

FROM PASSIVE RECIPIENTS OF AID TO ACTIVE CITIZENS IN SOUTH SUDAN

OPERATIONALISING ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED POPULATIONS



SUMMARY REPORT – JUNE 2018

MEENA BHANDARI – LEAD CONSULTANT & PRIMARY AUTHOR

KAI HOPKINS – SENIOR PROGRAMME MANAGER, GROUND TRUTH SOLUTIONS



Shelter NFI Cluster South Sudan
ShelterSouthSudan.org
Coordinating Humanitarian Shelter



Introduction

"NGOs should come and meet with us and use their eyes and ears and discuss directly."
– Rita, resident at Wau UNMISS Protection of Civilians (POC) site, South Sudan.

Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) is a commitment to involve communities affected by crisis in key decisions and processes that impact them. It points to the need to shake up the system – shifting power from donors to implementing agencies, and from these agencies to communities, so people themselves can own, if not lead, humanitarian operations.

At its heart, AAP calls for active and genuine participation by communities in all humanitarian interventions. Similarly, The Grand Bargain reached at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 refers in powerful language to the need for a Participation Revolution in emergency responses. This revolution sounds as radical as AAP, and requires implementing agencies to include people receiving aid in making decisions that affect their lives. Global, national, and local aid structures however, are constrained by multiple and complex factors. These limit community participation and many aid agencies are still not translating the AAP theory or global commitments on participation into a meaningful reality.¹

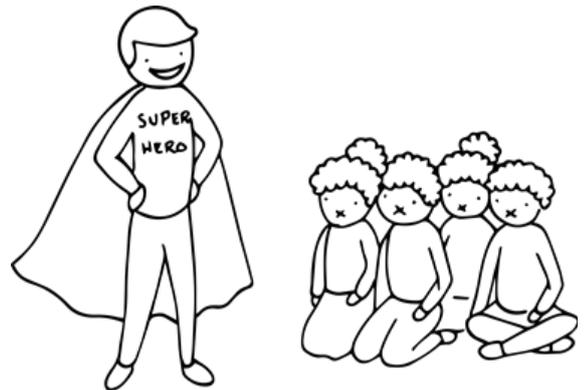


Figure 1. Passive recipients of aid

This disconnect between rhetoric and reality is particularly noticeable in South Sudan, with its remote locations, mobile populations, and security and logistical hurdles – as well as challenges of limited time, overstretched staff, and a lack of capacity or interest in meaningful participation. In this context, cluster partners have struggled to implement the basics of active participation, systematic engagement, accountability, or assess the quality of services as measured by communities themselves. In response, the Shelter and Non-Food Item Cluster in South Sudan (S/NFI), led by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), commissioned [Ground Truth Solutions](#) in early 2018 to develop a harmonised AAP Framework.

The aim of this project was to:

1. Understand the challenges cluster partners face in understanding and implementing AAP, and to begin to find solutions to push practice forward
2. Design and test an AAP Framework with simple and practical tools
3. Get buy-in and build capacity of partners to use the framework

Information was gleaned through a survey and interviews with partners, a wider scoping exercise with key actors in South Sudan, and a series of field visits. A series of AAP tools was designed in South Sudan to be used at the operational level – including an Active Citizens Accountability Scorecard (ACAS). This scorecard aims to help staff self-assess the quality of their work and their levels of engagement and partnership with, and accountability to, communities. The scorecard and other tools were field-tested and staff from Shelter cluster partners were trained in how to use them. A critical step in this project was the active participation of key donors – the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) – to dispel some of the myths and perceptions around donor expectations on AAP. The tools developed for the cluster are publically available [here](#).

¹ The lack of progress on community participation is well documented in the self-reporting of agencies on Grand Bargain commitments, as summarised in [this report](#).



This note summarises the findings of the process and identifies key recommendations for both implementing agencies and donors to mainstream AAP in South Sudan and beyond. The tools themselves are also covered in more detail at the end.

Findings: support for AAP is strong, but practical progress is limited

Interviews and the survey findings show a clear desire among implementing shelter cluster partners to know more about AAP, and an openness to better understand how to operationalise it. In South Sudan, almost all agencies reported that AAP was an organisational priority, and that it would be a useful addition to their work. However most agencies also made clear that they do not have their own AAP approaches or tools. As a result, most referred to complaints mechanisms and Post Distribution Monitoring (PDMs) as their only community engagement tools, which is a narrow definition of what meaningful participation and AAP encompasses.

