

## New emergencies and the governance link

*Can emergencies reduction be attainable without an effective public accountability? How can vulnerable people hold governments accountable?*

*An ActionAid briefing paper*

*April 2003*

### Executive summary

*Widespread suffering as a result emergencies like famine or flooding is often caused by the neglect of political leaders or their failure to act proactively. The victims have little opportunity to impose sanction on their leaders – other than ‘not to vote’; particularly in young democracies where other accountability mechanisms and drivers are fragile. High political commitment is required in order to achieve a substantial reduction in emergencies – but this remains far from commonplace. The important question is, how can disaster reduction be possible unless governments are held accountable to the poor and politically marginalised victims?*

*Emphasising government performance, this report presents an overview of the significance of public accountability in emergencies reduction.*

*Using evidence from case studies carried out in Ethiopia and Bangladesh, the report argues that, without sufficient attention to public accountability, sustainable reduction of emergencies is unobtainable. The report also demonstrates ways to place vulnerable people at the centre of the public accountability debate and practices.*

### The context with key overview

With the aim of promoting solutions to reduce risk from natural hazards<sup>1</sup>, the UN International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) ran throughout the 1990s. By the end of the decade the number of people at risk was growing at a rate of 70 to 80 million per year, suggesting that the UN’s efforts were seeing little in the way of positive effect.

Beyond statistics this raises many other issues. While governments have the primary obligation for reduction of emergencies by protecting the vulnerable and undertaking adequate measures – that requires a ‘political commitment’. How far is this from happening?

Flash floods in 2002 in the northern part of Bangladesh showed us how corruption of public officials<sup>ii</sup>, coupled with an emergency situation, can trigger a major disaster. In

Gujarat, communal violence illustrated the terrible consequences of state inaction in the face of mass murder<sup>iii</sup>. In Malawi, the International Monetary Fund was accused of advising the government to sell off their strategic food grain reserve – one of the key factors that later contributed to a widespread hunger and famine. This issue raises many more important questions about the accountability of the Malawian government to its citizens.

### What about reduction?

While the constitution of Ethiopia provides the policy objective that ‘government shall take measures to avert any natural and man made disasters’, over the past decade the number of people requiring food aid, and the amount of international food aid requested by the government, have both been increasing at an alarming rate. Despite this, in the period 1993-2000, defence expenditure as a share of GDP has increased in far greater terms than expenditure on agriculture and health.

These pictures are not isolated snapshots – they raise many important questions about the role of governments the world over in the new emergencies – political neglect, corruption, lack of commitment and retreat from accountability.

So, how do powerless widow Amina in Bangladesh, dalit Bindu in India, disabled Okello in Ethiopia, little Juan in Latin America and their communities escape from poverty; make a living without losing their family members in emergencies like flood or famine? How do they hold their government accountable when they are not enough of a political priority to ensure actions are taken to help them? The first step towards helping them cope with the effects of emergencies is empowerment – giving them the ability to hold their own governments accountable. It is not enough for governments to be ‘answerable’ when cases such as the above happen every day.

This requires us to find a new analysis and fresh courage to address the emergency problem. In order to this, five fundamental questions need to be answered:

- Who is accountable?
- For what are they accountable?
- By which mechanism they can be held accountable?
- What benefit this would produce?
- If they are not willing to be held accountable; what can powerless people do?

**Architecture of the study**

The study addressed some practical challenges such as the question ‘what differences public accountability can make when government is so constrained by limited capacity and resources’. This also deals with how those powerless victims can hold their government accountable for their performance.

**Box-1 Five stages – when is government accountable?**

- a) The duty bearers define, respect and practise their obligation in response and reduction;
- b) Responsiveness: taking action based on the duties in a way that ensures equitable treatment to all citizens. This may also be applied to creating space for others to take action;
- c) Arrangements are put in place to permit stakeholders to participate in government decision-making that directly affects them;
- d) Provide an account [horizontal and vertical] for their performance and outcomes of action and inaction; and
- e) Mechanisms of sanction, by which the citizen can criticise government and, in extreme cases, have the right to change their government.

