

# Transforming development practice – the journey in the quest to develop planning, monitoring and evaluation systems that facilitate (rather than hinder) development

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## Synopsis

ActionAid's strategy, *Fighting poverty together (1999-2005)* has demanded significant organisational change. Changes which attempt to bring our internal processes and systems in line with our organisational goals and objectives – systems and processes that facilitate rather than hinder the development process.

Central to these changes was the introduction in September 2000 of ActionAid's Accountability Learning and Planning System (ALPS). ALPS attempts to embed the idea of rights and justice to the very heart of its accountability system. The essential principles of ALPS are closely linked to AA's mission and strategy, promoting accountability, gender equity, transparency and empowerment of the poor. As such, the system has the potential to create opportunities for poor people, particularly the most marginalised groups, not only to access resources, but also have influence and choice.

This paper explores ActionAid's experience of institutionalising such large change across an international NGO. It explores the progress that has been made and the challenges that ActionAid still faces. The introduction of ALPS (the ActionAid Accountability, Learning and Planning System) has led to some change:

- more explicit reflection – action –learning cycles across the organisation
- increased downward accountability
- more transparency in our work
- better understanding of the impact of our work

It has also led to a greater understanding of the challenges we still face in honestly adhering to the principles and values we espouse as an organisation. The challenge of supporting our staff through greater organisational development processes to carry out the underlying changes required in ALPS and the work set out in our strategy – *Fighting poverty together*. The need to break down the 'silos' that separate disciplines such as 'finance' and 'programme'. The need to constantly challenge the attempts to reduce our work into boxes for clear analysis, which can distort and pervert the reality on the ground. And the need to constantly challenge the frequent and incessant demands of upward accountability, which can detract from the energy, given to improving downward accountability to our partners and to poor people.

ALPS has the potential to make great changes to ActionAid's work. As yet, the new Accountability, Learning and Planning system is new and therefore still fragile. In the words of one ActionAid International Director – 'it is something we need to nurture'.

## Introduction

During the 1990's, ActionAid had shifted its focus from a relatively narrow concentration on operational projects in selected geographical areas to far more diverse country and regional programmes, and a greater investment in policy and advocacy work. These changes reflected the different discourses within ActionAid in its understanding of the causes of poverty and its approach to poverty alleviation. The outcome of these analyses was a new strategy document, *Fighting poverty together*<sup>1</sup>. A strategy, which refocuses ActionAid's work from delivering, services to addressing the fundamental causes of social injustice and poverty. A key outcome

<sup>1</sup> *Fighting poverty together, ActionAid strategy (1999-2005)*

of this change process required ActionAid to review its planning and reporting systems.

During the 1990s, ActionAid, like many large NGOs equated accountability and reporting systems with central control and bureaucracy. Staff and local partners were spending too much time and effort on planning and reporting. ActionAid's internal planning and reporting systems over-emphasised upward reporting, accountability to donors and sponsors and an over reliance on ActionAid's own interpretation of change. Large wordy reports tended to describe project activities in great detail whilst giving less emphasis to the wider outcomes, impacts and changes perceived by the groups of people with whom ActionAid and ActionAid's partners work. Despite a huge amount of staff effort spent on reporting, the organisation knew little about the lasting changes that its work has brought about in people's lives. Things had to change.

Thanks to the foresight of ActionAid's International Directors – and particularly the insights of a few committed Trustees - ActionAid embarked upon a creative journey to redesign its planning and reporting systems in 1999<sup>2</sup>. The aim was to develop internal reporting systems, which would essentially help operationalise, the (then new) organisational strategy *Fighting poverty together*<sup>3</sup>.

