



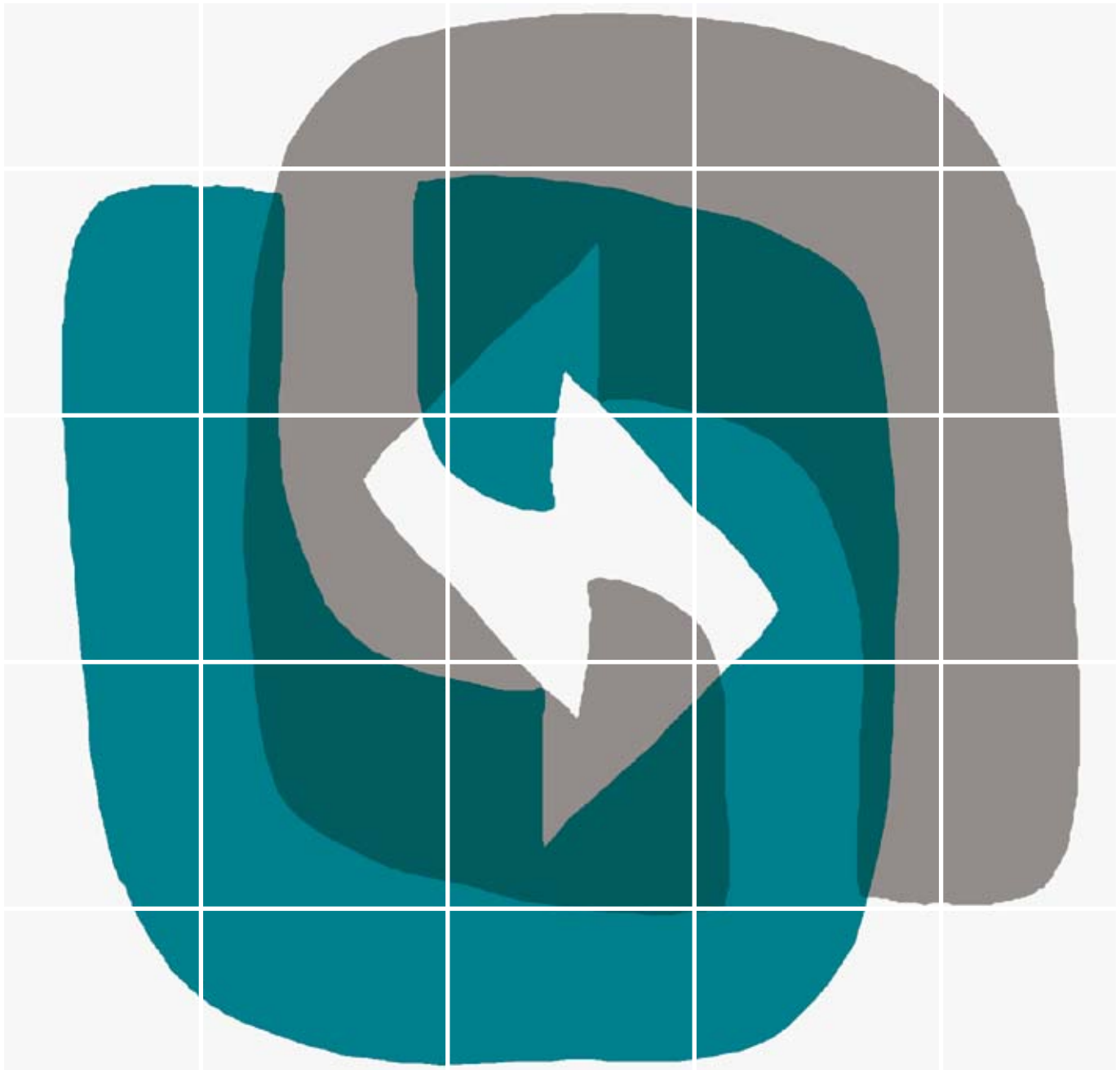
Lessons for change

Going against the flow

the struggle to make organisational systems part of the solution rather than part of the problem

The case of ActionAid's Accountability, Learning and Planning System

Rosalind David and
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Background

Organisational learning, in which leaders and managers give priority to learning as integral to practice, is increasingly recognized as critical to improved performance. ActionAid, DFID and Sida collaborated with the Participation Group at the Institute of Development Studies to explore understandings of learning and to document innovative approaches.

Learning with ActionAid centred on institutionalising a radical organization-wide approach to accountability, learning and planning. The new system prioritises accountability to poor people and partners and so revolutionizes the way the organization does business. The paper by David and Mancini documents the struggle to institutionalize the new system and the extraordinary changes that it has engendered.

The learning process with the UK Department of International Development (DFID) looked at how to reflect on and improve relationships as a central aspect of aid delivery. The paper by Eyben provides a justification for the role of relationships in DFID's practice as a bilateral development organization. In their paper, Pasteur and Scott-Villiers examine the importance of learning about relationships and offer a set of questions for the organization wishing to learn. Larbi Jones describes three DFID projects and the methodologies applied at various stages to reflect on and learn about partnerships and influencing in Brazil.

Staff of the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) worked to explore understandings and practices of participation across the agency. They experimented with participatory learning groups, which took different forms in Stockholm and Nairobi. In their paper, Pratt, Cornwall and Scott-Villiers detail the learning methodology and point out pitfalls and possibilities. Cornwall and Pratt, in a separate paper, explore the realities of implementing participation in a complex bilateral development organisation.

Much of the impetus for IDS to engage in these collaborations resulted from a workshop held at IDS in May 2001 on "Power, Procedures and Relationships" which highlighted learning as a way to achieve consistency between personal behaviour, institutional norms and the new development agenda (IDS Policy Briefing, Issue 15). A group of IDS staff have pursued this subject, including Robert Chambers, Andrea Cornwall, Rosalind Eyben, Kath Pasteur, Garrett Pratt and Patta Scott-Villiers. IDS also organised a workshop in February 2003 to facilitate reflection and sharing between those involved in each of these initiatives.

Background to this paper





This paper gives a personal perspective. Both authors were members of ActionAid's Impact Assessment Unit during the writing and introduction of a new, organisation-wide system of accountability, learning and planning, ALPS. Rosalind David left ActionAid in August 2003 and is now an independent consultant based in Auckland, New Zealand. Antonella Mancini has been with ActionAid for over 10 years and is currently Head of Impact Assessment. Rosalind helped design the initial ideas behind ALPS and was part of the drafting team. Antonella has supported the introduction of ALPS into country programmes and now leads the process of supporting its principles as the organisation 'internationalises'.

The aim of this paper is to give an honest insight into organisational change; sharing with others the difficulties involved and the problems encountered. In doing so, we inevitably have to discuss organisational politics. We try to do this in an appropriate, sensitive way while remaining honest to our overall analysis. The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent an ActionAid perspective.



Going against the flow

This paper looks at the origins of the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS), a revolutionary approach to managing the learning and relationships of an international non-governmental agency, ActionAid. Starting with the origins of ALPS in the late 90s, and describing the false starts and factors that mobilised change, the authors go on to describe:

-  The new system and what was unique about it
-  Challenges and successes of introducing the idea and encouraging local innovation with over 30 country offices on three continents
-  Dilemmas and contradictions between the organisation's international systems and the principles of the new accountability learning and planning system and how they were overcome
-  The differences made by the new system and the work still to be done

Recognition of the need for participation and downward accountability has been around for a long time. This paper shows that the hard work starts in creating systems that will make it happen. ActionAid is by no means the only organisation which is going through this process. Hopefully some of the insights in this paper will help those on the same journey.

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Introduction

Between 1998 and 2003, ActionAid underwent huge organisational change. In 1999, a new strategy (*Fighting poverty together*) set a new direction, articulating bold objectives to help tackle the root causes of global injustice. Between 1998 and 2003, the organisation further decentralised from the UK.¹ The two UK offices at London and Chard² were downsized and functions and power decentralised internationally to country offices, while strong regional teams were established in Africa, Asia and Latin America/Caribbean led and run by people from those regions.

The organisation is currently embarking upon a new wave of change. It is in the process of 'internationalising'. ActionAid UK, along with alliance organisations in Italy, Greece, Ireland, the US and Brazil are joining together to form ActionAid International. The new headquarters, which has hitherto been located in London, will now be relocated to South Africa. Internationalisation is a key part of the organisation's attempt to distribute power in a more equitable manner within the organisation, and in the longer haul, between ActionAid and poor people. The international organisation will be led by southerners, based in the south, with an international board composed of southern and northern Trustees. Eventually, all country programmes will become full affiliates of ActionAid International, with their own national governing bodies.

In practice, over the last six years, ActionAid has undergone a substantial transformation. It has become bolder, more outspoken and much clearer about its principles and values. As an organisation it has become much more effective in its work with partners in tackling social injustice.

