# ACCOUNTABILITY TO BENEFICIARIES

## *An overview of aid agency commitments*

Transparency International Georgia
Tbilisi, 04 May 2009

### OVERVIEW

This report provides a brief overview of the commitments made by international NGOs active in Georgia to be transparent and accountable towards the people they serve. The aim of the report is to alert managers of relief and development organizations in Georgia to their duties towards their beneficiaries, to encourage beneficiaries and their representative to demand that NGOs fulfill these duties, and to publicize the complaints mechanisms that are available to beneficiaries and other stakeholders if international NGOs neglect their duties.

### WHAT ARE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY?

**Transparency** means that the public can see what is happening within an organization. However, being able to discover misallocations, waste and corruption is only useful if it is also possible to make positive changes to the way the system works – which is where accountability comes in.

**Accountability** means that organizations serving the public – and the people working within these organizations – are required to explain and justify their decisions and assume responsibility for their actions. In addition, accountability implies that people have some power to control the actions of those who work in their name, be it through effective complaints procedures, through the courts, or through elections.

### THE NEED FOR TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

International aid and development organizations command significant resources in Georgia. Since the early 1990s, NGOs have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on relief and development activities in the country.[1] In the October 2008 revised Flash Appeal[2] alone, United Nations organizations and international NGOs jointly[3] requested 109 million dollars in funding for six months of post-conflict emergency relief and recovery operations, the equivalent of over three thousand dollars for every person long-term displaced by the war, and over five times the amount allocated to the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation in the 2009 draft state budget.[4]

International NGOs frequently argue that a lack of transparency and accountability not only creates opportunities for corruption, but also increases the chances of misallocation of money and waste. Many of these NGOs have themselves managed projects that try to encourage their own sub-grantees – and sometimes Georgian governmental bodies too – to increase their transparency and accountability towards the people they serve.

[1] Exact figures are impossible to obtain, but a nine-figure sum appears to be a safe minimum assumption.
[2] The Flash Appeal is a public document: http://ochaonline.un.org/cap2005/webpage.asp?Page=1701
[3] It is impossible to determine exactly what proportion of the funds requested in the Flash Appeal would finally flow through NGOs. For example, UNHCR alone requested nearly 45 million dollars, but UNHCR frequently subcontracts NGOs to implement individual projects on the ground.
[4] See http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19988 for the draft state budget breakdown for 2009.


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With significant resources at stake, and broad acknowledgement of the importance of transparency and accountability by NGOs themselves, the need for NGOs to be accountable towards their beneficiaries is clear.

**NGO COMMITMENTS TO TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Recognizing this need, international NGOs have committed themselves to transparency and accountability not only towards donors, but also towards the people whose communities they work in. Just as the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action make it possible to hold donors accountable to their promises,[5] there are also a number of globally recognized standards that make it possible to evaluate the actual performance of aid providers on the ground.

Below, three of the most significant standards[6] are discussed:

1. Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) Standard
2. SPHERE Standards
3. InterAction PVO Standards

[5] For more information on donor commitments, please see Transparency International Georgia's past publications on this subject. www.transparency.ge

[6] Other well-known commitments include:
The Code of Conduct for NGOs in Disaster Relief:
http://www.gdrc.org/ngo/codesofconduct/ifrc-codeconduct.html
The INGO Accountability Charter**:**
http://www.ingoaccountabilitycharter.org/cmsfiles/ingo-accountability-charter-eng.pdf
For a more exhaustive list of NGO commitments, see http://www.gdrc.org/ngo/codes-conduct.html



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## (1) Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) Standard

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) 2007 Standard was developed in order to improve the accountability of humanitarian actors by developing clear benchmarks and means of verification. According to HAP, "humanitarian accountability involves taking account of, and accounting to disaster survivors".

http://www.hapinternational.org/projects/standard/hap-standard.aspx

HAP aspires to set out standards to guide all humanitarian actors. Organizations can choose to become members of HAP, at which point the standard becomes a "binding commitment" for that organization.

