

ActionAid International

Organisational information

ActionAid International is an international development charity that empowers poor and marginalised people through participatory approaches to help them identify and demand their own rights and fight poverty both locally and internationally. It was founded in 1973 as a British charity based on child sponsorship and delivering specific services to individuals. In 2003 the organisation underwent significant restructuring both in terms of the services that it offers and its organisational structure; in doing so, ActionAid International became a coalition of northern and southern affiliates fighting poverty through advocacy and lobbying at the local, national and global levels.

With their headquarters in Johannesburg, ActionAid International employs a total of 1,787 staff worldwide (89 percent from developing countries). They have programmes in 47 countries and their total income in 2004 was €132 million.¹ Of this, 25 percent came from the UK Department for International Development (DfID) and the EU. Other major contributors to ActionAid International's income are ActionAid affiliates and committed giving.²

ActionAid International actively engaged in the data collection process for the **2006 Global Accountability Report**. They completed a questionnaire, provided access to internal documentation and representatives of the organisation were interviewed as part of the research.

Organisational Structure

ActionAid International is an international coalition of 13 national organisations. Of these, 6 are full members called affiliates (Brazil, Greece, Ireland, UK, USA, Italy) and have full voting rights, the remaining 7 are associates that have joined ActionAid International with the intention of becoming full members (Ghana, Kenya, India, Uganda, Sweden, Guatemala, and Nigeria.)

The governing body of ActionAid International is an **International Board of Trustees** made up of one representative of each affiliate and Independent Trustees appointed by the board for their skills and expertise (it has 11 members). Each board member has one vote. Associate members also attend and participate in Board meetings, but only as observers. The Board has responsibility for determining and approving the organisation's overall core vision, strategies and policies as well as plans and budgets. The Chair of the Board is elected from among the Independent Trustees.

The executive body of ActionAid International is the International Directors Team. This is made up of the most senior level of management within the organisation, including the Chief Executive and eight International Directors (an International Director for Asia, Africa, Europe Coordination, Americas, Finance, Fundraising, Organisational Effectiveness, and Communications.) This body meets regularly and sets policy and makes decisions.

Transparency dimension

ActionAid International is the top performer among the ten assessed INGOs in relation to their transparency capabilities and second out of all 30 assessed organisations, with a score of 84 percent.

They are one of only nine of the assessed organisations to have an organisation-wide document that guides the disclosure of information (what they refer to as their **Open Information Policy**) and the only other INGO of the 10, along with WWF International, to have such document. The Open Information Policy stands out for embodying many good practice principles; most notably it identifies a narrowly defined set of conditions under which information will not be disclosed. The policy could be improved with the inclusion of an appeals process when a request for information is denied and a commitment to respond to requests within a certain period of time.

¹ ActionAid International, **2004 Annual Finance Report**, p4.

² Trustees Report and Accounts 2004

ActionAid International also has strong systems to support the implementation of the information disclosure policy and to foster transparent practices. There is executive oversight of the Open Information Policy at different levels within the organisation with the Chief Executive having responsibility for the policy at the international level, regional directors at the regional level and country directors at the national level. Training on the policy is also provided with an introduction to the Open Information Policy included in staff induction and more detailed training provided to staff responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the policy. The policy is also widely accessible to external stakeholders. It is posted on ActionAid International's website and its contents are presented at public meetings; it is available in French, Spanish and Portuguese.

Participation Dimension

ActionAid International's participation capabilities rank highest among the assessed INGOs, with a score of 85 percent.

External Stakeholder Engagement

ActionAid International's capabilities for engaging with external stakeholder are the most developed both within the INGO sector and out of all the assessed organisations. They have taken a very structured approach to the issue based on their **Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS)** which provides an organisation wide commitment to engaging stakeholders, particularly their beneficiaries in strategic planning at the international, regional and country levels. ALPS clearly identifies the conditions under which stakeholders will be engaged in decision-making and it also makes a commitment to responding to the feedback provided by stakeholders in the course of an engagement process. However, there are areas where it could be improved: it currently does not make a commitment to clearly communicate to external stakeholder before an engagement what the purpose of the engagement is and how much they will be able to influence the final decision, nor does it commit to making public how input from external stakeholder engagements affected decisions.