One important aspect of this organisational change has been the complete rethinking of its internal planning, monitoring and accountability system. In 2000, we took a principled approach by introducing the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS). This system had widespread implications for work right across the world. It has also attracted much attention within the international development community.

Change is never smooth, nor is it easy. It requires politically strong champions and it takes a long time. This paper explores the introduction of ALPS, what it symbolised and the huge implications it has had on our work and relationships with partners. It discusses the contradictions and difficulties that adherence to the principles underlying ALPS posed within the organisation. It explores some of the pressures and problems faced in negotiations with donors. Finally, it outlines some of the future challenges ActionAid faces in protecting the valuable essence of ALPS, while rapidly undergoing the internationalisation process.

¹ ActionAid had begun the process of decentralisation at the beginning of the 1990s when regional offices were first set up in Africa, Asia and Latin America/Caribbean.

² Chard is a small town in Somerset, England. This office was and is mainly involved in Child Sponsorship.

The origins of ALPS – critical moments and champions

There are many factors which together enabled a fresh, radical look at internal accountability, planning and evaluation systems. Among them were: widespread staff frustration with internal bureaucracy; a bold new organisational strategy which set a clear agenda; new leadership across the organisation; a hard-hitting external review of our programmes; and the active involvement of key trustees.

The early beginning...

In 1998 Salil Shetty took over as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and under his leadership, widespread change began to unfold. New leaders with strong programme backgrounds and an equally strong commitment to development were recruited or promoted. In 1999, after a long gestation, ActionAid's new organisational-wide strategy, *Fighting poverty together 1999–2005* (FPT), was completed. This strategy articulated a bold, new vision and agenda, which had emerged largely from work in country programmes. In essence, the new strategy refocused the organisation's work from delivering services to addressing the fundamental causes of social injustice and poverty. From being a slightly cautious British charity, we were now to link with others (community organisations, networks, trade unions and social movements) to reinforce global anti-poverty movements. Whereas ActionAid had previously concentrated its work on operational projects in selected geographical areas, mainly funded by child sponsorship, the organisation was now to embark upon a more diverse programme of work in countries and regions. Far greater emphasis was to be given to policy and advocacy work across the world.

The new strategy was inspirational. But the clear articulation of organisational goals – and particularly principles – in *Fighting poverty together* only served to further highlight the disjuncture between our vision and the management systems that were supposed to facilitate organisational performance. It became abundantly clear that internal systems had to change in line with our strategy. The most obvious system requiring revision was the internal accountability, planning and reporting system.

Radical changes were necessary. During the mid 1990s, ActionAid like many of its peers, equated accountability and reporting with central systems and bureaucracy.³ The instruction manuals were long and detailed: the thinking inherently linear. The assumption was that certain activities lead to certain outcomes which bring about positive change in people's lives. Both staff and local partners were frustrated. Everyone was complaining of spending so much time on project planning and reporting. The paradoxes were many. ActionAid at the time was known for its pioneering work on participation, yet somehow values of involvement had not permeated into our systems. While considerable staff effort was spent on reporting, the organisation knew little about the lasting effects its work had brought about in people's lives. The excluded people, with whom we worked, were rarely involved in assessing that change. Large wordy reports, which landed on office desks in the UK, tended to describe project activities in great detail. Far less emphasis was given to the wider impacts and changes perceived by the groups of people with whom we and our partners worked.

³ For the sake of space, ActionAid's former system, the ActionAid Planning and Reporting System (ARPS) is not described in detail in this paper. See Scott-Villiers (2002) for a more in-depth discussion of the APRS. Also see Rosalind David and Charles Owusu (2001).

False starts...

There were many false starts. Initial attempts to rethink the internal accountability and planning system became mired in confusion and struggles to retain power. Consultants were hired (at considerable expense) to help us assess information requirements at different levels. Tortuous workshops were held all around the ActionAid world. There was considerable disagreement.

An essential split was the degree to which staff and trustees based in the UK ought to retain power to “sign off” project/country appraisals and strategies – and the degree to which decision-making power ought to be decentralised to country and regional programmes. A second major issue was the volume of “upward reporting” required by UK-based staff and trustees. Discussions were particularly fraught among the UK marketing team. They were worried about feeding back to donors and sponsors, and (quite understandably) anxious not to make their jobs any harder through having less information. At the time, over 70 per cent of ActionAid’s work was funded through child sponsorship. This fundraising mechanism was popular because it provided long-term (ten year) funding to development projects. It required considerable staff time in feeding back to individual sponsors. More importantly, it had set up a paradigm of funding mechanisms influencing the nature of programme work – not vice versa.

Discussions and workshops were held on the internal accountability and planning system for at least a year (between mid-1998 and mid-1999). Although some headway was made – and indeed, new draft systems were proposed – these were never ratified.⁴ The power struggles had not been resolved. In trying to please everyone, the revised systems pleased no one. More work was needed.

Taking stock...

It was hard to see how we would move forward. After all, we were facing an impasse that is faced by many International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) across

the world. A major impetus then came at that stage through a highly critical, external review of ActionAid’s work. The *Taking stock* review was completed in May 1999.⁵ This review – though cutting and highly hurtful for many people across the organisation – gave the international directors (and perhaps particularly the CEO) a clear mandate to initiate change. Amongst other things, the external consultants pointed out what some of us already knew – that there were major contradictions between the goals in *Fighting poverty together* and the systems and procedures through which the organisation was run. The reviewers were blunt. We were not transparent. We were not accountable to our partners or poor people, and our planning and reporting system was bureaucratic and burdensome.

The *Taking stock* review proved pivotal in many ways. It accelerated the changing power dynamics within the organisation. A case in point was the power accorded to UK-based staff and particularly the marketing division. Taking stock outlined major changes required. The marketing division was to be radically rethought with many functions outsourced or decentralised. Systems and procedures were to be revised in order to facilitate the organisational mission – that articulated in *Fighting poverty together*. In particular, the ways of raising money would be reviewed. The organisation was to opt for decreasing the proportion of “tied money” raised through child sponsorship, while at the same time increasing un-earmarked funds raised through new funding mechanisms and from bilateral and multilateral donors. The reassertion of the paramount importance of programme work influencing support functions, rather than *vice versa*, had a dramatic effect. Within months, there was an opening to revise the accountability, planning and evaluation system.

Champions and mavericks...

It was the far-sighted support of a few trustees that helped the organisation gain new perspective. Robert Chambers, Patrick Mulvany and Ken Burnett (Chair of Trustees) were particularly important.⁶ None of these men are

⁴ ACAS (ActionAid’s Core Accountability System) was the name given to the proposed new accountability system. This system was never implemented.

⁵ The Taking Stock review was an organisational-wide review carried out by six external consultants: a marketing consultant, a finance consultant, a HR/OD consultant, a gender consultant and two development consultants.

⁶ Robert Chambers was one of the main inspirations behind ALPS. Patrick Mulvany was a champion and maverick on the board who gave support to ALPS. Ken Burnett was the chair of the Board and is a progressive, innovative thinker.

What emerged?

wedded to tradition. All were in positions of power. All wanted to see ActionAid make a real difference to world poverty. With years of development experience, they could see how unnecessary bureaucracy seems to swamp so many INGOs. In early 2000, Salil Shetty (then CEO) asked the Head of Impact Assessment (then Rosalind David) to work with Robert Chambers to outline ideas for a new organisational-wide accountability system. A day was spent brainstorming in a small office at the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex. On that day, caution was thrown to the wind. New thinking was required. With blank sheets of paper, the aim was to think out of the box. The essence of a new system – which emphasises accountability, transparency and learning – was devised that day.

