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For many of us, 'accountability' has become yet another one of those ubiquitous, fuzzy words that can mean all things to all people. Like *partnership*, *governance*, *enabling environment* and *participation*, a dollar in hand for every time the term *accountability* is used in international forums would yield sufficient funds to resolve some of the world's major crises.

This paper attempts to unpack the term *accountability* specifically with regard to partnerships. This short Practitioner Note aims to supplement "The Partnership Paperchase", a document published by BPD in November 2004 that looks specifically at the triggers, purpose and structure of partnership agreements by way of reviewing partner incentives and motivations. The "Paperchase" document stated quite clearly that it does not matter what specific forms of partnership documentation are called but that the intent of the partners is what lies at the heart of those negotiations. This note aims to clarify angles of accountability that influence how that intent can be more effectively fulfilled.[1]

Like the "Paperchase" document (and most other BPD documents), the aim of this piece is not to be prescriptive but to promote a greater understanding of how different accountability mechanisms can be represented through more careful attention to partnership practices and documentation.[2]

Defining our terms

The UK-based Institute of Social and Ethical Accountability (otherwise known as AccountAbility) usefully distinguish between different forms of accountability:

- Compliance – (being held to account);
- Transparency – (giving an account); and
- Responsiveness – (taking account of).

The author shall use these more precise sub-categories of accountability to explore how they can be reflected in partnership practice.

In this instance, partnership refers to multi-stakeholder relationships that are generally loosely arranged around some commonly held set of tasks or objectives.[3] Partnerships come in a range of shapes and sizes and can exist and operate at the international, national, regional, or local levels. They can be purpose-built around the delivery of a specific set of tasks (the construction of a clinic, 500 water connections, etc.) or they can be created for more wide-ranging purposes (for example, the World Commission on Dams, the Global Reporting Initiative, etc.) Such relationships may incorporate contracts or binding documents. The relationships are not generally regulated in any way but it is assumed that the partners operate within their own regulatory environments.

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[1] This note is meant to fill an interim gap as it supersedes a forthcoming set of documents by AccountAbility who are generating a Partnership Governance and Accountability tool (www.accountability.org.uk)

[2] As with other BPD documents, the author of this note welcomes your contributions and corrections. Numerous colleagues have helped to flesh out these issues in recent months, most notably Leda Stott, Barbara Evans,

Joe McMahon, Tracey Keatman and David Jones. The author also wishes to acknowledge the very practical contributions of the first cohort of BPD's Enhancing Professional Practice Course offered in Nairobi in May 2005 in conjunction with the Water and Sanitation Program – East Africa and The Partnering Initiative.

[3] Please see www.bpdws.org for a variety of BPD and non-BPD materials and web-links that further explore commonly held definitions of the term partnership.

Partnership Accountability

As partnerships become a more prevalent way of addressing social and environmental issues, increasingly critics, partners and beneficiaries alike are rightly beginning to raise the question of "to whom are these constructs accountable?". Early practitioners and analysts in the area made the rather simple assumption that the more actors involved, the greater the likelihood that accountability would be enhanced. Simply stated, the more that participated and had access to partnership processes or the more eyes that were watching, the less chance there would be for wrong-doing.

Whilst this assumption may be generally true, making partnerships work most effectively still proves to be an enormous challenge. Most organisations, managers and leaders are more accustomed to traditional vertical accountability of contracts and other hierarchical constructs. Partnerships, by their very nature of inclusive, equitable and transparent decision-making, suggest the use of far more difficult horizontal decision-making and power sharing. Precisely because more people are watching and the constructs are difficult to manage, accountability mechanisms need to be better understood and defined.

Individual organisations, be they from the public, private or civil society sphere, have a variety of accountabilities that they seek to meet in their normal operations. Partnerships complicate this further by introducing a range of new accountabilities into the mix. Though the choice of partnership structure and management will have an impact, regardless, *partners are meant to be accountable to each other*. Even if in the absence of a regulatory framework that oversees them, *partnerships are also meant to be accountable to external stakeholders*. The specific political, economic and social context in which the partnership operates as well as the culture of the participating organisations, will indeed have implications for how a partnership addresses issues of accountability.[4]

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[4] Please see forthcoming papers by BPD on the "enabling environment" for partnerships.

Partner-to-Partner Accountability

Using AccountAbility's sub-categories for accountability, partners generally must find ways to hold each other to account (compliance), be expected to give each other an account of activities and progress (transparency), and be expected to take account of each others' needs or concerns (responsiveness).

Compliance suggests that there is a sense of predictability, that partners know and have documented what is required to get the job done. It further suggests that there are standards to which the organisations have either voluntarily agreed to adhere or which are statutory. Based on the analysis in *The Partnership Paperchase*, in order to know whether partners are in compliance (to be held to account), the partners need first to have determined and then documented:

- a clear definition of responsibilities for each partner;
- that sufficient resources have been allocated to the task at the right time;
- that appropriate staff have been allocated to the partnership (that they have the skills, mandate, support and motivation to complete their tasks);
- clear governance procedures for making different kinds of decisions for the partnership (including making commitments on behalf of the partnership);
- clear agreement on sanctions mechanisms for breach of commitment;
- clear auditing procedures; and
- clear targets and indicators of performance.

Transparency requires that partners have made documentation available on the decisions they have taken and the related actions, performance and outcomes. As discussed in *The Partnership Paperchase*, "to expect full transparency is often neither practical nor desirable." Partners will always hold back some information, or strategically choose when to reveal certain information. The hope is that the partners will act as openly and truthfully as possible and that withholding information is a temporary function of doing what is in the best interests of the partnership. Minimum levels of transparency suggest that partners must:

- ensure that there is clear understanding as to why each partner is engaged;
- ensure that there are clear progress review procedures;
- ensure that job descriptions are shared to allow partners to understand the individual staff member's expected commitment;
- facilitate clear understanding of internal decision-making procedures;
- ensure that there is clear understanding of the different timeframes under which different partners are operating;
- be clear about what information is needed by which partners and for what purpose; and
- be clear about how the partners jointly define the partnership, which partners need what recognition and when, and how the brand can be used.