### The Accountability, Learning and Planning System

What we developed was, and remains, challenging. A long process of internal dialogue and discussion led to the design of a new system – ALPS, the ActionAid Accountability, Learning and Planning System. ALPS is a system that recognises that social development, rights or social justice can not be planned for, managed and delivered in a linear fashion. ALPS recognises that the principles and attitudes and the ways in which we do things are more important than plans and reports. That to carry out ActionAid's ambitious, organisational strategy – *Fighting poverty together* – we need to create space for our staff to reflect and work in a different way with our partners and poor people. Attitudes, behaviours and principles are therefore fundamental to ALPS. Attitudes which recognise the importance of partners, which seek to address & challenge power imbalances, seek real participation, acknowledge the importance of gender relations and which cause ActionAid staff to work in ways which make room for the excluded to fully participate.

Central to ALPS are five cross cutting themes:

- increasing downward accountability
- ensuring real participation
- promoting a culture of learning
- ensuring gender analysis throughout and
- recognising and sharing power.

ALPS marked a significant change for ActionAid because it...

- Ø Tries to set the conditions for ActionAid and its partners to involve poor and marginal groups in a real way in their own development processes
- Ø Attempts to opens up the space for community groups and partners to have greater participation in, and ownership over, programmes.
- Ø Emphasises learning with stakeholders about the value of our work
- Ø Recognises different forms of literacy and communication and encourages us to think creatively and work in different media
- Ø Encourages transparency, sharing and openness – moving to a time when community groups with whom we work are actively involved in planning, budgeting and assessing the value of interventions.

<sup>2</sup> The development of ALPS has been explained by Patta Scott-Villiers, 'The Struggle for organisational change: how the ActionAid Accountability, Learning and Planning System emerged', Development and Practice, Volume 12, Numbers 3 & 4 August 2002.

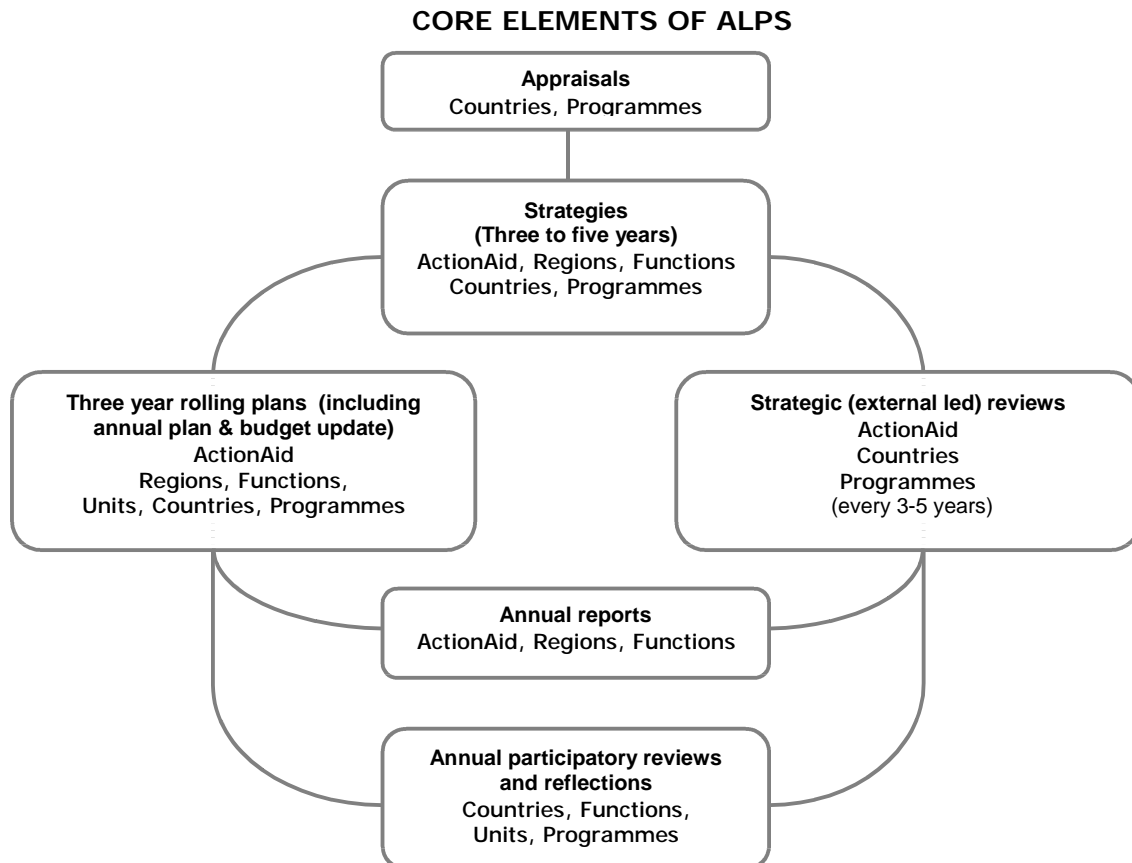
<sup>3</sup> Fighting Poverty Together, ActionAid strategy (1999-2004)