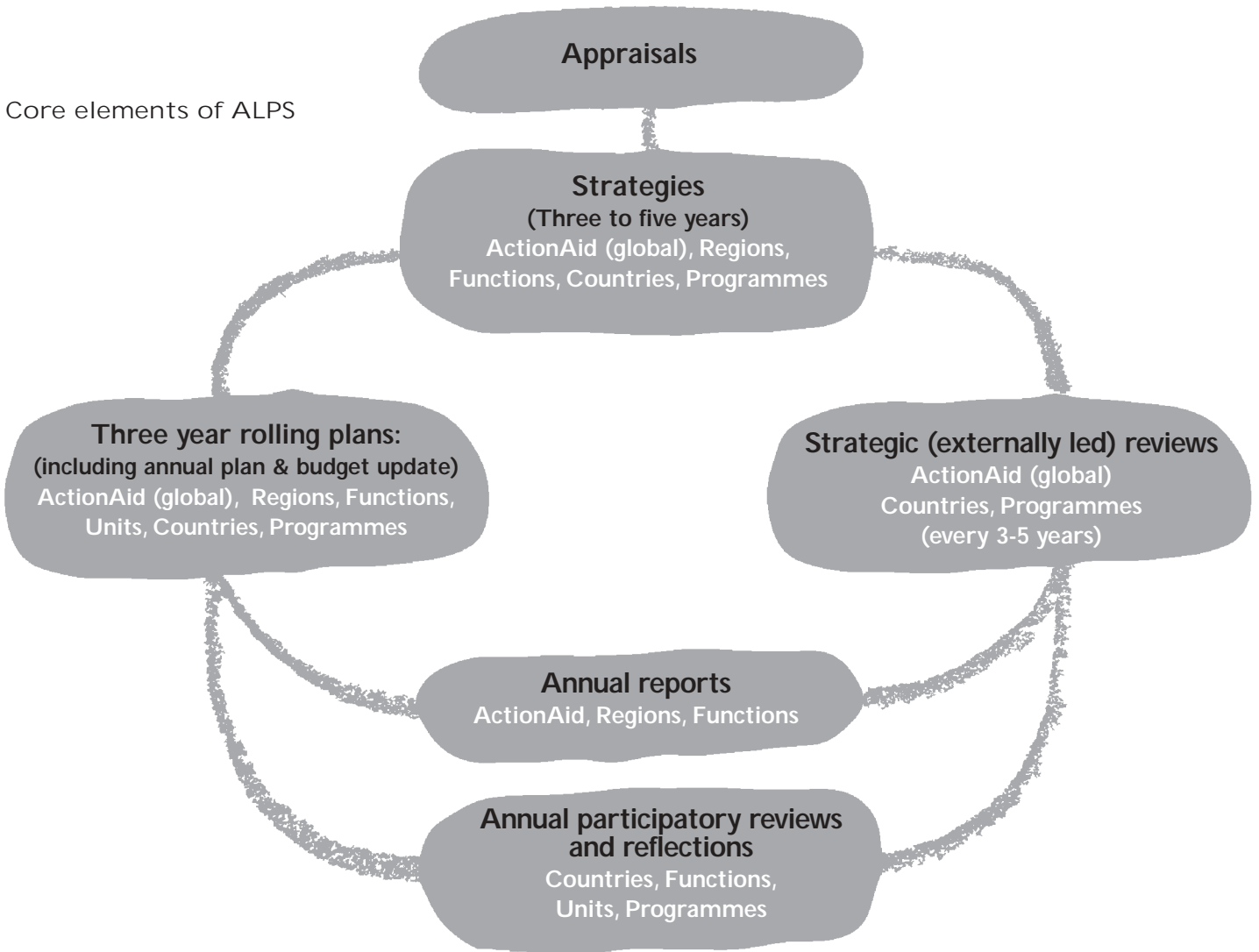
In her article on ALPS, Scott-Villiers (2002) points out the importance of frustration in the change process. By that stage, the tedium of discussing the accountability and planning system had set in. The international directors welcomed our radical (frankly, half-baked) ideas. A few months later (in March 2000) a small team of six international staff met in Zimbabwe for a week to work up the new ideas.⁷ We were drawn from all corners of the organisation. The involvement of two international directors (the Africa Director and Director of Finance) gave the team weight. The involvement of Robert Chambers added the voice of the trustees. Marketing were conspicuous by their absence. The mandate was clear. Together we were to devise a workable system, which would bring our organisational processes and systems in line with the values and principles of our organisation: a system which would facilitate, rather than hinder, development.

What emerged from that week in Zimbabwe proved motivating for the whole organisation. During one short week, the new Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS) had been written. It had also, almost, been ratified before the document was typed. Decision-makers were either present or were consulted through email or telephone. During that week, the Africa Director was in frequent communication with the CEO and the Directors of Policy and Asia. There was a strong alignment of thinking.

On the face of it, ALPS is no different from many other INGO accountability systems. Core requirements include programme, project, country and regional appraisals, strategies, three year rolling plans (with annual updates), annual reports and strategic reviews (see overleaf).

⁷ The team comprised: Ephraim Dhlembeu (the Africa Programme Coordinator), Lubna Ehsan (Pakistan Gender Policy Analyst), Colin Williams (Africa Director), Nigel Saxby-Soffe (Director of Finance), Robert Chambers (Trustee) and Rosalind David (then Head of Impact Assessment).

Core elements of ALPS



However, ALPS was – and remains – inspirational. It was a complete paradigm shift. It starts with a belief that poor people and their own organisations are both capable of and should be involved in managing their development processes. ALPS reflects the view that poor people and their organisations should be given the space to negotiate their own position and be given the opportunity to do so at local, national and international levels. It requires a belief that the INGO's role is to support development initiatives, initiated and led by poor people (and their organisations).

Three quintessential elements of ALPS render it different and – to some – controversial.

1 Firstly, the system puts heavy emphasis on the principles which drive our work. ALPS recognises that the principles and attitudes, and the ways in which we do things, are more important than functional planning and reporting. It emphasises the principles of

transparency, participation, learning, awareness of gender and power and, above all, accountability to our primary stakeholders – poor people. ALPS outlines the importance of process and encourages adherence to the above principles in all that we do.

2 Secondly, in its very essence ALPS goes against the flow. It digresses from logical thinking by recognising that social development, rights and justice can not be planned for, managed and delivered in a linear fashion. To carry out *Fighting poverty together*, we needed to create the space for our staff to reflect and work in different ways with our partners and with poor people. To allow space for partners and staff to respond appropriately to changing situations and contexts we needed to become a reflective and reflexive organisation.

3 Finally, while many INGOs have responded to the demands of greater accountability by increasing reporting to central offices, ALPS

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

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

Attempts to open up the space for community groups and partners to have greater participation in, and ownership over, programmes

Emphasises learning with stakeholders about the value of our work

Recognises different forms of literacy and communication and encourages us to think creatively and work in different media

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.

tries to do the opposite. It tries to reduce the number of reports (written in English) coming to headquarters, emphasising instead greater accountability to the community groups and partners with whom we work. It encourages the active involvement of primary stakeholders in planning, budgeting and assessing the value of interventions. More decision-making has been decentralised from London and greater decision-making power given to national teams running their own programmes in countries across the world. The power balance has significantly shifted. ALPS was designed to allow our primary stakeholders (poor and excluded people) a significant and powerful voice in ActionAid's work. It was not designed to feed the insatiable desire for upward reporting.

New elements introduced by ALPS

Though the core elements of ALPS were similar to many other INGO accountability systems, some aspects of ALPS were new and – and at the time – innovative.

1 The first was the introduction of the annual participatory review and reflection processes (PRRPs). Reflection processes were to happen once a year at each level (in programmes, countries, across the functions and globally). The overall purpose of these reflection processes is to learn and share learning from achievements and failures in order to improve programme quality. The aim is to involve stakeholders – particularly the poor, but also partners, donors and peers – in the analysis of what has worked and what hasn't. By ActionAid opening up to criticism and creating the space for honest dialogue about programme expenditure, plans and initiatives, it hoped to create the possibility for stakeholders to be honest themselves and to actively influence the organisation's agenda.

2 To some, a radical element was the decision not to require a formal annual report from country programmes. The emphasis of ALPS was to improve the quality and impact of work carried out by country programme teams. At the time of writing ALPS, there was a strong body of opinion against asking country directors to produce annual reports, the argument being that the organisational

emphasis should be placed on developing the integrity of the participatory review and reflection processes. Instead of annual reports, country directors were asked (in the spirit of organisational learning) to share rough notes from the review and reflection processes; putting lessons and outcomes on the global intranet. This might include matrices, photographs, diagrams, as well as analyses. As we discuss later in this paper, the question of whether to ask country programmes to produce annual reports is one to which we were to frequently return.

Thus, ALPS breaks new ground. ALPS is different because it is an INGO system which aspires to promote organisational adherence to much-vaunted rhetoric. Embedded in each of the core requirements of ALPS is the emphasis on process, the aim being to gradually transform the way ActionAid carries out its work. At each stage there is an emphasis on increasing transparency, participation, gender and power analysis, downward accountability, honesty and a genuine sharing of power in the development process.

While ALPS calls for core documentation (for the purposes of statutory upward accountability), it recognises the importance of downward accountability to local stakeholders particularly the poor. Without their central involvement in development planning, monitoring and assessment – upward reporting was perfunctory. What use to know how many kilometres of road, or health centres have been built, without knowing what (if any) difference this has made to the lives of the poor? Indeed, was building the roads and health centres the best was to tackle poverty?

The aim was to change. ALPS, as a system, opens up the space for programme work to change in line with the political and conceptual understanding of development as outlined in *Fighting poverty together*.

Key drivers...

The involvement of two international directors in the ALPS drafting team was invaluable. Colin Williams – the then Africa Director – brought to ALPS a very clear notion of appropriate

attitudes and behaviours, which he imputed into the document. His firm support of ALPS – particularly its principles – helped ensure its early acceptance by the Africa teams.

