SUCAM in Kenya) in which AA can have multiple roles—partially or wholly funding some of the network members, being a network member itself, undertaking capacity-building work of the network to enhance its potential for ongoing action.
3. National level partnerships that has AA serving as a donor. These are short term or long term (e.g. one year vs three years in Kenya) that largely put AA in the donor role but also involve other roles in the longer-term relationships.
4. National level partnerships with AA as a recipient of the funding (e.g. with DFID in Kenya) or in implementation partnership with government departments or with specialized agencies. In these relationships AA often fulfills multiple roles.
5. Coalitions at the national level in which AA is one of many others and has no particular extra weight.

The discussions on the understanding of partnerships points to its being part of the language discussion as well.

VI. Use of Language

Language matters. Words that are not used can be devalued such as feminism.

Words that do not reflect a rights approach such as beneficiaries create a dependent relationship instead of one of agency.

Partnerships create confusion as one word serves different ideas.

Caution should also be exercised around the use of the word empowerment. Not only in Action Aid but in other organizations as well empowerment is used to mean empower others. This flies in the face of people who build power coming from organizing, creating their own agency and recognizing that power stems from relationships.

The suggestion has been made in the RBA report that a glossary be developed to create a rights based vocabulary. That could develop words that motivate as well as word that sap energy and action.

VII. Internationalization

What is clear about internationalization is that it is accepted as a given. It is not a question of whether but how and at what pace?

A central question that resides under the table is identified in Alex Jacobs' report. Will internationalization add value to the efforts by an individual nation? One item that consistently emerged is that people in country expected Action Aid to be able to represent their needs and voices—nobody suggested the how or what the processes of decision-making should be—but that seems to be an expectation that comes out in conversation or when probed on that matter.

Clearly there is a mystery about the process of internationalization. The danger is that there will be reliance on the formal documents that appear to be prepared with care. But these are matters that professionals handle to meet the various legal requirements. They prevent legal trouble. They do not make rumors or misinformation evaporate.

What is needed is a process that surfaces questions that people have, allows the organization to participate in and actually does good by dispelling the endless myths that sprout up in such situations. The process asks people in the different countries to ask the questions they wanted asked, raise them and have Action Aid International create the “common song sheet” to have everyone working from the same set of answers to those frequently asked questions.

VIII. Resource Mobilization and Allocation

One of the biggest challenges that any social justice organization faces—development, human rights, social-movement—is to have the finance and administrative teams feel that they are part of the larger effort.

Action Aid has maintained a high level of financial control and that professionalism should open the doors to the necessary collaboration. Misuse of funds and suspicion over their misuse has created exacting standards of financial control. That is accomplished with professional standards and appropriate deployment of staff. The nature of the work Action Aid is in makes for expectations that upward financial accountability has merit. But the culture goes deeper as a number of Country Program teams have provided capacity building support to Partners.

A series of suggestions from Alex Jacobs include asking Country Directors to take on the explicit responsibility for involving finance teams in program work, and finance teams would additionally spend a minimum of two weeks in the field with poor and marginalized communities.

Other matters to explore are increasing financial accountability to communities through ALPS.

Challenges arise that flow from Action Aid's organizational structures. Simon Matsvai identified one such problem in dealing with horizontal working groups. The horizontal working groups dealing with Action Aid's thematic issues give the structure the potential to be flexible—one can say lithe when action is needed—by involving people across the organization. That adds the value of pooling expertise and having reinforcements in the middle of a hard fought issue.

In practical terms the horizontal working groups appear to be weak. Staff has to prioritize its own line functions. It has to do so before it finds time for the horizontal functions. This appears to hit gender-working groups the hardest.

In the RBA report horizontal work was identified as useful, perhaps necessary, to advance such an agenda. That adds up to a lost opportunity when the horizontal groups are not working.

It raises the larger question whether management systems at Action Aid stand in the way of meeting vital organizational objectives.