**Objectives of the study**

- a) To understand the extent to which public accountability can improve the performance of government in reducing the impact of emergencies.
- b) To generate an understanding of the factors that account for improved accountability.
- c) To test a suggested framework of accountability analysis for ActionAid, which can also be used in similar contexts.

**Accountability and emergencies**

Amartya Sen’s remarkable work on how democracy can prevent famine is the

milestone to the emergency and governance debate. Work of Alex de Wall and Stephen Deverux also raised importance of political process in famine reduction.

While the dominant governance agenda views public accountability as one of the most important elements, there has been less research done in this area than on other elements such as participation or transparency. In the humanitarian arena, there have been a number of initiatives such as accountability projects and others, but emphasis tends to remain on the international level.

Considerable conceptual and practical challenges still remain as to how poor people gain control over these political processes. Again, the question is, how to integrate these perspectives in our development and policy work?

The study conclusions are based in two country case studies – Bangladesh and Ethiopia. Participatory tools were used to engage vulnerable people in accountability debate. While doing a literature review and garnering perspective from wide range of people, the study also undertook a separate analysis on the role of parliament in Ethiopia in famine response and reduction.

The countries were chosen as they represent a non-conflict setting in young and relatively established democracies – meaning that the findings can be applied to other countries in the same situation.

**Key findings**

**1. Public accountability conditions ‘relative performance’ of local government in responding to emergencies: evidence from two Kebeles in Ethiopia**

Separate participatory analysis in two pre-selected Kebeles in Ethiopia revealed a large difference in their relative performance<sup>iv</sup> in responding to emergencies. The vulnerable women groups developed their own indicators to measure government performance and accountability and then they score this and come up with aggregated score for both the Kebeles. Using performance-accountability matrix that clearly suggests that level of accountability of Kebeles to the poor and marginalized people can explain the differences in relative performance in emergency response.

In sum, where accountability is high performance is also high.

Two Kebeles with contrast performance in famine response	Performance score	Accountability score
Goroge, Oromia region [Selected as good performance Kebele]	387	384
Wanjashola, SNNP region [Selected as poor performance Kebele]	203	182

What factors account for public accountability in those local structures?

- a) A **pluralistic institutional** environment is important. Traditional institutions in the good performance Kebele helps to bring checks and balance; amplify people’s demand and maintain a power balance as a strong lever to influence local government.
- b) People’s **level of influence** over the institutions constituted by: improved access to information, accessibility, and **solidarity support** from other pro-accountability actors such as NGOs, local traditional organisations etc. Poor people’s level of influence over the institutions makes a large difference in the level of accountability in two Kebeles.
- c) People’s **accessibility** to the Kebele leaders and institutions not only increase **transparency** but also help people demand accountability.
- d) **Local democratic process** like ‘fair election’ and ‘performance evaluation’ contributes to bring local checks and balance and empower people to demand accountability and impose sanctions in case of non-compliance with their expectations.
- e) **Value of the institutions** e.g. to what extent Kebele leaders are responsive to the concerns of their community. ‘Kebele leaders are constantly asking Woreda administration to satisfy our emergency food needs. However, they are not able to satisfy because they

cannot pass Woreda level and reach higher levels of government.’

**Box-2 What is performance outcome as a benefit of public accountability?**

- Fair selection of who receives help
- Fair distribution of relief materials
- Local government raised concern to and bargain the higher authority for timely and adequate relief
- At national level, public debate and commitment to reduce emergencies are backed by adequate resources.

▪ **Government obligation**

**2. Government obligation to manage and respond to emergencies lacks legal enforcement in both countries.**

In Ethiopia, government obligations for famine reduction are defined clearly in the constitution as a ‘policy objective’, not as a legally enforceable instrument. International Humanitarian Law and human rights law are yet to be legally enshrined<sup>v</sup>. The National Policy on Disaster Prevention and Management sets ten policy objectives to reduce famine in Ethiopia, including obligation to respond and taking measures to reduce emergencies. Similarly Standing Order, the key disaster management instrument in Bangladesh is merely an administrative procedure. Neither this nor the national disaster management plan has legal a backing.