The involvement (and subsequent unstinting support) of Nigel Saxby-Soffe, the Finance Director, was important for different reasons. His involvement meant that for the first time, the system for financial planning was integrated with programme planning and reviewing. This essentially meant that programme learning from the (newly instigated) annual participatory review and reflection processes, could directly influence annual planning and budgeting. The learning cycles became obvious. While many INGOs write about 'learning' few have internal systems that ensure learning feeds into programming and budgeting.

Secondly, the involvement of the Finance Director ensured transparency in financial reporting. The work of finance teams to increase transparency to partners, about the ways in which money is spent, has arguably been one of the most cutting edge developments inspired by ALPS. After all, he (or she) who holds the budget usually holds the power. Attempts to make budgets more transparent have, in some cases, done a substantial amount to increase accountability.

We'd set ourselves a huge challenge

Did any of us realise how far-reaching the implications would be? Perhaps not. In June 2000, the new Accountability, Learning and Planning System was officially published. At the time, the CEO (Salil Shetty) wrote '...we can now say we have a planning and review system that is as passionate and rigorous as *Fighting poverty together*. We are all aware that it is much easier to change the system than changing behaviours and practice...' He was right.

Once the documents were written, the hard work began. On the face of it, ALPS simply tried to support the adherence to often repeated INGO principles. In practice, the adherence to those principles had enormous implications across the organisation. ALPS – the principles, attitudes and importance of involving stakeholders in our work, was applicable to all parts of the organisation. To teams based in the UK, Brussels, Italy and Washington as well as teams based in the south. ALPS really did require us to be creative and to "go against the flow". It required a political shift and a shift in consciousness across the whole of the organisation.

At the individual level, ALPS had implications for attitude and awareness. It required a heightened awareness of power and the ways in which we relate to others – especially the less powerful. Staff in many parts of the world (and especially "front line" staff who were at the cutting edge of our development practice) were required to give up old ways of working and learn – or in some cases hone – certain skills: those of facilitation, participation, listening, and gender and power analysis.

At the organisational level, the new system had implications for every aspect of our work. Human Resource and Organisational Development (HR/OD) teams were required

to somehow facilitate the development of new skills and align organisational incentives to support ALPS. As an organisation, we needed to develop tools for supporting an understanding of the new philosophy (as well as the new mechanisms). In doing so, we needed to clearly articulate what we meant by the principles and behaviours set out in ALPS and support an understanding of these across the organisation. In addition, we needed to ensure that an understanding of ALPS and the recognition of changed behaviours became embedded in formal induction and appraisal processes.

The new system also had far-reaching implications for finance staff. Finance coordinators in country programmes were required to develop skills to share financial information with partners and primary stakeholders in ways which were meaningful to laypeople. In practice this meant, in some cases, developing ways of sharing key financial data with people who were semi, or totally, illiterate.⁸ Finance staff were also required to work with their programme colleagues (and vice versa) in a totally different way. The accountability element emphasised the importance of comparing the costs of work with an analysis of the benefit of the work from the perspective of the poor and our partners. Hence the deep-rooted divide between finance and programme disciplines had to be transcended.

ALPS also brought about significant changes for the marketing teams. As with finance, marketing staff were required to work more closely with programme staff. Sponsorship staff in country programmes were to use the annual review and reflection processes as the primary source of information for reporting to sponsors. In addition, fundraisers suddenly had to explain (and “sell”) ALPS to our donors along with our projects and programmes. This became increasingly difficult in a context where donors were becoming obsessed with measurable outcomes. It is even harder when you are dealing with northern-based desk staff whose main concern is to tick the boxes. And yet harder, when you have no practical understanding of what ALPS means.

Seeking congruence – work began in country programmes

It was hard for the organisation to know where work should begin. The most obvious place was in country programmes. We in the Impact Assessment Unit (IAU) put together a three-year plan to support the internalisation of ALPS across Africa, Asia and Latin American country programmes. Initial ideas involved external consultants working with internal teams in-country to explore what ALPS meant in each context. Charles Owusu, a member of the Unit, had long since facilitated a network of staff working on impact assessment issues (the IA network). The idea was that this network would play an important role in supporting the organisational internalisation of ALPS.

Our plans were presented to the international directors in the autumn of 2000. The idea didn't gain currency. Within ActionAid, the political climate had changed. As regionalisation continued apace and teams decentralised from the UK, it was politically unpopular for a London-based team to be seen to provide support to the country programmes. The international directors – and particularly the Africa Director – made it very clear that country programmes themselves had to lead on ALPS. The UK could not be seen to be holding the baton.

An idea that did, however, gain favour was that of involving the Participation Team at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). Robert Chambers (as one of the leading architects of ALPS), Patta Scott-Villiers, Garrett Pratt and Andrea Cornwall were all interested in observing organisational change in ActionAid. We (in the IAU) asked them to do more. Their eventual role was to work in a few pilot country programmes with the IA network supporting initial workshops and helping us develop methodologies and processes, which would help keep us honest to ALPS rhetoric. Country programme staff, thirsty for support, welcomed the offer of IDS' involvement. During late 2001 and 2002, members of the IDS Participation Team worked alongside the Impact Assessment Unit (in particular Charles Owusu and Antonella Mancini) and supported the IA network and their fellow ActionAid

⁸ For example, through the use of pie charts, simple diagrams and PRA processes.

colleagues in India, Kenya, Ethiopia and Brazil. The process of internalising began.

Some welcomed the space...

We were all on a steep learning curve. At this stage, it was the work of a small number of country teams that made ALPS more than words on paper. To some country teams – especially ones led by country directors who shared the philosophical approach to development – the new system made complete sense. Like ActionAid's organisational strategy *Fighting poverty together*, ALPS had to be understood at an intuitive or political level. It is based on sets of beliefs and principles around the rights of the poor to criticise and influence poverty eradication efforts. There had to be a shared perspective that poor people are both capable of, and should, manage their own development processes. Effective participation requires creating opportunities and capabilities for people who are poor to analyse their own situation and possible solutions, take decisions in their own way, and build trusting relationships with those who support them. Poor people need to be able to negotiate their own position and be given space and opportunity to do so at local and international levels. While turning the conventional charitable perspective on its head, ALPS offered little guidance and few rules. It mainly opened up the space for creativity and provided a loose framework for country programmes to experiment with ways to improve development practice.

Many of these country directors who welcomed ALPS had fought long and hard against the organisation's bureaucracy. For years they had questioned the necessity of "sign off" by ActionAid UK. They wanted to support their teams to respond in flexible imaginative ways to changing contexts in their own countries without feeling the bond of rules, procedures and straightjackets from the UK. For them, the involvement of partners and community groups, in all that they did, was already important. ALPS merely gave permission to push the boundaries – to extend and formalise participatory processes of accountability and break new ground in increasing transparency.

Others floundered...

At the other end of the scale, some country programmes floundered. Quiet confusion reigned. Country directors were struggling to maintain large service delivery programmes, which had no place for, let alone understanding of, ideas of accountability to and learning from the poor. These were the country directors who did not necessarily understand (or perhaps agree with) ActionAid's new direction. Many probably lamented the changes that the new system induced. Clear guidance made things easy and manageable. At least staff knew where they were.

In floundering countries, the contradictions between ActionAid's principled words and the reality of service-delivery programmes, was too great. Indeed, the culture of some country programmes was (and, in some cases, remains) quite at odds with both ALPS and *Fighting poverty together*. Some programmes were characterised by a donor-recipient relationship with "partners", centralised monitoring systems based on endless indicators and procedures, and strong internal hierarchical - and male - systems of power. The fundamental relationship with partners and particularly the poor was one of charitable giving. Political and cultural leaps would be necessary.

Many country directors at this time asked for support from the Impact Assessment Unit in London. We were unable to provide it for two main reasons. Firstly, lack of staff capacity made this impossible (we were a team of four). Secondly, the international directors had been adamant that support should come from regional teams and consultants hired by country programme teams. London was being decentralised. At this time, central support teams in the UK were rapidly being made redundant.⁹ Our remit was limited to supporting the IA network and the IDS Participation Team involvement in four pilot countries.

Recognition of the absence of country programme support compelled the international directors to ask us to produce a manual of "best practice". In June 2001, we published *Notes to accompany ALPS*. These guidance notes were intended to help staff

⁹ The London-based central advocacy function (which provided support to country programmes in developing their advocacy) was a case in point. This team was disbanded in 2000.

think through the practical implications of ALPS. The notes provided examples (many from ActionAid country programmes) to stimulate ideas. Printed at the top of each page was *'Health warning: Ideas and options only – innovate and learn'*. Once again, the onus was on country programmes to explore the implications and possibilities for themselves.

ALPS wasn't easy – work was needed in the UK

While work was going on in country programmes, there was a constant need for the championing of ALPS in the UK. Although many country programmes had invested enormous amounts of time and effort in understanding ALPS and internalising its implications, little had happened in the UK.

