

Shared agendas, shared approach

International HIV/AIDS Alliance shares its response to the effectiveness and accountability agendas and explains why a sector-wide approach is needed.

It is heartening to see how much support there is for improving NGO effectiveness and accountability in the run up to the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in South Korea. But how we, as a sector, respond to the complex agendas that these two overlapping concepts represent, is arguably one of the most pressing issues facing us today.

The International HIV/AIDS Alliance has been proactively engaged in these debates and discussions and, although we acknowledge we have a way to go, what we are doing is already showing signs of improving the work of our linking organisations and the community partners with whom they work.

Whose value counts?

The 'effectiveness agenda' is best represented by the increasingly strident demands on NGOs by donors to demonstrate their programming results or impact and to show the 'value for money' of their work. The 'accountability agenda' is closely related to these demands to show results but, right now, it is focused on calls for greater transparency of what and where NGOs spend their money and in the requirement for NGOs to publish their data according to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) standards:

The values and concepts behind these two agendas and the way they have been articulated represent an important set of challenges for NGOs – and indeed the development community in general. At the Alliance, like others¹, we believe it is vital that we critically engage with these agendas and make the case for a more holistic understanding of how development happens, that social change is emergent and that it very often can't be reduced to simple quantifiable 'results' that can be transparently published. However, we realise that we cannot only opt for a 'can't do' position. We need to find constructive ways of meeting the requirements that both of these agendas represent and to proactively make the case that NGOs are committed to being – and indeed are – effective and accountable. The two positions are not incompatible.

Promoting public effectiveness and accountability practices

At the Alliance we have invested in the implementation of a monitoring and reporting system that allows us to annually track our global coverage and reach and map this data in a way that can be presented both internally to our partners

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to encourage learning and improve programme development and externally to our donors and other policymakers, so they can see the value of their investment².

Similarly, the work we have done to make our data IATI compatible and published has resulted in a better internal understanding of our funding flows and service delivery models and helped identify ways we could possibly rationalise our programmatic and reporting structure.

A community perspective on value for money

Although the Alliance has always strived to improve efficiency, our work on measuring value for money and a focus on actual country level costing analysis (generating both detailed data on unit costs for services to data as crude a cost per person reached) has highlighted significant differences in costs of similar service provision and provided a platform for quite robust programmatic and contextual discussions. However, our ability to generate reliable, fully loaded unit cost data is still weak and needs significant improvement (a situation which is probably shared by many NGOs).

The implementation of a number of value for money studies using an adapted form of Social Return on Investment methodology has also proved very useful in terms of helping us better understand the differential value of our programmes. Importantly, these values are generated from the perspective of beneficiary groups and as such often capture previously intangible or unmeasured positive (and indeed negative) outcomes and value from our interventions³.

Importantly this work has highlighted some significant evidence gaps to support the assertion that community based HIV/AIDS programming does represent a good investment for donors. Clearly, given that this is central to both the Alliance's mission and our strategy, we must do more to generate this evidence. The recent publication of an Investment Framework



• Children support group as part of the CHAHA project, India
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• Health education for young women, Senegal
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for HIV and AIDS⁴ which cites community mobilisation as a critical enabler of the HIV and AIDS response, has given us even greater impetus for our work in this area.

Mutual accountability – a partnership approach to increasing effectiveness

Unfortunately, as those of us who work in the evaluation field know, generating robust evidence is not always easy and often does not come cheap. At the Alliance, for example, we have implemented a large scale Randomised Control Trial to look at the impact of our community focused HIV prevention programmes in India. While the results were encouraging⁵ the experience was far from easy as we wrote up in a recent article in the Journal for Development Effectiveness⁶. Retreating to the ‘typical’ NGO approach of producing case studies or insufficiently robust evaluations, however, is not an option in this ‘new’ environment. We need to be serious about how we address these issues.

In this respect we feel that the effectiveness and accountability agendas are best addressed collectively. Generating evidence that community based interventions are effective, for example, is not something that is of interest only to the Alliance. A consortium type study involving a number of NGOs working on similar programmes in a range of contexts that looks at this question could both provide better evidence (since

the sample size and power could be increased) but could also be far more cost effective way of spending our scarce resources.

Similarly, the idea that each NGO needs to spend resources on developing bespoke monitoring and reporting systems to capture and present their work or make their data IATI compatible seems to be a significant waste of (normally unrestricted) resources. We should be far better at sharing systems and pooling resources so that we can release more money for programming on the ground.

Bond Effectiveness Programme

It is in this context that the work that Bond has initiated in this area around developing ‘good enough’ approaches to assessing NGO effectiveness and supporting NGOs to share examples of IATI requirements must be welcomed. The Bond effectiveness group, for example, provides a great forum for NGOs to share approaches and innovations (and there are a lot of good ideas out there!).

There is without doubt common ground amongst NGOs which can provide the potential for really enabling us to collectively make the most of the significant opportunities represented in the effectiveness and accountability agendas, while at the same time guarding against the dangers inherent in them.

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The Bond Effectiveness Programme is developing a common framework to help international development organisations measure the impact of their work, together with a tool for assessing organisational capacities to deliver effective work.

www.bond.org.uk/effectiveness

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¹ See, for example, the big push forward initiative led IDS and others.

² <http://maps.aidsalliance.org>

³ Social Return on Investment: CHAHA Programme, India. The True Cost of Stigma: Evaluating the Social Return on Investment of the Stigma and Discrimination Component of the Alliance’s Africa Regional Programme II

⁴ Towards an Improved Investment Approach for an Effective Response to HIV/AIDS, Lancet, June 2011

⁵ Community-based prevention leads to an increase in condom use and a reduction in sexually transmitted infections among men who have sex with men and female sex workers: the Frontiers Prevention Project evaluation results, August 2010

⁶ Journal of Development Effectiveness: Meeting the challenge of proving impact in Andhra Pradesh, India, December 2010