Similar to transparency, the organisational systems ActionAid International has in place to ensure compliance with ALPS are well developed. The Chief Executive has overall responsibility for ensuring implementation of ALPS, training is provided and the policy is widely accessible to external stakeholders; it is both disseminated to external stakeholders through multiple mediums and translated into multiple languages. ActionAid International is also one of only four INGOs that have institutionalised external stakeholder engagement in their corporate decision-making by having representatives of their stakeholder groups on their International Board of Trustees as independent trustees.

Member Control

ActionAid International exhibits strong member control in its International Board of Trustees with all affiliates having representation on the board and being able to add items to the agenda of meetings. The Constitution also ensures a minority of members are not able to dominate decision-making, with each affiliate holding an equal number of votes, and no affiliate able to block changes to the governing articles.

Evaluation Dimension

ActionAid International rank third among the assessed INGOs for their evaluation capabilities with a score of 88 percent.

ALPS also guides their approach to evaluation. It promotes the use of participatory review and reflections sessions, peer review and external evaluations. ALPS fulfils all of the good practice principles for evaluation used in the assessment process of the 2006 Global Accountability Report.

As mentioned above, the management systems to ensure compliance with ALPS are well developed. There are some shortcomings in relation to the dissemination of learning within the organisation; the organisation currently does not have a mechanism for ensuring the lessons learnt through evaluation are widely disseminated. Evaluations are available to staff through the intranet, but this does not constitute active dissemination. ActionAid International have acknowledged this gap and have

recently recruited a shared learning co-ordinator who will be responsible for synthesising evaluation reports and ensuring dissemination of learning.

Complaint and Response Dimension

ActionAid International's capabilities for handling and responding to complaints are the least developed dimension of their accountability. They do not have a mechanism for handling complaints from external stakeholders and their capabilities for handling and responding to internal complaints are average. As a result, they rank fifth among the assessed INGOs with a score of 25 percent.

Their Whistleblower Policy (which guides their handling of internal complaints) makes no commitment to maintaining the confidentiality of complainants, it does not require all negative consequences suffered by victims of proven whistleblower retaliation to be reversed nor does it require mandatory discipline for anyone found to have retaliated against a complainant, all key good practice principles.

ActionAid International's systems for handling complaints are also in need of further development. While there is executive oversight of the Whistleblower Policy through the Director of Organisational Effectiveness and the Director of Finance, no training is provided on the policy, and it is not made easily accessible to stakeholders.

Conclusion

ActionAid International's evaluation capabilities are the most developed area of their accountability while their complaint and response capabilities are the least. In light of this, ActionAid International should seek to undertake a number of reforms. They should strengthen their capabilities for handling and responding to internal complaints by including a commitment in their Whistleblower Policy to keep confidential the identity of complainants. They should provide training to all staff on the Whistleblower Policy and specific training to those members of staff that will be tasked with investigating complaints on the procedural commitments the organisation has made. They need to develop their capabilities for handling and responding to external complaints by establishing a policy on the issue and putting in place a mechanism through which external stakeholders can raise concerns both at the field and international secretariat level. In addition, although ActionAid International's Open Information Policy is already of a high standard, it would be improved if it provided an appeals mechanism for information requests that have been denied and specified the timeframe in which the organisation will respond to requests.

The 2006 Global Accountability Report assessed the accountability of 30 global organisations from the intergovernmental, non-governmental and corporate sectors according to four key dimensions of accountability – transparency, participation, evaluation, and complaint and response mechanisms. The study investigated the extent to which these organisations have in place the capabilities – policies and systems – at headquarters or the global office that foster accountability to communities they affect and to the wider public. At the global level, organisations need to have in place enforceable policies on key dimensions of accountability in order to promote consistency in approach both at different levels throughout the organisation and in relation to their diverse stakeholder groups. The presence of a policy at the global office indicates a public commitment to the dimensions of accountability and enables stakeholders to demand compliance with these policies; yet how these commitments translate into practice is equally important. The project team at the One World Trust is actively seeking innovative ways to assess accountability in practice both at the global office and field levels. Such assessments will help build a more comprehensive understanding of an organisation's accountability.

For a full list of indicators against which each of the 30 organisations were assessed click [here](#) or for further information on the 2006 Global Accountability click [here](#).