There are many excuses. Constant organisational change was a main factor. Others were lack of time and the difficulties of peer review in a northern context (where we are competing for funding and profile). Underlying these issues was, arguably, an anxiety about initiating difficult change processes in the UK. The dominant tendency among the (then) International Director's Team was for action rather than process. Many had little time for internal processes and analysis. This was particularly true in the London headquarters, which was about to be radically restructured. Indeed in 2001, the London (and Chard) teams were massively cut. The Marketing Division was downsized with some functions decentralised to regional teams, or out-sourced, or rendered obsolete. In addition, Human Resources Division was streamlined and some teams within the Policy Division made redundant.

Some attempts were made to initiate discussion of ALPS in the UK, but the timing was wrong. In 2001, suggestions to work on attitudes and behaviours in the UK office were heavily resisted by the then Director of Human Resources/Organisational Development. Due to widespread changes and resultant redundancies, it was deemed inappropriate to look at how we would work there.

An added problem was that there were significant gaps in terms of what was expected of the UK teams. At the time of writing ALPS, the focus and impetus had been on country programmes. While the new systems were meant to include the whole organisation, we hadn't clearly articulated what this might mean in the UK office.

Between 2001 and 2003, the Impact Assessment Unit made successive attempts to try and initiate and support stakeholder involvement in annual participatory review and reflections in the UK.¹⁰ Though this initiative had the full backing of the CEO, we struggled. There was a long way to go. Internal teams in the UK were markedly separate. London-based staff rarely discussed problems, learning or achievements between teams in the same division – let alone between divisions. Involving external stakeholders and peers in this process would be another major step. For many, a step too far. A major issue was the amount of time review and reflection processes would take. For marketing staff (who often had little or no overseas experience), reaching fundraising targets and accountability to those who gave us money were the major priorities. The senior managers in marketing at the time were resistant to change.¹¹ Spending time on "participatory processes" was perceived as a waste of time. Other teams (for example the UK advocacy team) had their own concerns. Advocacy work in UK focused on influencing a northern agenda on issues of development. Some saw themselves as competing with peers for influence, airtime and column inches. They were thus (perhaps understandably) highly cautious about stakeholder involvement.

High staff turnover in the UK made working on ALPS increasingly difficult. The massive restructuring processes unsettled many. Staff were coming and going at all levels of the organisation. For several years, the human resources team was primarily concerned with restructuring or recruiting and they were weakened in numbers and resolve. A strong induction process explaining the philosophy and thinking behind the new accountability, learning and planning system was vital. This was never given priority. It was a major mistake. With each new staff member, there was a

¹⁰ Typical northern stakeholders would include peer organisations, individual sponsors, donors, partners in the north, those whom we were trying to influence, etc.

¹¹ All of the senior managers in marketing eventually left ActionAid.

tendency for 'normal professional behaviours' to return. Those country teams that had invested most time and effort in internalising ALPS resented the lack of work in the UK.

Internal pressures, contradictions and dilemmas

Much of the difficulty we experienced in translating our ideals to reality was to do with control over resources and activities: not wanting to let go of control or fear of what would happen if we did. One unexpected event was useful in raising the central issue of power. In early 2002, David Archer (along with other key figures) organised an international workshop in Bangladesh. The forum was initially conceived as a space to share experiences around participatory methodologies, adapting them to our new strategic direction. However, the workshop rapidly evolved into a space for the analysis of power and power relations. This change came with the recognition that participatory methods, tools and techniques can easily become manipulative, extractive, distorted or impotent without an understanding of power dynamics. This meant looking inwards, at our own personal experiences of power and at power relationships within our organisation, in order to identify contradictions and develop new lenses, sensitive to power, with which to see our work with our partners, our allies and crucially with poor people. The workshop lasted for ten days. Staff and partners were invited from all regions of the world. With them came figures central to ActionAid's power structure: the CEO, the Directors of Policy and Asia and one trustee (Robert Chambers). For some the workshop was revelatory. Indeed, it galvanised energy around greater awareness of power dynamics in country programmes. Others considered the workshop wasteful of time and money. They had gone expecting to come away with a box of tools and methodologies and left feeling frustrated and challenged.

Adhering to the principles and values expressed in ALPS was not easy. There were many contradictions, which as an organisation we tried to overcome. One of the main contradictions was a dominant desire to

understand overall progress made against the aims set out in *Fighting poverty together*. The international directors (and particularly the CEO) wanted to have efficient systems for monitoring progress and for generating management information. How were we to square this thirst for upward information with ALPS emphasis on downward accountability? The Impact Assessment Unit played a part in trying to manage the tension.

In early 2002, the Unit was restructured. Instead of providing some practical support to country programmes, impact assessment became a central function reporting directly to the CEO. Our direct relationship with the Impact Assessment Network (in Africa, Asia and Latin America) was curtailed. Our mandate and priorities changed. Our primary tasks were to ensure overall understanding of impact (producing an annual report on progress), work with the international directors to ensure internal coherence of ALPS processes, and support those working to develop organisational learning and management information systems. Producing an overall assessment of progress became a major aspect of our work.

Global progress report

There was a certain irony in our new role. After all, producing a global progress report against *Fighting poverty together* was essentially supporting upward reporting. There were indeed contradictions, but there was also some coherence in this work. Our aim in producing annual global reports on progress, lessons and problems, was considered an important way to increase transparency. The analysis was intended to validate learning cycles within the organisation and, through the process of involving peers in the PRRPs, attempted to apply the rhetoric of ALPS to organisation-wide processes.

The pressure to produce an annual report of progress came from the CEO, not from the trustees. He had a valid concern. While he supported the need to increase accountability, transparency and involvement of primary stakeholders in all our work, he also wanted to know what difference our work was making.

ActionAid was working in more than 30 countries across three continents, but essentially we were one organisation. We had one, widely accepted organisational strategy and a considerable amount of organisational coherence. There was a valid need to share lessons across the organisation. There was also a compelling need to know if our work was worthwhile.

Controversy of the 'FPT framework'

Upward versus downward tensions initially caused inertia. We in the Impact Assessment Unit dithered – not knowing how to proceed without giving mixed messages to the country programmes. However, the CEO galvanised energy. He wanted the job done. During late 2001, the international directors (with our support) produced a framework for monitoring against *Fighting poverty together*. This framework essentially detailed “expected outcomes” against each of the mission and organisational goals. It was a tool designed to be used by the international directors as guidance in their process of analysing organisational progress. They were to use it both as a guide when writing their annual regional or functional reports, and as a prompt for their discussions during their annual review and reflection process. The framework is a simple document that attempts to spell out organisational aspirations in a more coherent way.¹²

The production of the “FPT framework” (as it became known) caused internal controversy. Unfortunately, the sharing of the framework was badly managed. Country programmes received it through email and misinterpreted its significance. The confusion was great. To country teams engaged in the mammoth task of developing processes for increasing transparency and downward accountability, the framework presented huge contradictions. It typified upward reporting and linear thinking. It seemed to undermine all that was espoused in ALPS.

The tensions between downward accountability and upward accountability remain to this day. The Impact Assessment Unit played (and plays) an important role in trying

to manage that tension. As a team, we attempted to put the framework firmly in context. It was never intended for use by country programmes, but for use in making a global analysis. It should not undermine the principles outlined in ALPS. Country programmes should not feel constricted by the “expected outcomes” in the framework. Furthermore, without solid effort in-country to work with partners and poor people in understanding change processes, there was little point in an overall global analysis. The groundwork had to be right. Our partners and our stakeholders had to be part of the analysis of what progress (or lack of it) we were making. Priority had to be given to the integrity of processes at grass roots level.

We wobbled on the question of country reports

A key issue in the upward/downward debate was whether country programmes ought to produce an annual country report. As explained earlier in this paper, ALPS did not require country teams to write annual reports. They were merely required to share learning from their review and reflection processes. Thus, rough notes on PRRP process, lessons and outcomes/impact superseded formal reports.

As an organisation, we were uncharacteristically indecisive over the issue of country reporting. Scott-Villiers in her article on ALPS talks about consistency. She quotes a Buddhist monk who once said: *'If you're going to over-eat, then over-eat. If you're going to meditate then meditate. Just don't wobble!'*

Each year we wobbled. In 2000, no country reports were required. In 2001, a country annual progress report was requested. In 2002, (after lengthy discussions at an international directors meeting in UK) the annual country reports were again waived. The argument won the day that the production of an annual country report discourages open, honest and transparent discussions of change in the country programme's own review and reflection processes. Emphasis was again placed on adhering to the principles and values in ALPS.

¹² More coherent than the 'expected outcomes in Fighting Poverty Together' (which had been put together quickly and, as a result, were unclear).