Nevertheless, ALPS also asks for core requirements. These, in themselves, are not new. They include:

- **Strategies** at each level (programmes, countries, functions, regions, ActionAid) every three to five years
- **Three year rolling plans** (with annual up-dates)
- **Annual reports** for ActionAid globally, regional programmes and divisions
- **Strategic reviews** External (consultant led) reviews of work at each level after 3-5 years
- **Annual participatory review and reflections** at all levels.

There were a number of new and radical elements of this revised system:

1. The first was the introduction of the annual participatory review and reflection processes (PRRPs). The overall purpose of these reflection processes is to learn and share learning from achievements and failures to improve on-going programme quality. The aim being to involve stakeholders – particularly poor people, but also partners, donors and peers – in the analysis of what has worked and what hasn't. The aim of the PRRPs is to increase reflection, transparency and learning in order to improve on-going work.
2. The second, more radical element was the decision not to require a formal annual report from country programmes. Thus allowing country programmes to concentrate on the integrity of the participatory review and reflection processes.
3. Finally, the ALPS system was breaking new ground in that for the first time, it tried to bring the planning/budgeting processes more in sync with the reviewing our work. It also clearly required the full backing of ActionAid's Human Resources and Organisation Development teams across the world.



## Additions to the system

A number of organisational changes have occurred since the introduction of ALPS in 2000:

1. **Global Monitoring Framework:** A year after the introduction of ALPS, work began to try and enable ActionAid to systematically track progress against our organisational strategy – *Fighting poverty together*. A framework setting out 'indicative outcome indicators' emerged out of work carried out by ActionAid's International Directors. During 2002, this framework was piloted.
2. **Management Information System:** Secondly, subsequent to ALPS, ActionAid has commissioned work to develop an internal Management Information System. The aim is to identify and aggregate global ActionAid information needed for key management decisions.
3. **Shared Learning Initiative:** ALPS and *Fighting poverty together* place great emphasis on learning, reflection and innovation. During 2002, a Shared Learning Strategy was developed to support of these objectives. A key aim of this initiative is to develop systems to encourage learning and sharing within ActionAid.
4. **ActionAid Open Information Policy:** More recently, a disclosure policy has been written entitled "ActionAid Open Information Policy". The aim of the policy is to guide staff and the organisation on what information should be shared, and what our stakeholders can expect or demand in terms of information from ActionAid. A key element of the policy is financial disclosure.

## What has been achieved?

During the autumn of 2002, ActionAid decided to assess the progress we are making in redesigning our systems and bringing our organisational practice in line with ALPS<sup>4</sup>. In two years modest, but significant changes have been made. Two distinct areas of progress stood out in the analysis. The first is the strong commitment and effort ActionAid, across the world, has put into internalising and adapting ALPS to local situations and partners. The second is the success of the PRRPs in acting as a catalyst for coherent change processes across the organisation. These changes are briefly explained below:

### 1. Strong internalisation of ALPS

Perhaps the most important change has been the strong acceptance and internalisation of ALPS and what this stands for. Along with the ActionAid global strategy *Fighting poverty together*, ALPS is now seen as a key reference document throughout the organisation. It is something that we aspire to achieve. Indeed, people commonly describe processes or actions as "out of keeping" or "in keeping" with the spirit of ALPS. ALPS – and particularly the attitudes, behaviours and principles, which it espouses - are entering the life-blood of the organisation. This hasn't been without effort. A huge amount of energy has gone into this internalisation process.