PDMs require a huge investment in time, with very little perceived value for field staff or communities. Agencies reported the information gathered through PDMs took vast amounts of time to gather and analyse. Reports often came out only after mobile populations had moved on and it was time to conduct the next PDM. Moreover, field staff and community mobilisers had little oversight or ownership of the PDM reports, which were used for management and donor reporting purposes. While this upward reporting may be a primary purpose of PDMs, it undermines their potential to help assess the quality of work as perceived by affected populations themselves, and as the basis for follow-up. Indeed, those interviewed on the ground reported that there was no systematic process of turning PDM data into action for improvement. This resulted in lost opportunities for delivering higher quality and more relevant services. What emerged from this, was a critical need to have more real-time data for field teams – in effect empowering frontline staff to make decisions based on information directly received from communities.

Given the challenges of field operations in locations like South Sudan, community engagement is often limited to talking to community leaders. These are either political figures or the heads of traditional community structures, and invariably male. Women’s empowerment, participation, and engagement are huge challenges. As a result, leaders’ voices become all powerful and influenced by favouritism and clan preferences. With a lack of practical alternatives, agencies view chiefs and leaders as a shortcut to community engagement, especially if a more robust approach is neither resourced nor systematically built into programme design or on-going implementation.



Figure 2. Short cut to AAP

AAP is viewed as something for Managers and Donors

The survey with partners of the shelter cluster and the scoping trip conducted during this project found that agencies did not view AAP as an approach that could be integrated throughout every stage of the program cycle - from design and planning, coordination and cooperation, through implementation, review and course correction.

- Operational challenges limiting AAP:**
- Deep field / remote locations
 - Reliance on community leadership structures - with involvement limited to men in power
 - Staff capacity for AAP
 - Practical knowledge of AAP
 - Lack of budget and resources for AAP
 - Time for staff to conduct meaningful engagement



Any learning and adapting as a result of AAP was largely considered as something that could only be undertaken for new programmes, not for day-to-day, on-going interventions. This means that many staff are disempowered – “learning is for someone else” – and they are not encouraged to rapidly adapt in the field or to take corrective action based on community perspectives.

AAP is also not seen as a tool to build stronger partnerships between agencies and communities to deliver a more coordinated response. Interventions are considered something that agencies have sole control over and responsibility for. There are limited efforts at involving communities in service delivery or judging quality and results. This undermines the potential value of AAP and ignores the role communities can play in improving service quality and relevance during the lifetime of a project.

Donors setting the AAP agenda

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E), accountability to managers and donors, and learning all appear to be intertwined in organisations’ understanding of AAP. These functions are largely considered for upward management or donor purposes – not tools through which field-level quality could, or should, be improved. The pressure to deliver with limited resources, to the most number of people possible, comes from both the humanitarian imperative but also from perceived donor pressure. None of the agencies in South Sudan reported that they had a budget allotted for existing or new AAP activities. All agencies questioned whether donors would accept that delivering better AAP would require, for example, more staff to accompany a distribution team to inform communities of a distribution process, or for the team to be in the field longer to ensure better engagement. This was a clear example of where conversations with donors were needed but had largely not happened. Conducting interventions as usual was the default position – in part due to the fear that it would impact donor support.

For the past 15 years, donors have increasingly required budgets for monitoring and evaluation – activities that are largely used for upward accountability. However, there is rarely similar insistence from donors to adequately fund AAP. Where donors are asking for AAP, it is too often (a few key exceptions notwithstanding) relegated to a box at the end of a proposal, with no mandatory budgeting requirement to support it throughout the programme cycle. Rather than simply call for new or additional funding over and above traditional M&E resources, perhaps upward accountability requirements could be balanced with downward accountability such as AAP. This would ensure the latter gets more attention and is aligned with agencies’ core operations, rather than being seen as an add-on or afterthought, with few clear examples about how to implement it in practice.