Neither of the constitutions says that state has an obligation to respond to emergencies; nor do they recognise relief and recovery assistance as a right. The National disaster prevention and management policy of Ethiopia states that ‘no human life shall perish in want of food or relief assistance’ – which is not backed by law – meaning no legal action can be taken in the event of violation.

Type of obligation	Impact/benefit on accountability
No responsibility	No accountability
Political obligation e.g. policies	Help the political actors to ‘mobilise pressure’
Legal obligation e.g. local law guarantee people’s right,	People can go for legal action, ask for compensation if emergencies resulted from governance inaction

▪ **Accountability mechanism**

**3. No unique mechanism delivers accountability in all contexts; nor there is a best mechanism to promote accountability. There is a need of diverse and pluralistic setting where actors are equipped to use those.**

While a clear, visible and accessible mechanism is the precondition for public accountability, no one single mechanism can pave the way to total accountability. Nor can one mechanism work in a variety of contexts. An improved accountability is a combined action of mechanism, drivers and stakeholders. For example, a free media can be a mechanism at the same time as an actor demands accountability on behalf of an interest group. If the media is to expose an abuse of power or non-compliance, it can only be successful if other actors, e.g. opposition political parties and civil society have a presence and are willing to back up demands for accountability.

**3.1 Parliamentary oversight is weakened by partisan factors**

Standing committee, public accounts committee and public hearing are the component of oversight through which elected representatives hold executives accountable.

A parliamentary standing committee can ensure that executives are responsible for the policy achievements, which can be hindered if members of the committee are not selected from opposition.

‘Partisan factor’ constrains parliamentary oversight in both the countries. In Ethiopia, all members of the Rural Development Affairs Committee, which oversees disaster management, are from the ruling coalition. In Bangladesh, until end of November 2002 standing committees were not formed, due to a contentious boycott of parliament by the opposition parties.

One of the key obstacles for checks and balance in Ethiopia is that all members of the ruling coalition and executives are also politically appointed from same ruling coalition. Careful observation suggests that no mechanism exist that ensures executives out of partisan objectives.

A positive move is that the federal parliament of Ethiopia has been practicing

public hearing, which gives public access to parliament through television and radio, but there are still factors hindering this process.

By analysing proceedings of three public hearings in Ethiopian federal parliament on famine issues, the study identified three key problems of public hearing:

- There is no full debate, more of a question and answer session on famine issues in the public hearing.
- There is no mechanism to ensure that the recommendations put forward by the MPs can directly influence decisions on famine.
- Discussion is dominated by the ruling party.

**3.2 Public interest litigation – a safeguard for the victims of emergencies**

While the absence of legal obligation is a challenge, if government does not comply with its obligations what can victims do? Such cases, Public Interest Litigation (PIL) have been used in few developing countries<sup>vi</sup> to impose sanctions and claim compensation from government. ‘The concept of public interest litigation and *locus standi* has been mooted for expression of the voiceless, disadvantaged, weaker, oppressed and those unable to gain access to the court of law and justice to ventilate their grievances.’<sup>vii</sup>

While democratic elections remain the principal mechanism to impose sanction on government, PIL can be an excellent method of holding governments accountable between elections.

**Box-3 Public interest litigation in India**

In 2001, large parts of the country were hit by severe drought and people were living with acute hunger – while government warehouses were overflowing with grain. The public interest litigation (PIL) filed in the Supreme Court of India in 2001 by the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) demanded the Right to Food and Right to Work for the drought affected people. It was agreed with civil society groups that AA India would gather and present the case information and field level primary data and analysis. In response to the PIL, the Supreme Court created a number of new legal entitlements to food and immediate implementation of PDS and others. But we should note that India already includes a constitutional right to food, information, and work. Success came from joining hands with people’s movements, civil liberties groups and pro-poor lawyers.