Many country directors responded positively to the reemphasis on the principles and values of ALPS. One country director wrote...

*This indeed is a welcome development, and will create a lot of thinking and learning space for all of us across ActionAid. I particularly appreciate the creativity that has been used in thinking through how the regional [and] divisional reports will be produced. Indeed those are all the information sources available, and the challenge is for us to capture information from multiple sources... rather than thinking of PRRPs as uni-dimensional.*¹³

Managing the tension?

Some may wonder how we managed to produce global progress reports without annual country reports. The answer is that the participatory reviews by country programmes, which were doing the most on ALPS and *Fighting poverty together*, were full of analysis. The PRRP notes/reports, from these countries contained lessons, contradictions, progress and above all, an honest and corroborated analysis of change. These raw documents provided a basis of our overall understanding of progress. In addition to these, there were cross-organisational thematic reviews (both internal and externally led), formal country reviews (carried out during the year and led by external consultants) and, most important of all, the analysis and reflection by the international directors and ActionAid's peers.

Our role in putting together the annual global progress report was unexpectedly rewarding. Firstly, the distillation and analysis of overall change and impact was challenging. Secondly, the international directors gave license for incredible transparency. It was immensely cathartic to write honestly about the challenges and problems we faced as an organisation in trying to achieve our goals. Finally, in working so closely with the international directors through the annual cycles, we were able to help emphasise the importance of lessons from participatory review processes influencing budgetary allocations.

¹³ One country director's email response to IAU on being informed that annual country reports were to be waived.

¹⁴ The Africa Directors discussed the proposed MIS at their regional meeting at Entebbe in August 2002.

The work on management information systems also presented inherent contradictions

While considerable organisational attention was given to managing the upward/downward dilemmas of the global reporting process, few people devoted time to the work on management information systems. This proved a costly mistake.

The project was led by the Information Systems Department. The aim was to explore how management information systems could provide timely information to decision-makers at all levels of the organisation. Ideas were first developed in the spring of 2002 and terms of reference written by the autumn of that year. Consultants were hired to lead the first phase of the project – namely a scoping study on the information requirements of the organisation. While the consultants had excellent information technology skills, they had a weak knowledge of NGOs in general, and ActionAid in particular.

The consultants approached the work by carrying out interviews with staff in country programmes, regional offices, Alliance countries and the UK. Of course, everyone wanted to know everything. Six months down the line (in November 2002) the proposed system was being presented to the international directors. By this time, alarm bells were ringing all over the organisation.

The initial proposal inherently contradicted ALPS. There were two fundamental problems. Firstly, the amounts of information requested were huge, particularly at country level. It would take the organisation back to focusing on bureaucratic data collection rather than on the bigger picture of what is working well and making a difference to peoples' lives. Secondly, the focus of the information was on activities. The dilemma was about asking the right kinds of questions in the right kinds of ways – in essence getting a balance between learning, downward accountability and upward reporting.

The Africa Directors vigorously opposed the new system as out of keeping with ALPS.¹⁴ The Impact Assessment Unit and Finance Director

did the same. The project was put back on the drawing board and work is still going on to develop an appropriate management information system. An important lesson has to be the central involvement of ActionAid staff who understand ALPS

External pressures for 'business as usual'

External pressure – especially from donors – to carry out “business as usual” was (and remains) enormous. There were many contradictions. While we were getting frequent requests from NGOs, bilaterals and multilaterals to talk about our new accountability, learning and planning system, at the same time our funding departments were pressurised to conform to normal practice. A case in point was our negotiations with the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) over a Programme Partnership Agreement (PPA).¹⁵

ActionAid's negotiations with DFID over the monitoring of the Partnership Agreement were protracted and frustrating. On the one hand, DFID's Evaluation Department was particularly interested in ALPS and welcomed the ground-breaking work we were doing to increase learning, transparency and accountability. On the other hand, the Civil Society Department (with whom the agreement was negotiated) wanted us to prepare a 'logical framework' setting out measurable indicators for our work. The principles of this were entirely at odds with ALPS.

The discussions on this issue were long and circuitous. They involved the Impact Assessment Unit, the Director of Policy and, at times, even our CEO, all exceptionally articulate and lucid about the complexity of development work; yet we were required to make our case repeatedly. Our work is about supporting social justice movements in over 30 countries of the world. It involves working with partners, allies and networks to achieve change in global poverty. We were prepared to set out a series of expected outcomes to indicate changes we would *like to see* as a result of our work (this was later done and became known as the “FPT framework”, as explained above).

We could not, nor would not, reduce our work to standard outputs to be counted. The standardised, quantitative yardsticks for measuring social change just don't exist.

At times, the discussions were tense. We were prepared to forsake the Partnership Agreement for the sake of this point. Logically our DFID colleagues could understand the difficulties of measurement and sympathise with our reluctance to produce quantitative indicators, which would create incentive systems at odds with ActionAid's principles. However, they frequently returned to the same point. They had to fulfil organisational requirements. Boxes had to be ticked. Senior managers satisfied.

What occurred with DFID occurs practically every time we seek donor funding. As ActionAid has deliberately followed a policy of diversifying its funding base (away from child sponsorship) this is a frequent occurrence. While the Impact Assessment Unit – with the support of the Policy Director and the CEO – are able to argue the point, most fundraisers and members of marketing teams are not.

Donors put constant pressure on us to set out direct and unambiguous outcomes from our work. Donors – particularly those dealing with funding applications – are rarely interested in the messy and complex reality of development issues. Fundraisers all over the world have their hands tied. Our fundraisers, who live and work close to the sources of funds in northern countries, are often far removed from programme realities. Though there have been massive changes in the marketing function since the introduction of ALPS (with a new Marketing Director who has brought ActionAid's marketing much more in line with its political philosophy), this still remains a dilemma.

Fundraisers have targets to reach and donor reporting requirements to meet. Poor induction processes often mean they have received no training or support, which would enable them to either understand, or adequately explain ALPS.¹⁶ Many give up and simply conform to donor requirements. Every time this happens, the contradictions build up within ActionAid. Internal incentive systems get confused and messages blurred.

¹⁵ PPAs are strategic level agreements for supply of funds, which describe the overall framework for DFID's work with the organisation receiving funding. These agreements set out clear outcomes which DFID and partners have agreed.

¹⁶ This applies to all new AA staff who have joined AA since ALPS was introduced.

What difference has ALPS made?

This paper would be incomplete without an assessment of what difference the new system has made.

What bearing (if any) it has had on the organisation's contribution to social justice and anti-poverty work across the world? An in-depth analysis is not possible in this paper. Neither space nor time allows it. Indeed such an analysis should extensively involve country programme teams and partners.¹⁷ For the sake of completion however, we outline below some of the progress that has been made as a result of ALPS and some of the challenges, which remain. ALPS has made a difference, but that difference is patchy and there is considerable space for improvement. Indeed, as this paper has endeavoured to point out, change takes a long time. There are no panaceas. No short cuts. It is three short years since the introduction of the system and there is still a long way to go. Three distinct areas of progress stand out:

1 The first major achievement is the strong commitment and effort that country teams across the world have put into internalising and adapting the new system to local situations and partners.

2 The second is the growing recognition of the importance of analysing and understanding power dimensions in our work.

3 The third is the success of the annual reflection processes (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 we have seen over the last three years has been the strong acceptance and internalisation of ALPS and what it stands for. Along with the global strategy *Fighting poverty together*, ALPS is seen as a key reference document throughout the organisation. It is something that the organisation aspires to achieve. Indeed, staff commonly describe processes or actions as 'out of keeping' or 'in keeping' with the spirit of ALPS. The system – and particularly the attitudes, behaviours and principles, which it espouses – is entering the life-blood of the organisation. This hasn't been without effort. As this paper has outlined, a huge amount of energy has gone into this internalisation process – particularly in some country programmes. In November 2002, the newly appointed Africa Director commented:

*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.*¹⁸

2 Recognising and sharing power

A second major achievement is that ALPS has induced a growing recognition of the importance of analysing and understanding power dynamics in our work. Progress is slow, but nevertheless highly significant. As a large INGO, ActionAid has huge power vis-à-vis many of its partners. In places, it also has a dominant hierarchy.¹⁹ In addition, many partners rely on us as a donor. As such, there is an inherent contradiction when trying to open up space for honest feedback and criticism.

¹⁷ An external review of ALPS is to be carried out in early 2004. This will be part of *Taking Stock 11*.

¹⁸ Algresia Akwi Ogojo, International Director for Africa. Directors' meeting held in Bath, 15 November 2002.

¹⁹ For example in some country programmes, country directors are disproportionately powerful.

While ActionAid Uganda has developed good, mutual and often negotiated relationships with national players in Uganda, this appears not to be the case very often at the...community level. Here ActionAid Uganda is still a very powerful and significant force and has a tendency to lead, expecting others to follow. It has not analysed its role and power as a donor, nor how to combine that role with facilitation and handing over power to less skilled or strong organisations and individuals.