Responsiveness does not necessarily mean doing what others want you to do, but that you demonstrate publicly that you have taken others' considerations on board in decision-making processes and then provided coherent and rational "responses" as to why the organisation took the decisions it did or completed specific actions in question. The challenge for internal partner relations is that in many cases, clear definitions of who are partners and who are stakeholders are not given. BPD's general sense is that partners are those that are engaged in the business of delivering the objectives of the partnership. They bring resources to the table, from finance to convening power to technical skills, etc. (See below for further discussion). Responsiveness suggests that partners need to ensure:

- clear mechanisms for reviewing participation in the partnership;
- clear channels to question a partner's choice of representation;
- channels of communication that allow partners to share information regarding changes in their own circumstances;
- clear channels for communication that meet each partner's style; and
- clear channels for resolving conflict and carrying out sanctions in case of breach of commitment.

Whilst the areas of *compliance* and *transparency* are more procedural and rules-based, discussions around responsiveness generally elicit greater discussion around desired qualities

or aspirations within a partnering relationship, i.e. that of inclusiveness, assurances, reflection, listening, flexibility, etc.

Ensuring External Accountability

As noted above, some distinction needs to be made between partners and stakeholders. Similarly distinctions need to be made between different kinds of stakeholders. A widely used definition of the term stakeholder is any individual or institution that *can influence* or *is influenced by* the activities in question. Whilst those stakeholders that *are influenced* by partnership activities are obviously important, often too much emphasis is placed on those that *can influence* partnership activities. Granted partnerships also exist in a political environment and thereby influence is exercised by those that are able. A challenge would be whether ways should be found to determine whose concerns and risks are more "legitimate" or severe than others. Generally the poor are the least able to influence events but the most influenced.

Though risk cannot always be adequately quantified and thereby proves difficult to compare, partners need to be clear about what risks apply to what stakeholder groups in order to steer accountability appropriately.

With regard to the external world, partnership accountability suggests that

- to be *in compliance*, the partnership needs to have stated simply the tasks and areas around which the partnership approach should be judged. This would require a clear statement of objectives, targets and milestones.
- to be *transparent*, the partnership needs to have appropriate mechanisms (print media and public forums, etc.) that provide access to information on decision-making, progress, M&E, etc.
- to be *responsive*, the partnership needs channels for external stakeholders to make suggestions, state grievances, and then to hear how these suggestions or grievances have been taken into consideration and then how they have impacted on the functioning or activities of the partnership.

Getting it right

Sceptics abound with regard to partnerships, suggesting, among other things, that partnerships represent an abdication of responsibilities on the part of specific actors; that partnerships mask the real transactions that go on behind the scenes; that partnerships give too much power to particular actors; that partnerships are just new language to glorify business as usual.[5] Unless more attention is paid to partnership accountability, indeed the sceptics are more than likely correct in discounting partnership approaches.

Partners will need to agree on their own practices around compliance, transparency and responsiveness. Admittedly not all partnerships will need to employ all of the accountability mechanisms referred to in this document. Looser more experimental affiliations need not be so laden.

	Compliance (Being held to account)	Transparency (Giving an account)	Responsiveness (Taking account)
Partnership Governance	Organisational and partnership organograms Partner representative job descriptions adequately reflect responsibilities and tasks Clear decision-making forums and processes Clearly defined roles and responsibilities including designated signatories Clear succession plans	Accessible information on voting rights and decision-making procedures Clearly stated communications mechanisms Minutes of meetings made available Shared job descriptions Statement on internal decision-making procedures for each partner	Statement on voting and decision-making that clearly takes into account risk factors for different partners Statement of channels for partners to query internal decisions taken by particular partners Schedules for review of participants, and their roles and responsibilities
Partnership Performance	Resource maps that define contributions of each partner Clearly defined programme and financial plan Clearly defined timelines with milestones and targets Clear monitoring and evaluation plan Clear sanctions mechanisms for non-performance	Agreement on objectives and understanding of different timeframes for each partner Widely available progress reports with clear understanding about what goes in them, who produces them, who approves them, etc. Clear understanding of what information partners need to do their jobs	Clear monitoring and evaluation plan Clear procedures to assess changes in the partner and partnership context and then flexibility to adapt as appropriate Clear rules on staff performance appraisals (can partners contribute?)
Stakeholder Engagement	Clear definition of who are partners, who are at-risk stakeholders, who are interested stakeholders Clear statement of targets and milestones to ensure stakeholders have sufficient information to judge performance	Clear reporting on successes and failures, challenges and constraints Clarity on which partners need what recognition and when	Clear channels for stakeholders to make suggestions / raise grievances Clear guidance on whose responsibility it is to collect stakeholder views Clear procedures for the partnership to convey responses to suggestions and grievances to outside stakeholders

Much of the challenge that the sceptics put forward is around how partnership practitioners measure and evaluate the effectiveness of both the processes and the outcomes. Greater clarity around governance, performance and engagement along the three sub-components of accountability would appear to be the most logical way to frame partnership constructs into a more effective and efficient mode of delivery.

For further information or comments, please contact info@bpdws.org.

[5] Stott, L. "Listening to the critics: Can we learn from arguments against partnerships with business?" Trigger Paper for Post-Graduate Certificate in Cross-sector Partnership, University of Cambridge Programme for Industry, International Business Leaders Forum and The Copenhagen Centre (Year 2).