Problem of PIL is clearly different in both the countries. In Ethiopia: a). no legal obligations, b). lawyers are licensed by government, which hinder their free practices, and c). absence of independent judiciary, poor people lack of access to justice.

In Bangladesh, successful PIL, e.g. slum eviction, was constrained by the government’s lack non-compliance with court order. Compare to government non-compliance only a few organisations work on PIL; they have a focus on broader civil-political rights.

- **Accountability drivers and stakeholders**

**4. Pluralistic political environment is a pre-requisite for improved accountability**

A pluralistic institutional and political setting is probably the most important precondition for improved public accountability. At both local and national level, presence of diverse institutions is important to bring checks and balance between government and citizen. An important challenge is that institutions are not homogenous, nor all are pro-poor. Pro-poor institutions with an accountability agenda are helpful for poor people to hold government accountable.

**Box- 4: how a pluralistic setting brings checks and balance in Bangladesh – simplified analysis**

The Bangladesh government is conscious of criticism about performance [e.g. ignoring emergencies]. Once the relatively free media [only one television and radio channel is owned by government] criticise government and publish follow up news, this can easily be taken up by an opposition political party as their agenda. Civil society would launch a campaign. The public interest litigation group will go to the relatively independent court.

Government is concerned about their popularity and votes, because they will face an election next time under a caretaker government.

**4.1 Opposition political party—key element of institutional checks and balance**

Inside and outside parliament, the role of the opposition political party in promoting public accountability is to:

- provide feedback to the responsibility holders and amplify citizens’ voices
- put political pressure on the government to meet its accountability
- demand accountability and strengthen citizenship

A key challenge found for public accountability that reduces emergencies – extent to which: political parties are committed to the pro-poor issues like emergencies and environment that enable or disable them to operate. In Bangladesh, only one out of the four political parties’ manifestos talks about disaster preparedness. Again, there was little discussion on the issue in both 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> parliament<sup>viii</sup>.

In Ethiopia, pluralistic politics is hampered by a total lack of opposition parties in some areas, and the fact that in areas where they do exist, they are far weaker than the ruling party.

Number of political party and members in some selected Woredas in 4 regions<sup>ix</sup>

Region	Number of political party in operation	Party membership	
		Ruling EPRDF	Opposition
Afar	1	2588	--
Amhara	1	4529	--
SNNRP	2	3241	150
Addis Ababa City administration	5	1618	2000

**4.2 Role of civil society**

Participation and transparency can only be achieved by amplifying the voice of the people at meso and macro level. Civil society, particularly NGOs and media, play an important role in achieving this. They can also create demand for accountability by undertaking various measures like civic education, raising awareness on rights and responsibility etc.

Without a feedback and follow up mechanism accountability faces many hurdles. In Ethiopia, for example, key recommendations from the parliamentary public hearing never been implemented because they were never followed up.

**4.3 Fear of losing popularity, legal action by citizens and public criticism are the three important drivers that lead to improved accountability.**

To achieve accountability, these are constrained by people’s limited participation of citizens in the political process, government control over media and civil society and limited pluralistic politics. Wider practices of demand for accountability by civil society and media are constrained by a non-supportive regulatory mechanism and lack of political incentives from government.

**4.4 Role of free media in enhancing public accountability: through exposing non-compliance, feedback and transparency.**

When effective debate is a precondition, transparency in the form of right to information is a breeding ground for accountability. The UNDP Human Development Report<sup>x</sup> rightly denotes that ‘as a watchdog, checking abuse of power, increasing government transparency and public holding official accountable for their action in the court of public opinion’.

A capable media is effective when political institutions are ready to use this news to mobilise people. Capacity of media is also an important aspect, but one that many of the leading Ethiopia cannot afford, leading to a lack of grassroots correspondents. But, in Bangladesh, sub-district level journalists expose power abuse particularly corruption in relief and social services. ‘Reporting on corruption is a threat to the corruption of officials and elected representatives<sup>xi</sup>’. But media reporting alone is not effective unless there is political group who can utilise this type of news. One of the grassroots politicians in the Kurigram district stated: ‘Before, the local political wing used to be concerned about media reports of corruption. In fact, they used to be the strong instrument for political mobilisation. Now there is such a lot of such news, people have become immune to it.’