"ALPS is creating a dynamic for change. ALPS is new, it is in a fragile state. ALPS pushes people to think. Where it has been internalised it has left staff feeling empowered. ..." [Algresia Akwi Ogojo, ActionAid International Director for Africa, Directors meeting 15 November]

<sup>4</sup> The ActionAid core impact assessment community undertook the analysis (Ephraim Dhlembeu, Ramesh Singh, Edele Thebaud, Antonella Mancini, Ros David). Their discussions were informed by their involvement in Africa and Asia Country Directors meetings, and input from the Latin America Impact Assessment Network. The discussion and analysis was further informed by discussion at the International Directors meeting on 15th November 2002.

## 2. Participatory review and reflection processes have been a catalyst for change

A second major change has been the success of the PRRP processes. These processes have become the catalyst for organisational changes with regards to ALPS principles, attitudes and behaviours. The picture is by no means homogenous across the world, but the vast majority of ActionAid country programmes have invested a huge amount of time and effort in the PRRPs – and feel proud of the changes these processes have engendered. We can see the beginnings of change on many fronts, however, four areas stand out: the PRRPs have led to more learning, altered accountability, more transparency in our work and have improved our overall understanding of change/impact.

### i. Developing explicit reflection–learning–action Cycles

There is evidence that in many ActionAid country programmes the PRRPs are influencing the on-going nature of the work. In Burundi, for example, work initiatives have been revised and a new project proposal submitted to DFID in the light of learning from the PRRP.

“...we recognise that this is a very useful and innovative evaluation report...”, wrote DFID who used the PRRP report to review ActionAid’s project proposal, which has ultimately been approved.

Indeed, more generally, this is the first year that there is a more explicit link between the learning and insights drawn from the global PRRP processes and ActionAid-wide resource allocation decisions<sup>5</sup>.

### ii. Increasing Downward accountability

The PRRPs are also beginning to affect ActionAid’s accountability to partners and poor people. Many of the PRRPs in 2001 involved stakeholders at all levels. Partners, peers, donors and poor people were actively encouraged to participate in processes. The involvement of a wide range of stakeholders has, to-date, been particularly strong in ActionAid Africa programmes. Different methods and approaches have been used with different stakeholders including participatory methodologies, facilitated group discussions, face-to-face interviews, telephone or email interviews etc (for more details please see IA Exchanges special: October 2002).

Despite progress in involving stakeholders in review processes, the organisation acknowledges the distance we have to go. ActionAid is far from being held to account by its stakeholders. What we are beginning to see, however, is the opening up of the space for stakeholders to critically assess ActionAid’s work.

### iii. Developing a culture of transparency

The PRRPs have engendered a little more transparency in the ways that we work. The process has, in some cases, encouraged the sharing of budgets, details of programmes and the methods of raising and distributing money. During 2001, a few more countries have been experimenting with methods for sharing financial data with communities, and partners. ActionAid Kenya, Haiti, Burundi and India have all made progress in this area of work with exciting results. ActionAid Brazil now shares all its financial information on the Internet.

<sup>5</sup> A paper outlining the key learning from the global PRRPs and areas needing further investment & attention was prepared for the preliminary 3-year plan discussions held by International Directors. Learning and issues also highlighted in regional 3-year plan guidelines issued to country programmes.

#### iv. Better understanding of impact

Finally, the introduction of PRRP processes has led to a marked shift in the way ActionAid documents its work. Previously ActionAid programme reports concentrated on 'activities', (basically detailing ActionAid's work). Now however, there is a growing tendency for reports to be more concise and to give more emphasis to the changes our work, and our partners work, has brought about in people's lives. The involvement of stakeholders in many review processes has led to the refocusing of analysis on what is important in people's lives.