IX. Accountability and Learning

This has been identified as a major topic for Action Aid. It is referenced in the various reports Irene Guijt will cover important issues concerning accountability and learning in a complementary report

X. Internal Organization

Our team picked up different items and they deserve attention. A hierarchical culture within the different Action Aids comes through in our various observations. This is not based on isolated examples. There are times in any social change organization when internal cohesion and tight discipline is needed. But can social change work be sustained in a dominating hierarchical culture?

There are also questions but what the nature of leadership is? Is it personal or collaborative?

Certainly the role of the Country Directors, and the power they wield within the organization, is a regular conversation topic. Are there ways of creating forms of

downward accountability that would apply to finance, resource mobilization and a rights based agenda?

Going back to Ramesh Singh's linking of development organizations, human rights and social mobilization the question that has not been asked is if you join Action Aid are you more movement or more career oriented. Are you part of a movement or are you advancing your career? Do the management systems increase change or prevent it?

X1. Conclusion

We think organizational and institutional issues have been identified that enables Action Aid to look ahead over the next years. This is not meant to supply the answers but to stimulate the conversation that in turn will supply the answers by Action Aid itself—its community that includes Boards of Directors, staff, partners and most critical of all those it works with and serves.

XII. FURTHER REFLECTIONS on TAKING STOCK 2

Having now read the four submitted reports twice and dipped into parts additional times, I asked myself how would I talk about the incredible and memorable Action Aid experience I had and I think that my fellow team members had. In this instance I am, of course, speaking only for my self. What stands out!

I. The Present

1. People making a difference in people's lives by tackling outrages and trying to do something about them. In Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, India, Vietnam and Guatemala there are striking examples of people working to improve people's lives, and doing so, and not standing still for injustices and often facing risk in doing their work. My colleagues in Kenya reported the same.

What also stands out is that in meeting all of the organizational demands the value of these powerful experiences that are taking place do not emphasize enough what is being achieved. As a consequence the achievements are not sufficiently well recognized or celebrated within the organization.

Nor is what is being learned consistently captured for forms of organized and organizational appreciative inquiry and critical thinking within country programs or across Action Aid borders. Appreciative inquiry and critical thinking are methodologies that can be integrated into REFLECT which can be more widely used.

There are stories to be told—these are powerful and memorable—and they are not being told nor recorded in ways that resonate.

2. To fight poverty, and overcome the growing inequalities that our different societies experience, Action Aid has to be generically political and completely non-partisan. This is the clearest route to fighting with the poor, those who are marginalized and oppressed, and at the same time standing with them. Action Aid can continue to do what it is doing and it will improve people's lives. The question is will its impact be lasting? Will it have contributed to changing oppressive systems?

The commonality that stands out for me is forms of struggle that historically comes from oppressive systems including imperial ones that leave in place, and indeed strengthen, political, economic and social systems that oppress people.

Understanding that oppression and the struggle to free peoples from that oppression has a deep meaning within the Action Aid community. Action Aid meets the test of a learning and open organization—I know there is plenty of room for improving specific practices—because it undertakes serious country reviews and the Taking Stock 2 review is part of a culture of review and examination. That culture has to be

understood and appreciated for matters such as zero tolerance for corruption and the steady move toward a Rights Based Approach that encompasses matters that deal with women's rights.