Although donors, including those in South Sudan, have bought into the normative frameworks like the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) or political deals like the Grand Bargain, these initiatives have not been translated into clear and practical approaches. Participation trainings are more often high level, focusing on technical explanations. This inability for donors to help agencies turn the theory into practice has contributed to the over-reliance on somewhat limited-value tools such as PDMs and complaints mechanisms. Encouragingly, donors in South Sudan have begun to change their positions on AAP, and are keen for agencies to “push against an open door” with better ideas for how to operationalise AAP. In doing so, in South Sudan for example, the two donors interviewed were happy to resource AAP where it is part of a well-thought-out strategy across the program cycle. The challenge in South Sudan has in part been one of poor communication between stakeholders. There is also the challenge of how to turn the international frameworks into more meaningful examples of AAP beyond PDMs and complaints mechanisms. Both of these, of course, are good examples of “tick-box” approaches to AAP, and quite typical across the sector.

² Shelter partner survey respondent

³ South Sudan donor interview participant



Recommendations

For the global call to action for real participation to materialise at the field level, there needs to be a shake-up in a number of critical areas. Effective AAP shifts the existing aid sector power dynamic and recognises that people affected by a disaster have power, too, and that they are active citizens with capacity, local knowledge, and the ability to decide the direction of their own lives. People affected by crisis need to be involved and be able to make decisions about their own response and recovery. This involves participation, engagement, and ownership throughout the Intervention Cycle – from assessment, design, and implementation, to monitoring reviews and re-design of the next intervention. The AAP tools arising from the focus on the shelter cluster in South Sudan – the key contribution from this project to push the AAP agenda forward – can therefore be viewed as a way to ensure communities are not approached as passive recipients of humanitarian interventions but rather as active citizens. AAP can be interpreted as simply information provision, but the tools are designed to go beyond this limited understanding – so people can influence the response, where their voice will have an impact on what kinds of aid resources are distributed and how. While access to timely, relevant, and effective information is critical, so that people can make choices about their own lives, it is only a starting point. It is all-too-common to inform people without handing over real control and power over resource allocation or decision-making. The tools aim to go several steps further.

Key ways to make AAP more operational and effective in South Sudan and beyond:

1. Agreement that community engagement can improve the design and implementation of interventions, and that it is impossible to measure the success of any programme without including the voices of those meant to benefit from it;
2. A shift in organisational culture and staff mind-set to ensure everyone understands their responsibility for using data to drive program quality;
3. More effective ideas to operationalise AAP with practical, useable and sustainable tools – such as those created for this project;
4. Budget commitments to deliver AAP properly and to align it with existing M&E, across all parts of a programme (design and implementation).

A number of broader recommendations emerged based on the findings and context in South Sudan that are relevant well beyond the country. While some of these broader next-steps may seem straightforward and obvious, they are worth emphasising, as without them, the tools will have limited impact.

Operationalising AAP at agency level

In order to mainstream AAP as a systematic and consistent approach among implementing agencies, the following 10 steps were identified as critical. **The Commitment to implementing AAP** developed for South Sudan (see below) is also a good starting point for imbedding practical approaches.

1. Capitalise on staff enthusiasm and energy to do more on AAP and use it to drive programme quality. Staff want practical ideas and solutions, not more theory and international standards.
2. Involve more staff – especially frontline staff – in learning for change and program improvement – and empower field staff to make rapid decisions and iterative improvements throughout the delivery phase.
3. Conduct fewer PDMs to free-up resources for more timely, relevant, and real-time data collection at the community level. When using PDMs, try to ensure they play a role in community engagement (use them to ask relevant questions and as an opportunity to feed back the results of previous community engagement activities).
4. Make community-led measures the way to understand programme quality. This may involve less traditional output measurement, but will include the voices of those who are meant to benefit from the project, and who are uniquely positioned to say whether or not it has worked.
5. If using complaints mechanisms, review them in light of communities' awareness of them, trust in them, and preferences for how to make complaints. Also ensure anything received is responded to systematically.
6. Use existing data better (output monitoring, PDM data, anecdotes, meetings with community leaders, staff perspectives) to extract meaningful feedback and possible responses. There are many missed opportunities by simply reporting data up the chain of command. Information already gathered from communities should be analysed and acted on.
7. Ensure better coordination among cluster agencies on possible assessments and data gathering or mapping to avoid duplication and share valuable insight arising from the processes.
8. Discuss AAP successes and failures openly and honestly, including with communities themselves and donors, to understand what works and how to refine future approaches.
9. Understand the local community, including which actors and marginalised groups exist as well as people's preferred communication channels.
10. Consider exit strategies, even in rapid onset emergencies, to leave behind a well-thought-out, locally led AAP plan, that holds communities and their perspectives at the heart of it.

