

Accountability Principles for Research Organisations



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A framework to understand and implement accountability good practices for research organisations working in developing countries – Executive Summary

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Introduction

It is an ideal of good governance that policies are founded on a solid evidence basis. Research organisations, as generators of this evidence, can have great influence in shaping policy decisions. Their impact on developing countries growth and progress can therefore be extensive. Given their influence and potential impact, it is important that they are accountable to those on whom they will have an impact.

Accountability offers research organisations opportunities to be more effective. Observers have described a gulf between the complex, qualified and nuanced research which academics produce, and the simple answers to daily policy problems which policy-makers face. Accountability, framed in terms of the need for transparency and participative processes, can help bridge the gap. It can help research managers navigate the complex interactions between diverse advocacy coalitions, political actors and policy-makers that make up a research community.

The report on Accountability Principles of Research Organisations provides a framework for establishing accountability good practices and principles for policy-oriented research organisations working in developing countries. We therefore discuss how the core principles of participation, transparency, evaluation and feedback management can be applied to research. In addition to providing arguments for the need for accountability to a wide range of stakeholders – a need justified both ethically and instrumentally – we also acknowledge the tensions and challenges that different organisations will face in formulating accountability principles.

By drawing on the experiences of sixteen research organisations which reflect the diversity of evidence-producers in developing countries, our study explored the tensions they face in balancing the interests and demands of different stakeholders. By implementing the principles in key processes and policies, research organisations can become more accountable.

What is 'accountability'?

The meaning of the word 'accountability' has been – and continues to be – stretched in a number of ways. Traditionally, it referred to an agent rendering account to the principal for the activities carried out on the principal's behalf. This assumed a formal agreement giving the agent authority to act on the principal's behalf, and conferring on the principal the power to demand that the agent render an account. Nowadays, however, it is a common occurrence in the media to hear that particular organisations, industries or people should be "more accountable" or should be "held to account" for their actions, without implying the existence of a prior accountability relationship. Thus, accountability now includes "softer" and non-legally binding duties; it includes the process by which the scope of the authority was defined and negotiated.

The One World Trust, in the face of this dynamic and somewhat elastic term, has formulated the following definition for accountability:

"[Accountability is] the processes through which an organisation makes a commitment to respond to and balance the needs of stakeholders in its decision-making processes and activities, and delivers against this commitment."

(One World Trust, "Pathways to Accountability", 2005, 20).

Moreover, while the traditional meaning of accountability entailed an exclusive relationship between two parties, it now has reference to an engagement with a wider set of stakeholders. The stakeholders of an organisation are those who have an interest or claim in the activities of an organisation. We argue that a research organisation should be accountable to more than simply those with whom it has a formal relationship. Caution is necessary here, however: the usefulness of "stakeholder" as a word is precisely in its lack of content: it means no more than "an actor who has an interest or recognisable claim in another actor".

Four principles of accountability

Informed by the Global Accountability Framework (One World Trust, 2005), the research project discusses how key principles of accountability may be applied by research organisations. We identify four key principles:

- **Participation** concerns the way in which an organisation involves stakeholders in its decision-making processes and activities. Participation gives stakeholders a voice in the activities of the organisation, creating ownership of the results and a greater likelihood of the uptake and legitimacy of the research.
- **Evaluation** enables organisations to reflect on and learn from their experiences. Furthermore, only through a transparent evaluation process can a research organisation report on its activities to its stakeholders.
- **Transparency** describes the way in which an organisation makes available information about their activities and aims. With research organisations, this may include the data that they collect and which forms the evidence-basis for their policy recommendations. It will also include information about their work, their expertise and their key stakeholders.
- **Feedback mechanisms** describe ways in which an organisation invites comments and critique of its activities. A feedback mechanism allows stakeholders to comment and if necessary require redress for the research organisation's prior acts.

Of these four principles, two are characteristics of processes – participation and transparency, while the other two are processes themselves – evaluation and feedback handling mechanisms. We discuss how each can be practically applied to the activities of a research organisation.

Why does the accountability of research matter?

Accountability offers a range of benefits to research organisations. These benefits can be framed in two different ways: the first way expresses the normative or ethical reasons prompting accountability; the second way comprises the instrumental reasons or practical advantages that a research organisation may accrue if it implements the principles of accountability in its key decision-making processes.

Normative reasons for accountability

Throughout its life, a research organisation will form relationships to different stakeholders through its actions. Some of these actions will trigger the need for accountability, based on normative principles.

1. **Formal accountability:** Core or “traditional” accountability relationships are founded on legal obligations or contractual commitments to donors and partners made by the organisation. They are formal in nature, expressly stated, and their ethical roots lie in the contract or formal rule which creates them.
2. **Claims:** Accountability relationships may be triggered when a research organisation makes a *claim* of a particular sort, whereby it

purports through this claim to the wider policy community to be acting as an agent on behalf of another. These include: claims to benefit a particular group through its research; claims to represent a group or community; and – when advocating for policy change – claims that their research is objective. We argue that all of these claims create a form of accountability relationship.

3. **Impact:** We argue that if an organisation has an impact on a person or group then the research organisation should be accountable to the person or group for harm that they cause, particularly if there are no other means of recourse.

Each accountability relationship creates a link to a particular stakeholder – just as a contract only creates obligations within the contracting parties, so for example a claim to be working to benefit a group only triggers the need for accountability to that group.

Instrumental benefits for accountability

While the normative reasons for accountability are based on ethical arguments, the instrumental motives for accountability are rooted in a practical understanding of how research can best impact policy. Organisations who are accountable – who are participative, transparent, who conduct evaluations and invite feedback – are more likely to be effective than those who are unaccountable.