II. What Is Next?

1. Tackling key organizational questions of implementation and initiation so that Action Aid is building a community of social change practitioners across borders. Three stand out for me:
 - (a) implementing internationalization so that it is well understood by the staff, partners and contributors;
 - (b) recognizing that women's equality is central to the thrust of RBA and initiating efforts to understand and tackle patriarchy as a social system;
 - (c) connecting organizing with partnering and recognizing that partnerships are central to being political and therefore require a sharper delineation.
2. These organizational steps help Action Aid to be political in this sense: it takes on the cast of an organization that initiates, innovates and invents. It does so at all levels—local, national, regional and international on systemic questions that affect systems and policy.
3. One critical strategy is to understand and provide experiences on the securing and negotiating of political and public space to advance Action Aid's work. The importance of that is seen in the work of all the southern countries our team visited. Each country was creating or trying to create such space.
4. From our discussions I found that three matters seem to stand out as critical for state action to do macro policy that will have local impacts as well.
 - (a) budget policy that deals with expenditures and revenues; capacity building in this area will also strengthen local efforts in public budget allocations;
 - (b) governance questions especially those that broaden and deepen participation at the local level and also deal with institutionally embedded corruption.
 - (c) relationships between NGOs and government authorities on matters dealing with registration, conducting public business and the space to engage in issue campaigns; some questions on this matter stem from the consequences of internationalization.
5. In operational terms on each of these matters it would be useful for Action Aid International to be well connected to those doing cutting edge work on these matters. The work in India pioneered by M.D. Mistry and John Samuel is well known. Connecting to the international Budget Project (begun in Ethiopia) presents opportunities to connect with lively networks that can provide effective guidance.

There are also appropriate networks to connect with on matters affecting corruption and NGO-government relations. This is the chance for Action Aid International to serve in a facilitating and catalyzing role with individual countries.

6. What are the ways of creating an effective experience that will provide insights on negotiating with government, and building valued relationships and experience, when there are people and/or ministries that can be worked with, when to confront government to create a political effect from organizing and applying pressure strategically and when to pursue parallel actions because nothing can be done to force constructive changes?
7. The unquestioned emphasis on RBA work brings about a sharper focus on Action Aid International providing capacities and intelligence to influence power players On the international scene, namely the IFIs at the world and regional levels including the World Bank, IMF and regional banks dealing with Asia, Africa and Latin America.

III. Organizational Questions to Bear in Mind

1. Given the drive to be an active organization that advances RBA and women's equality do management systems within Action Aid sap or release energy for work that initiates, innovates and invents? Does it allow for effective horizontal work? Do Action Aid practices and systems enable leadership to emerge that is recognized within and outside of the organization? Is leadership that transforms through building well understood?
2. Does the current use of language by Action Aid reflect the emphasis on RBA, an emphasis on women's equality, the preferences needed for the poor and a passion for overcoming oppressive systems and attaining equality?
3. What are the workable ways to hold Country Directors responsible for advancing RBA, women's equality and a sharper political presence that is non-partisan?
4. How can the fund-raising teams represent well the programmatic aspects of the organization? Has thought been given to include North America in fund raising?

IV. World View Considerations

1. In the opening of my report I was struck by Ramesh Singh's important insight that development work, human rights work and social movement organizing and mobilization were finding ways to converge and create valued synergies to advance a Rights Based Approach. Assuming the validity of that insight what identity does Action Aid wish to create over the next 5 years. If it is part of a social movement does it have to have something distinctive in its organizational portfolio? Or can it stand on what it contributes to improve people's lives and the oppressive systems it helps change or modify?
2. Are there opportunities through forms of international, global and trans-national advocacy create civil society power centers that deepen and broaden the efforts to advance a Rights Based Agenda, with a heavy emphasis on women's equality and the tackling of oppressive social systems? Are there ways of making the World Social Forum a strategic center for planning and initiating change? Is there a way

to create a southern power center in global social justice efforts that influences agendas for northern supporters and allies to support to the fullest.

3. There are reports that the President of Brazil, with the support of the governments of India and South Africa wants to launch an anti-hunger initiative. Does such an effort hold promise to build a countervailing power to force changes on northern governments who are wedded to neo-liberal practices. Change agents in global civil society—Action Aid can be a prime player—can be working with governments such as the possible Lula effort to keep the pressures on, to advance ideas, to build allies in the north and west and to enable agendas to be set by southern challengers to the neo-liberal model.