The Taking of the Horizon –

Tina Wallace and Allan Kaplan, 2003

These dynamics have to be recognised and tackled if we are to do more than pay lip service to participation and downwards accountability. We have to be proactive in creating an environment where our partners are confident to criticise honestly. A quote from a partner in Kenya amply illustrates this issue:

'We can only respond to the questions raised if you can promise that you will not victimise us by cancelling our project'

(Concerns expressed by CBO member during AA Kenya PRRP, 2001)

Many country programmes have recognised power differentials and have begun experimenting with a variety of methods to create trust. Even so, the organisation has been criticised for sometimes appearing inflexible in expecting partners and communities to follow its definitions and understanding. It is unclear to many staff when we should expect partners to learn the new "ActionAid approach" and when we are prepared to negotiate to reach shared perspectives.

There is also the issue of internal power dynamics. In this regard, there has been increased recognition of the power nexuses in the organisation and some effort has gone into empowering staff at all levels to take responsibility and decisions relevant to their work. This is supported by the requirement in ALPS that all reports are signed off only one level up the hierarchy. ActionAid Uganda, in particular, has put a lot of work into

organisational development processes to encourage staff to take greater responsibility.²⁰ Despite the principles codified in ALPS however, the way power is used in country programmes remains largely up to the personal styles of country directors.

3 Participatory review and reflection processes have been a catalyst for change

Thirdly, where it has been understood, ALPS has provided huge space in ActionAid country programmes: space to learn, and work with others, to improve the quality of development efforts. A key element of this change has been the success of the PRRP processes.

The annual reflection process was a new phenomenon. As such, it was greeted in many country programmes with enthusiasm. Here was something that was different. It provided the space to be creative, innovative and to challenge old ways of working. These processes have become the catalysts for organisational changes with regards to principles, attitudes and behaviours.

The picture is by no means homogenous across the organisation. However, the vast majority of country programmes have invested time and effort in the review processes – and feel proud of the changes these processes have engendered. We can see the beginnings of change on many fronts. Four areas stand out. The annual reflections have led to more learning, altered accountability, and more transparency in our work and have improved our overall organisational understanding of change and impact.

a) Developing explicit reflection–learning–action cycles

There is evidence from many country programmes that the annual reflections are influencing the nature of the work. In Burundi, for example, their first participatory review and reflection led to major revisions in their programme plans. A new project proposal was submitted to DFID in the light of learning from the PRRP. A DFID staff member later commented '*...we recognise that this is a very useful and innovative [PRRP] report...*' The project proposal was approved.

²⁰ See The Taking of the Horizon: Lessons from ActionAid Uganda's experience of changes in development practice, Tina Wallace and Allan Kaplan, Impact Assessment Unit, ActionAid.

Learning and changing – experiences from Haiti/Dominican Republic PRRP 2001

Pie charts presenting cost structures within each micro region, as well as the consolidated cost structures of the Haiti/Dominican Republic programme (central and 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 cost 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.

Indeed, more generally across the organisation, there is a more explicit link between reflection, learning and resource allocation decisions. This is true at all levels. As explained earlier in this paper, the international directors review and reflection process, and feedback from peers and other stakeholders, explicitly influences organisational-wide annual budgetary decisions.

b) Increasing downward accountability

The annual review and reflections are also beginning to affect ActionAid's accountability to partners and poor people. PRRPs have led to a much greater involvement of stakeholders at all levels. Partners, peers, donors and poor people are actively encouraged to participate in these processes. Different methods and approaches have been used with different stakeholders. These include participatory methodologies, facilitated group discussions, face-to-face interviews, telephone and/or email interviews.²¹

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. The challenges are particularly acute when working through partners. Progress is beginning to be made. In some countries (for example ActionAid India), some partners are now involved in the job description, selection and appraisal of ActionAid staff members.

This process sometimes raises difficult questions but has also been widely welcomed.

Within Burundi, the fact that ActionAid allowed itself to be appraised (and criticised) by beneficiaries and partners at all levels, in itself continues to be admired as a rare occurrence. It demonstrated for many the value of transparency and openness.

(ActionAid Burundi PRRP report - quote from donor)

Greater accountability to poor people is demanding. In some cases the motivation for this has been mistrusted:

Initially when we accepted PRRPs based on the ALPS principles many of the NGO partners showed resistance towards this mode of review involving the community. They [partners] perceived it as a form of policing/inspecting by ActionAid India. Some of the partners even went to the extent of accusing ActionAid India of not having trust in their (NGO partner's) report and hence involving the community in the review process. However, in due course the partners have understood the real reasons and see the potential of the PRRPs as an enabling tool. They feel that it has helped them better understand the issues of the partner community and to assess them against the strategic objectives. This has improved the confidence level and strengthened the people-centred approach in their work.

(From: *Ongoing learning and reflection – lessons from ActionAid India*, Mohammed Asif, 2002)

Achieving greater accountability remains a challenge. It is relatively easy to ensure that poor people, women and socially marginalised people are represented in reflection and review sessions. However, it is harder to ensure that their voices are heard.

'...People were able to ask why certain decisions were reached and to express their frustrations over certain items of expenditure not addressing priority needs, lack of clarity about ActionAid's sponsorship mechanism and there not being enough involvement in planning and even less involvement in deciding about finances...'

Sam Gatigwa (2001) *Sharing our Finances*, IA Exchanges Special, London: ActionAid

'... Nowadays communities that still rely on outsiders to decide what they need really do not get the best solutions to their problems...'

Azumah Apandaag, (2002) PRRP participant in Googo community, Ghana 2002

²¹ For more details see IA Exchanges special, October 2002.

The complexities of partnership

'... Discussions with ActionAid Brazil staff about how they saw their work with partners, revealed some of the complexities of introducing work with partners. First, it highlighted different degrees of autonomy of partners, and the importance of sensitivity in relationships with them. Seeking to get partners to "internalise" ALPS might provoke tensions. Encouraging them to "appropriate" it and to co-evolve systems of learning and accountability that work with what they already do or want to be doing, would be more congruent with the role ActionAid Brazil has chosen in their work with their partners. This role has largely been as colleague and enabler, as well as donor. It is a role that will evolve over a longer period of engagement, as ActionAid Brazil moves through the contradictions and tensions of being a donor and wanting to be more of a partner.'

Andrea Cornwall, (2001)
Appropriating ALPS – Strategies for improving accountability, planning & learning in ActionAid Brazil, Brighton, IDS

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, programme details and the methods of raising and distributing money. Since 2001, many more countries have been experimenting with methods for sharing financial data with communities, and partners. ActionAid Kenya, Haiti, Brazil, Burundi and India have all made progress in this area of work with exciting results.

In Kenya, for example, local level reviews have included community-based organisations, local NGOs, provincial administration, elected local government councillors, and Government officials from various departments. At these meetings, ActionAid staff have presented reports on financial plans and budgets showing the actual annual expenditure on different sectors.

Participants are then able to ask questions and assess the progress made by ActionAid in implementing the plans for that year. Subsequently, the management of each community organisation in turn facilitated a similar process with their respective members, to assess the progress they had made in implementing their planned activities and teasing out lessons from their performance.

In some cases this has resulted in partner organisations challenging ActionAid to be more frugal in its use of resources. For example in one area of Kenya it was questioned why training sessions were held in large hotels outside the local area. Consequently, training is now mostly carried out locally. Similarly, during discussions on the capacity-building costs, some participants recommended that exposure visits involve smaller teams. In another instance, open financial discussions led to ActionAid modifying its policy of contracting firms to implement water projects. The Kenya office now includes community representatives in the selection process of firms.

Since the introduction of ALPS, an organisation-wide disclosure policy has been written entitled *ActionAid Open Information Policy*.

The aim of this policy is to help 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. However, the policy also ensures that the staff share (in accessible formats) work plans, reviews and evaluations. This level of transparency is a major departure from standard INGO practice.

d) Better understanding of impact

Finally, the introduction of annual review and reflection processes has led to a shift in the way we document our work. Previously programme reports concentrated on detailing activities. Now, there is a growing tendency for reports 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. As explained earlier in this paper, where the understanding of ALPS is greatest, the review and reflection reports contain a wealth of lessons, contradictions, and progress and above all, corroborated analysis of change.

Reporting still raises challenges. One such challenge is the way we assess the added value of what the organisation brings to partners. ActionAid has a wide range of relationships, which fall under the umbrella-term of 'partnerships'. Very few reviews have assessed the value of the relationship with partners, leaving the organisation unclear what added value we bring to coalitions, networks, community based organisations work or partner activities.