Independence is one of the media’s great potential strengths, but the media is market as well as a social actor<sup>xii</sup>. And media is not a homogenous group – it represents diverse interests. Within that context is how to promote a pro-poor accountability that could contribute to reduction of emergencies.

ActionAid partner organisation South Asia Partnership Bangladesh is assisting grassroots journalist to develop a coastal journalist forum, which raises issues such as the right to cyclone shelter, on behalf of poor people.

**Box-5 How the media plays an important role in new emergencies**

Following the 2002 floods in north Bangladesh – while agencies were busy planning interventions, a national daily published a report saying that the flood was a result of corruption. The report stated firstly that the previous year’s government allocation was less for maintenance of the embankment, and secondly there was huge corruption of government officials. Farmers and local government officials complained – but they did not get noticed.

Finally ActionAid Bangladesh and partners undertook a social audit and presented those findings to agencies and government. Media again started follow-up story.

Government immediately suspended some of the high officials pending an official inquiry.

**5. Accountable local governance is the first precondition for poor people to make government accountable**

Effective local governance is the important precondition that enables poor and marginalized people to demand accountability from their government, which potentially reduces emergencies. Proactive local government amplifies poor people’s voices to the higher level.

**Box-6 Political pressure matters: micro example in Ethiopia**

“Sometimes we send a special request to the Woreda for more relief materials, outside of the early warning system. We do this because of pressure from Keble administration. And they are also pressurised by the local affected people, particularly the elderly.”

--Group discussion with Dalocha Woreda DPP Committee [government], Ethiopia.

But, what is effective local governance? Corruption by local government officials in distributing the Vulnerable Group Feeding programme is very high in Bangladesh, while no such evidence was found in Gororya

Kebele in Ethiopia. What accounts for such a difference in their performance?

For local government officials to enable poor people to demand for accountability and respond to those demands, is not something that happens automatically. For example, in Bangladesh two thirds of rich villagers are satisfied with Union Council services, while two thirds of the poor are dissatisfied.

Poor people influence and accessibility over local government clearly influence their performance in responding emergencies. Survey in nine representative Unions<sup>xiii</sup> in Bangladesh revealed that villagers complained about the lack of availability and detachment of the UP Chairmen. Again, in the Kebele where we found good accountability poor people have a high degree of accessibility and influence over Kebele Leaders. Poor people's influence over local government works, not on the individual level, but on the collective. The active pro-poor traditional institutions constitute such a pluralistic environment, where checks and balance are found between poor and the Kebele leaders.

An institutional incentive or capacity building approach to improve performance alone may hinder government performance, if pro accountability factors are ignored. Findings indicate that capacity gap and limited resources are two of the constraints of performance. Only by addressing those may result negative because poor people may lose their influence and accessibility over the institutions. Pro-accountability factors like checks and balance, accessibility to the institutions, participation and transparency and empowerment of citizens are not paid sufficient attention.

Capacity building alone in Bangladesh does not reduce corruption in the vulnerable group feeding programme. Rather, experience suggests in some areas where accountability is a part of overall approach it works well<sup>xiv</sup>. In Ethiopia, Gororaya Kebele we found an improved accountability producing good performance outcome because of these factors.

## Conclusion

The key conclusion of the study is that 'public accountability' matters in emergency reduction. Lack of public accountability exacerbates emergencies – and violates people's rights. Improved accountability can guarantee promotion; protection and fulfilment of human rights, and potentially reverse the impact of emergencies.

The central argument of this report is that without a robust and effective culture of public accountability, a sustainable solution to the emergency problem cannot be attained. It promotes debate to include public accountability as a major component in emergency reduction discussion. This focus places vulnerable people at the centre of the public accountability debate.