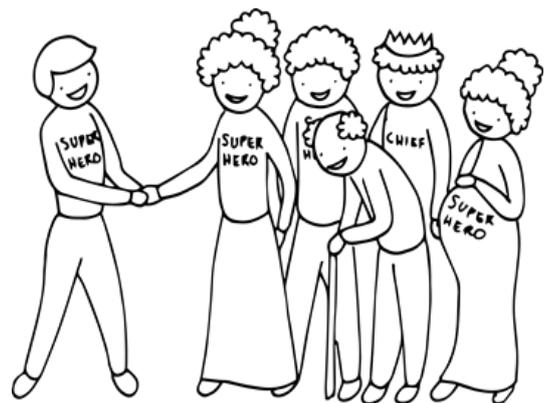


Figure 3. Recognising active citizens



Donors' role in supporting agencies

Donors have a major role to play in shifting the balance of power. In South Sudan, however, there are often no requirements by donors to deliver AAP other than a check box in proposals, with limited guidance about what this means in practice. Overall, there is a communications gap, with donors waiting for agencies to come up with ideas, and agencies wanting more direction and financial support from donors to operationalise the theory. Moreover, the perception that donors are unwilling to allow changes based on evidence stands in the way of effective community engagement.

This points to the need for more open discussions between donors and agencies, especially in-country donor representatives, on what AAP could or should look like beyond PDMs and complaints mechanisms for meaningful progress to be made. As part of this project, donor-agency open sessions were held as a step towards exploring mutually agreed commitments to delivering AAP, and resourcing operational changes for delivery.

There is also a need to shift the cultural mind-set of agencies so they can begin to address the challenges and face up to their limitations. AAP more broadly runs the risk of becoming a tick-box exercise because there are so few examples globally of successful and sustainable AAP and so few donors who demand – and fund – anything systematic, creative or well thought out. As a result, it is recommended that donors agree on a minimum viable standard or approach to AAP in South Sudan and provide the necessary budget for it. If AAP is to be integrated into programming from the design stage, such a policy should be made clear to agencies at the proposal stage.

AAP framework tools

This note has summarised the findings from Ground Truth Solution's work in South Sudan with the Shelter and Non-Food Item Cluster. The main output of the project was a [framework of tools](#) – summarised below – designed to make operationalizing AAP easier and more sustainable. The tools were well received by IOM and partner agencies, tested on the ground, and are currently being integrated into the 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan.

While much more is needed to mainstream AAP – at all levels of the humanitarian architecture – we hope these tools represent a useful start. The aim is to recognise active citizens through a series of small practical steps towards the type of high-level commitments covered in the CHS and the Grand Bargain. A culture of learning about practical solutions needs to be fostered, where agencies are encouraged by donors to test solutions and share the results. We plan to share experiences from using these tools and, while they were specifically designed for the South Sudan Shelter Cluster, we would encourage others to use them as well.

The tools start with a **(1) Commitment to AAP**, which sets out 11 principles to be followed by all shelter cluster partners. The aim is to publicly agree a common approach and to enable the shelter cluster agencies to hold each other to account for their adherence to the framework.

The next tool is the **(2) Active Citizen AAP Scorecard (ACAS)**: a self-assessment design and implementation tool, to help measure where an organisation sits along the continuum of AAP standards. The scorecard comprises 20 AAP Standards, which are aligned to the nine commitments in the CHS. Agencies can then score themselves for each standard along an AAP spectrum. This ranges from passive recipients of aid, where people have no power to determine the response, to active citizens, where men and women feel aware, involved, consulted, and actively engaged and represented in the intervention. The tools are designed to be a constant resource, a living document, that can be used throughout an intervention.



To complement the scorecard, there is also a **(3) Rapid Monitoring Checklist**, a list of things to maximise effective AAP for each of the 20 standards. The checklist helps agencies prepare for Shelter and NFI distributions.

Lastly, the **(4) Constituent Voice Tool**, is a set of questions to collect systematic feedback from both communities and field staff / community mobilisers, to verify the self-reported scores from the ACAS. This tool is for measuring progress on the cluster’s AAP strategy as well as providing the basis for improving the strategy, provided feedback is discussed and responded to, as per [best practice](#).