The justification for this statement lies in the evolving understanding of research organisations. Research seldom changes policy in a single blow. Increasingly, studies have shown that policy processes are not linear: research is rarely successfully transferred to the users in a complete form. Often its uptake and use is subtler. Frequently, a successful research programme will “percolate” slowly, acting to reframe the debate, to change the terminology, and to shift the narratives. For the uptake of the research to be maximised, our literature review shows that studies increasingly emphasise that research organisations should interact with the wider policy community from the beginning of the research. They should ensure that their research is tailored to the needs of the policy-makers and the research community. To do this, links to the policy-makers, which may be developed through participative processes, are vital.

While prevailing political forces can mean that high quality research outputs are ignored, they can nevertheless have intermediate impacts – not only amongst the policy-makers, but also in the behaviour of the wider policy community. They can act to change policy by involving the wider policy community through persistent communication, and through continually engaging in the debate. Increasingly networks and research partnerships are used to plan, conduct and communicate research, drawing on a wider set of stakeholders. Networks and partnerships offer special relationships and open communication channels which can be used by organisations to increase the impact of their research.

An organisation which follows the principles of accountability – transparency, participation, evaluation and feedback – will, according to the developing best practices, be more likely to be successful.

Challenges and tensions to accountability

While there are significant benefits to accountability, both normative and instrumental, accountability can also pose challenges to a research organisation. The report presents a study of the practices and policies of sixteen diverse research organisations, working in the fields of agricultural science and governance. The challenges and tensions in accountability may be arranged according to two sets of characteristics: the first set describes obstacles deriving from the formal status of the organisation; the second set are those that stem from the type of research conducted by the organisation.

Formal status and the alignment of stakeholders

The formal structure of the organisation will tend to determine what types of claims the organisation makes, and thus the nature of the balancing act they must make in prioritising different stakeholder groups. Thus private companies will often only claim to benefit their clients or stakeholders (although we found that, due perhaps to the rise in importance of “corporate social responsibility”, companies also make such claims); public organisations focus their claims on the government bodies who form the main market for their research; and non-profits will often make explicit claims that they are acting to benefit a group of people.

The interests of key groups of stakeholders – funders, policy-makers and claimed beneficiaries – tend to align in different ways for different organisations. Where the interests of funders and claimed beneficiaries do not align, for example, research organisations face the threat that the donor dictates the terms of the research project (rather than the project being determined by its relevance to its claimed beneficiaries). Other organisations expressed the need to ‘manage’ their independence where they were perceived to have too close a relationship to a funder or, in the case of some public organisations, a government policy-maker. In dealing with the application of accountability principles to organisation’s processes, the report addresses these challenges.

Expertise and the space for participation

Another set of challenges to accountability were caused by the expertise of the research organisation. For a research organisation to be a sustainable and effective organisation, it will normally occupy a research niche for which they will be the experts. By virtue of the same expertise that makes a research organisation sustainable, the ‘space’ for participation is restricted. The challenge to accountability is to allow laypeople to participate meaningfully in the decision-making processes of an organisation. In particular, those organisations which rely on mastery of complex causal models will limit the space for meaningful participation to any but fellow experts. We explore how this challenge can be overcome. The growth of participatory methodologies shows that the range of actors with substantive contributions to offer has become broadened. The value of ‘indigenous’ expertise is increasingly recognised. Moreover, opportunities will remain to engage

Key Processes
Defining strategy
Defining operation structure
Forming partnerships; engaging in networks
Identifying research priorities
Planning research projects
Evaluating and learning
Conducting the research
Empowering communities
Conducting advocacy and outreach
Key Policies
Information release
Complaints handling

stakeholders in discussion of the values of a research organisation, and its intended goals.

Applying accountability in key processes

In exploring how a research organisation could apply the four principles of accountability, we identified a series of key processes common to most research organisations. For each process, we investigate how research organisations can be participative and transparent. To this we add a specific process for evaluation – itself a process which may be participative and transparent. For each process, we describe the benefits of accountability and possible challenges faced in implementing accountability. We outline practical measures which organisations may adopt. Where appropriate, we also highlight key tools that have been developed which can be employed by organisations to improve their accountability. Finally we address two policies – one, the information release policy, deals with a specific commitment to transparency. The other, complaints handling, addresses the final principle, that of feedback mechanisms.

Conclusions

The need for accountability offers research managers both challenges and opportunities. To step back and review the full array of stakeholders of an activity so wide-reaching, and yet so indeterminate, as research, requires for many research organizations a change in perspective on their own role. This, however, is the route to balanced and legitimate policy-oriented research and greater efficacy. An accountable, transparent research organisation with good processes and a robust self-knowledge can do this without sacrificing its independence. In countries where policy processes are weak, researchers can form an important bridge between people and their decision-makers. The area is an exciting one. Developments in participatory research techniques are carried forward by leaps and bounds across the world. Evaluation techniques and the understanding of the role and impact of research in policy are becoming increasingly sophisticated. This study tries to add to that debate by showing, in a holistic way, the opportunities that exist for research organisations to identify their key stakeholders and to consider how they might be more accountable to each of them.

This is the executive summary of the final report on the One World Trust's study of accountability principles for policy relevant research institutes (APRI), which is aimed at developing a better understanding of the accountability challenges research organisations face and developing tools to help them to address these. The project is carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada and is part of the One World Trust's ongoing work on the accountability of global organisations, engagement of citizens in political processes, and international law and regulation to make global governance more accountable. More information about the project is available on the Trust's website www.oneworldtrust.org, or by contacting Brendan Whitty at bwhitty@oneworldtrust.org.

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The **One World Trust** is an independent think tank that conducts research, develops recommendations and advocates for reform to make policy and decision-making processes in global governance more accountable to the people they affect now and in the future, and to ensure that international laws are strengthened and applied equally to all.

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