Key progress

The PRRPs have been well received. These annual reflections have been a catalyst for:

- The beginning of greater accountability to our partners and to the groups of people with whom we work at grass roots level.
- Led to the encouragement of learning processes, which improve ongoing work.
- The opening up of ActionAid's work to more criticism from our peers, donors, partners and the people with whom we work in communities.
- The internal challenging and rethinking of our work with partners.
- Greater understanding of the real value and inherent problems of ActionAid's work.
- More transparency in sharing honestly with others the difficulties of development work.

Key challenges

There are many challenges and problems that we face in trying to make the major changes associated with ALPS:

- 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.
- In some AA country programmes, ALPS processes are an add-on to existing, bureaucratic monitoring and evaluation processes.
- There is a need to seek greater synchronicity between all of AA's systems (such as human resources/organisational development, finance, marketing and sponsorship).
- There is a fear of financial transparency in many AA country programmes. Our partners also fear sharing budgets with community groups.
- All the changes that ALPS have currently made within ActionAid are tentative and need to be nurtured and encouraged. Progress can easily be undermined under the pressure to show change and respond to linear thinking or to anticipated outcomes. The rigid adherence to goals and verifiable indicators set out in a 'logframe' can distort and pervert the reality on the ground.
- There is a danger of asking for too much too fast. The introduction of the "FPT framework" for monitoring against ActionAid's strategy, has led to a major danger of undermining ALPS processes. This tension needs continuous management.
- Internationalisation poses a major threat as there will inevitably be a tendency to standardise reporting.

The struggles continue – new challenges on the horizon for ALPS

ALPS has created a dynamic of cultural change within ActionAid and in the arenas where we work. However, it has not necessarily led to the abandonment of older systems, nor old ways of working. ALPS cannot be seen in isolation from other organisational systems. Whilst some systems have undergone changes over the past few years, there is still a need to identify some of the practices and policies in place that are currently undermining the change agenda. Some of the key issues are summarised below:

a) A need for greater organisational development support

As Salil Shetty pointed out in 2000, systems, in themselves, do not create change.²² 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, the organisation has a huge amount of work to do to address the challenge of changing our attitudes and behaviours in line with ALPS.

In addition, there is much work to do in developing induction processes, which introduce not only the mechanisms of the accountability, learning and planning system, but also the thinking, ideas and philosophy, which

underlie it. Induction processes should be for all staff – whether programme, human resources, finance, policy or marketing.

b) Need to communicate changes with donors

Secondly, ActionAid still has a lot of work to do in effectively communicating with donors how it wants to monitor and 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. This is change which is rarely clear-cut, is not always positive, occurs for a variety of reasons and which needs to be supported in 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. Attempting to do so distorts and perverts the reality on the ground and closes off appropriate responses to contextual changes. We need to challenge our own internal tendency to apply management-centred logical and linear thinking, as well as that imposed from outside.

'...ActionAid should be prepared to invest in short term staff capacity building activities e.g. send staff on secondment or attachment to other country programmes or organisations, conduct reviews and pilots in country programmes for experience building, learning and sharing...'

Recent recommendation made during Africa Country Directors meeting in Pretoria September 2003

²² See introduction to ALPS, 2000.

The following quote illustrates the contradictions that ActionAid staff have to deal with in their relationships with donors...

'...The ALPS system and ... impact assessment used by ActionAid country programmes provides a sound philosophy for programme management, monitoring and evaluation and it is in this context that the M&E team has made its observations and recommendations. However, national programmes must be designed and monitored by an objective and reliable methodology for which technical assistance will be needed to ensure that sound log frames, M&E frameworks and user-friendly databases are in place. At the country level, SIPAA has involved key stakeholders in log frame development. This has been a good way to build ownership and understanding of the programme amongst partners, but it has also resulted in inconsistencies and weak strategic focus on priority areas of the National Strategic Plan. Furthermore, the planning process led to raised expectations amongst CSOs and SIPAA has been deluged with proposals as a result...'

Nicole Fraser, Fiona Duby, Grace Osewe and Sue Enfield (2002) *To develop a monitoring and evaluation plan for SIPAA*, ActionAid and SIPAA

Some of our difficulty in challenging our donors arises from the confusion and muddled thinking in a few country programmes. Indeed, in some country programmes, the enthusiasm for PRRPs has led to the complete abandonment of old monitoring and evaluation thinking. In some cases, countries have abandoned their bureaucratic systems while not replacing them with simple methods for data collection, analysis and use. The abandonment of basic monitoring has led to distinct difficulties when providing necessary information for management decisions and reporting to donors. Donors tend to conflate in-country monitoring with ALPS. If ActionAid country programmes are unable to provide basic quantifiable information to donors, they will assume ALPS is not rigorous.

Indeed if ActionAid is to convince donors of the worth of ALPS, it has to significantly improve practice. The recent experience of three country reviews not appearing to involve

primary stakeholders in an analysis of country programme impact, nor comparing costs against achievements, is testament to the long way we have to go.²³

Pressure to improve practice has to come from many fronts – but particularly through the management line. The international directors need to encourage, cajole and support country directors and thematic leaders to put in place coherent monitoring systems (which are light, simple and non-bureaucratic) as well as ensure commitment to following basic ALPS guidelines. After all, it will only be through ensuring high standards of internal practice, that we will be able to convince our donors.

c) Protecting the spirit of ALPS during a period of great change

ActionAid faces continuing challenges in adhering to the high standards of principles and values it set itself. As explained in the introduction of this paper, the organisation is currently embarking upon a rapid (and dramatic) process of change as it joins with other members of the ActionAid Alliance and country programmes to form a truly international organisation.

The founding of ActionAid International represents a structural transformation. A new organisation will be created of affiliates, governed by an international board, and supported by an international secretariat. These changes will also induce a massive cultural transformation through the development of a unifying set of core values, common vision, identity, mission strategies, standards and systems for collective and determined action across organisational and national boundaries. The challenges are many. There is a likelihood that this newly merged organisation will want to reduce differences between its component parts. There is a danger that the uncertainty of transition will create a demand for some standardised practices and tangible outcomes. ALPS offers neither of these. Instead, it offers to those who can handle it the possibility to learn and develop with partners and the poor and to implement changes, which are culturally, and context sensitive. Conversely to those

²³ ALPS clearly requires that ActionAid's stakeholders, particularly poor and marginalised groups, participate in an analysis of what difference ActionAid and ActionAid's partners' work has made. Country Reviews are also required to compare an analysis of the costs with achievements.

who misunderstand it, it represents an additional set of requirements that add to workload and confusion, increasing expectations of partners for actions that maybe ActionAid offices can't or won't deliver.

ALPS as a system will be the legacy of only one of the organisations that will merge to become ActionAid International. It will therefore undoubtedly change in the transition to the new international organisation. Indeed it was always envisaged that ALPS would evolve as lessons are learned and the organisation changes. What is important is that its spirit – which captures the essence of what the organisation believes in and is trying to achieve – survives in the newly developed international system(s). In order to do this, we have to pay attention to lessons learnt from the introduction of ALPS. The key lesson here is that putting the system in place is nowhere near enough to achieve real change. Increased organisational development support will be required to ensure that the spirit of ALPS is not lost among all the other pressing demands for change that internationalisation will inevitably create.

Some lessons learnt

In conclusion, despite the changes brought about by ALPS, there is still work to be done to make accountability to poor people a reality. It is only three years since the introduction of the system. As an organisation, we are still learning, rethinking and reacting to its introduction. The experience is modifying and changing the system. We are seeking continuous feedback from within and from our major stakeholders as to how to keep ALPS processes authentic and honest. We have a huge amount of work to do in fostering a true relationship with our partners to create a relationship where partners can openly and clearly articulate criticism, and share vulnerabilities of the difficulties of promoting social change. The lesson is that real change takes time, determination and the commitment to see the process through.

In any INGO it is easy to dream up plans, but they will fail if they are not adopted and prioritised by those working in country programmes. Without the solid hard work carried out by country teams, ALPS would have remained words on paper. It was the determination of teams in countries such as Uganda, Brazil, Haiti/Dominican Republic, Nigeria, India, Burundi and Kenya who actually worked with the space provided by ALPS and, in doing so, gave it substance and made it meaningful. They repeatedly reminded the organisation that we really could do things differently. They demonstrated this by pushing the boundaries and developing new practice.

At the directors level, the support of the CEO, Policy Director, Finance Director and Asia Director was vital, as was the commitment of Robert Chambers.

Despite the many champions, the reactionary forces to change are very strong. As this paper illustrates, it takes a long time to create change on a large scale. It requires a lot of trust, effort, focus and will. It also takes unwavering commitment and visionary leadership from those in power. At the same time applying this kind of willpower actually begins to create subtle changes almost immediately. It is these subtle changes which may eventually result in whole systems change. It is early days yet, but we hope so.

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Going against the flow

the struggle to make organisational systems part of the solution rather than part of the problem

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Rosalind David and Antonella Mancini

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