Accountability is the powerful lever for poor and marginalized people to make non-compliance with their obligations expensive for politicians. The lessons of this study also have relevance beyond Bangladesh and Ethiopia; even in conflict setting where, without accountability, there can be little movement towards peace and justice.

Public accountability is about power. Government is not accountable to the poor and marginalised people when they are less empowered. Access to information, influence over institutions, presence of institutions that balance overall power in favour of poor people, solidarity support from institutions and democratic process at local governance are the key factors behind poor people's empowerment.

A clear obligation is the most important precondition for public accountability. But, the presence of mechanisms like parliamentary oversight, public interest litigation, and free press are necessary for the pro-accountability actors to hold government accountable. But a successful accountable culture is dependent on the degree and willingness of the actors to use those mechanisms.

A pluralistic institutional environment where diverse institutions operate is an important precondition of checks and balance.

Effective local governance is the most important arrangement for poor and marginalised to hold government accountable.

Improved public accountability can be achieved through all level of engagement—within and outside government, but the key aspects are:

1. Empowering poor and vulnerable people
2. Strengthening the mechanism that improve accountability
3. Strengthening and making government obligations legal
4. Strengthening capacity of the stakeholders so that they can use the mechanism effectively

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<sup>i</sup> Living with Risk: A global review of disaster reduction initiatives. IDNDR. UN.

<sup>ii</sup> For detail analysis—see Actionaid Bangladesh newsletters at [www.actionaid-bd.org](http://www.actionaid-bd.org) and What stop hazard becoming disasters? DFID paper for WSSD. [www.dfid.gov.uk](http://www.dfid.gov.uk)  
[http://62.189.42.51/DFIDstage/Pubs/files/wssd\\_neg\\_floods\\_bang.pdf](http://62.189.42.51/DFIDstage/Pubs/files/wssd_neg_floods_bang.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> “We Have No Orders To Save You” State Participation and Complicity in Communal Violence in Gujarat. Human Rights Watch. 2000. NY. USA

<sup>iv</sup> Relative performance is defined by the way a particular unit perform within resources available. For example, fair distribution of relief without discrimination and favourism, selection of needy people, raising voice to the higher authority on their behalf.

<sup>v</sup> As per the Ethiopian constitution all the international instruments that government of Ethiopia has ratified are part of local law. The government ratifies both the human rights and humanitarian laws. Neither the Geneva Conventions of 1949 nor their Additional Protocols have been published in the Negarit Gazeta.

<sup>vi</sup> India has been a pioneer of public interest litigation practices. In Asia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and recently Nepal have started PIL.

<sup>vii</sup> Commenting on the importance of PIL in Bangladesh, Justice A K Badrul Haider  
<sup>viii</sup> Promoting pro-poor issues: role of MPs and major political parties in Bangladesh. ActionAid Bangladesh.

<sup>ix</sup> Data obtain from Dr. Meheret Anenew. Decentralisation and democratic governance in Ethiopia: some lessons of experience and policy implications at the Woreda levels. Forum for social studies. Ethiopia. 2001.

<sup>x</sup> Human Development Report 2002. United Nations Development Programme. Oxford University Press. New York. 2002.

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<sup>xi</sup> Personal discussion with Shafi Khan, District Correspondent of Kurigram. The Daily Prothom Alo. Bangladesh.

<sup>xii</sup> Civil society and political accountability: proposition for discussion. Jonathan Fox. University of Notre Dame. 2002.

<sup>xiii</sup> Center for Analysis and Policy Research (1999). Adopted from Taming Leviathan—reforming governance in Bangladesh. An institutional review. World Bank. Dhaka. 2002

<sup>xiv</sup> Promoting responsive governance and gender justice undertaken by Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangha [BNPS]—a review by Professor Salahuddin Aminuzzaman. Dhaka. 2003.

*This report is circulated for comments.*

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*Further reading*

1. **Public accountability and famine reduction in Ethiopia**
2. **Synthesis report on public accountability and emergencies-Bangladesh and Ethiopian case**

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