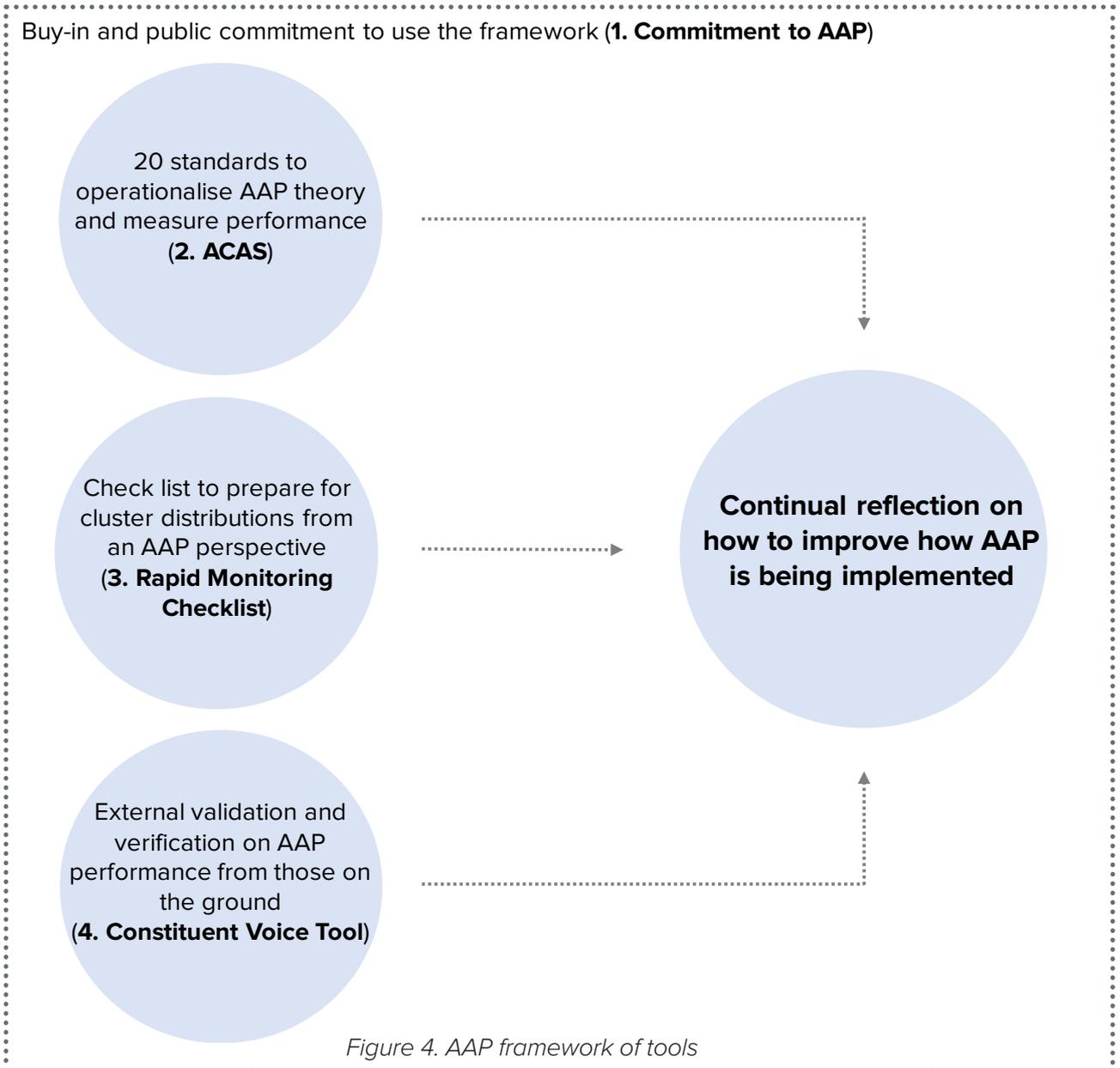


Figure 4. AAP framework of tools

For more information on this project or the AAP framework tools, please contact Meena Bhandari at popiab2@outlook.com and Kai Hopkins at kai@groundtruthsolutions.org.