### Distance to go...

ALPS has created a dynamic of cultural change within ActionAid and in the countries where ActionAid is working. However, it has not necessarily led to the abandonment of older systems, nor old ways of working. In our analysis of progress against ALPS, we had to acknowledge the need to achieve more internal congruence. ALPS cannot be seen in isolation from other ActionAid systems. Whilst some of ActionAid's systems have undergone changes over the past few years, there is still a need to clearly identify some of the practices and policies in place that are currently undermining ActionAid's change agenda. Some of the key issues are summarised below:

#### 1. A need for greater organisational development support

There is a need for greater organisational support to develop the work of ALPS. Systems, in themselves, do not create change. The expectations in ALPS are dependent on attitudes, behaviours and the skills needed to carry out key change processes. This requires a huge investment in building staff and partner capacities and reviewing our current human resource and organisational development policies and procedures. ActionAid has not yet built up the personnel and expertise required to give such support right across its programmes.

Where intensive processes have happened (for example in Uganda) the results of this work have been transforming. Similarly, processes in Asia on developing a healthy work-life balance are also having an influence. However, it is true to say that across the board, ActionAid has a huge amount of work to do to address the challenge of changing our attitudes and behaviours in line with ALPS.

Indeed as an organisation, we have not clearly articulated what we mean by the principles and behaviours set out in ALPS. We haven't articulated expected changes, nor developed yardsticks by which we can 'lightly' assess progress. In our review of ALPS, there is a sense that we have a great deal of work to do before we can see changes in these areas. Recent lessons from Uganda's organisational development work give some indication of the amount of time and commitment required to undertake such change processes.

#### 2. Finance staff not working closely with programme staff

Despite the attempts of ALPS to bring finance systems more in line with programme work, this has not necessarily happened. There is still a (seemingly) deep-rooted separation between finance and programme work. This separation manifests itself in various ways. Finance staff are currently not as involved as they should be in all ALPS processes – from planning to reviewing work.

Pie charts presenting cost structures within each micro region, as well as the consolidated cost structures of Haiti/Dominican Republic programme (central & partner costs) were displayed, generating intense discussions and debate. This exercise was meant to demonstrate our commitment to transparency and encourage partners to look critically at how resources are allocated. It became obvious from the analysis presented that staff costs proportions were considerably high. It was agreed that AA Haiti/DR and partners would try to agree on a set of basic performance targets in an effort to increase efficiency and effectiveness.  
Experiences from Haiti/DR PRRP 2001

As a result, financial figures are rarely compared to programme outcomes and impact. Equally important, the reviews and learning processes are not seamlessly linked to the budgeting and planning process. Where Finance staff have been given the opportunity to be involved in experimenting and aligning country finance systems to ALPS processes, the results have been extremely positive. More needs to be done to encourage such innovation and highlight lessons from these experiences.

### 3. Ambiguity on organisational requirements

A third major issue is the contradictory incentive set up by the *Fighting poverty together* monitoring framework. Whilst ALPS emphasises improving downward accountability and learning, the emphasis of the global framework is to understand overall organisational progress. Although, in the long run, there doesn't necessarily have to be a disjuncture between the two – in the short term this can set up contradictory incentives. Pressure to identify impact can impede honest reflection and learning. It also has the potential to damage relationships with partners where their contribution is not highlighted. Pressure to 'talk up' work can be heightened in countries where work is extremely difficult and progress extremely slow (or negative)<sup>6</sup>. In any case, programme change is neither linear, nor consistent - yet the global framework itself represents linear thinking.

Early work on a Management Information System (MIS) has led to the identification of further contradictions. Initial work seems to be requiring huge amounts of quantitative information which would take the organisation back to bureaucratic number crunching, rather than focus on the bigger picture of what's working well and making significant changes in peoples' lives. The tension is not the amount of information required. It is more about asking the 'right' kinds of questions in the right kinds of ways - in essence getting a balance between learning, downward accountability and reporting upwards. A balance, that is hard to achieve.

### 4. Need to communicate changes with donors.

Fourthly, the issues around internal processes of monitoring against ActionAid's global strategy *Fighting poverty together* equally relate to the external pressures of reporting against donor imposed 'Logical frameworks'. ActionAid still has a lot of work to do in effectively communicating with donors how it wants to monitor and

"Initially we tried to think linearly: input>output>outcome>impact. Gradually we discovered that the real world is not, nor can be linear... From a linear model we are moving towards a learning model."  
Mohammed Zakaria, Impact Assessment Officer, ActionAid Bangladesh

assess the value of its work with partners and with its primary stakeholders – poor people. As an organisation, we need to challenge some of the linear thinking associated with management tools and have the courage to communicate the (often slow) reality of trying to promote social change. Change which is rarely linear, which is not always positive and which needs to be

supported in appropriate ways, which recognise context and cultural specificity. Promoting social development, rights or social justice cannot be planned for, managed or delivered in a linear fashion. By attempting to do so, distorts and perverts the reality on the ground and closes off appropriate responses to contextual changes. ActionAid needs to boldly challenge its own internal tendency to apply management-centred 'logical' and 'linear' thinking, as well as that imposed from outside.

<sup>6</sup> ActionAid works in nine countries, which are either in – or emerging out of- conflict.

<b>Progress and challenges of ALPS</b>	
<b>Key progress</b>	<b>Key challenges</b>
<p>The PRRPs have been well received. These annual reflections have been a catalyst for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The beginning of greater accountability to our partners and to the groups of people with whom we work at grass roots level.</li> <li>• Led to the encouragement of learning processes, which improve on-going work.</li> <li>• The opening up of ActionAid's work to more criticism from our peers, donors, partners and the people with whom we work in communities.</li> <li>• The internal challenging and rethinking of our work with partners.</li> <li>• Greater understanding of the real value and inherent problems of ActionAid's work.</li> </ul>	<p>There are many challenges and problems that we face in trying to make the major changes associated with ALPS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ActionAid is a large International NGO which is changing constantly, which has a huge power vis-à-vis many of its partners and which (in places) has a very dominant hierarchy. As such, there is an inherent contradiction when ActionAid is trying to open up space for honest feedback and criticism.</li> <li>• In some AA country programmes, ALPS processes are an 'add-on' to existing, bureaucratic M&amp;E processes.</li> <li>• There is a need to seek greater synchronicity between all of AA's systems (such as HR/OD, finance, Marketing and sponsorship).</li> <li>• There is a fear of financial transparency in many AA country programmes. Our partners also fear sharing budgets with community groups.</li> <li>• All the changes that ALPS have currently made within ActionAid are tentative and need to be nurtured and encouraged. Progress can easily be undermined the pressure to show change and respond to linear thinking - or anticipated outcomes. The rigid adherence to log framed goals and verifiable indicators can distort and pervert the reality on the ground.</li> <li>• There is a danger of asking for too much too fast. The introduction of the 'Global framework' for monitoring against ActionAid's strategy, has led to a major danger of undermining ALPS processes.</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, despite the modest changes bought about by ALPS, there is still work to be done. It is only two years since the introduction of ALPS within ActionAid. As an organisation, we are still learning, rethinking and reacting to its introduction. The experience and reality of work in country programmes has to modify and change the ALPS system. We are seeking on-going feedback from within ActionAid and our major stakeholders as to how to keep ALPS processes authentic and honest. ActionAid has a huge amount of work to do in fostering a true relationship with its partners to create a relationship where partners can openly, clearly articulate criticism, and share vulnerabilities of the difficulties of promoting social change. We are also trying to share our learning with academics and others about the problems and issues inherent in trying to institutionalise such large changes across an international NGO. Your thoughts, comments and feedback are most welcome.

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