There are five full HAP members currently active in Georgia:

- CARE International
- Danish Refugee Council (DRC)
- Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)
- Oxfam GB
- World Vision International

HAP Principles include the following points:

- Informed Consent: ensuring that the intended beneficiaries, or their representatives, understand and agree with the proposed humanitarian action and its implications.
- Witness: reporting on policies or practices that affect the wellbeing of disaster survivors.
- Transparency: ensuring that all relevant information is communicated to intended beneficiaries or their representatives, and other specified parties

Specific commitments include the following:

- The agency shall inform disaster-affected communities about beneficiary selection criteria and deliverables
- The agency shall include its name and contact details[7] in all publicly available information
- The agency shall specify the processes it uses to identify intended beneficiaries and their representatives
- The agency shall establish and effectively publicize complaints-handling procedures

If any HAP member organization violates its commitments, it is possible to submit a complaint[8] to HAP online. Anybody can submit a complaint:

http://www.hapinternational.org/projects/complaints-handling/complaints-advisory-service.aspx

HAP will then investigate the complaint with the agency concerned.

[7] In the Buffer Zone, TI Georgia's aid monitoring team has encountered one poster by a HAP member that did not include the agency's contact details. In future, TI Georgia will file a formal complaint with HAP when HAP members are seen to violate their own standards.

[8] TI Georgia is likely to file such complaints in the future, and will keep its readers posted on how the process works in practice. A TI Georgia staff member filed a private complaint against a large INGO in Georgia on 02 February 2009. HAP acknowledged receipt of the complaint on the same day, and on 24 March reported having communicated the complaint to the INGO's international headquarters, stating that the INGO itself would "shortly" respond directly to the complainant. To date, the INGO has not responded. (The complainant had given permission for his contact details to be disclosed to the agency in question. HAP protects the anonymity of complainants if they wish to remain anonymous.)



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## (2) SPHERE Standards

The SPHERE Project was launched in 1997 in order to improve the quality of assistance to people affected by disaster and to improve the accountability of states and humanitarian agencies. SPHERE has developed a handbook that sets out minimum standards and key indicators. The most recent edition (2004) is available in English or Russian and can be downloaded for free.

http://www.sphereproject.org/component/option,com_docman/task,cat_view/gid,70/Itemid,203

The SPHERE Handbook identifies common standards that apply to all sectors, including the following:

- Local populations receive information about the assistance programme, and are given the opportunity to comment to the assistance agency during all stages of the project cycle.
- The results of assessments should be actively communicated to all concerned organizations and individuals. Mechanisms should be established to allow people to comment on the programme.

SPHERE is a voluntary initiative, and there is no complaints mechanism. However, SPHERE standards are so widely recognized that any breach of SPHERE standards should be taken extremely seriously. Also, the handbook includes very detailed sectoral standards for water, sanitation, food security, food aid, shelter, settlement, and health programming, for example detailing the exact daily amount of food calories that displaced people are entitled to receive. This makes it easy to objectively determine when a standard is being breached.

Any violations of SPHERE standards by aid agencies that come to the attention of TI Georgia will be raised with the Tbilisi office of the agency in question, and may be brought to the attention of a wider circle of stakeholders.

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## (3) InterAction PVO Standards

InterAction is a membership association of over 170 American NGOs that exists to enhance the effectiveness and professional capacities of its members engaged in international humanitarian efforts. Each member must biannually certify compliance with InterAction's standards, filling out a detailed assessment sheet. While the standards are not legally binding,[9] each applicant organization accepts responsibility for following the standards.

The following InterAction members are operating in Georgia:

- CARE
- CHF International
- International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC)
- International Relief and Development (IRD)
- International Rescue Committee (IRC)
- Mercy Corps
- Relief International
- Save the Children
- United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)
- World Vision

InterAction standards include the following:

- The organization shall oppose and shall not be a willing party to wrongdoing, corruption, bribery, other financial impropriety, or illegal acts in any of its activities.
- Organizations shall substantiate, upon request, that their application of funds is in accordance with donor intent or request.
- The member organization shall be committed to full, honest, and accurate disclosure of relevant information concerning its goals, programs, finances, and governance.
- Participants from all groups affected should, to the maximum extent possible, be responsible for the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects and programs.

While these standards may seem vague,[10] the large number of member organizations and an effective complaints procedure make InterAction standards a valuable tool for advocating for greater transparency and accountability.

The InterAction Standards Committee will receive and act on complaints about possible non-compliance.

Email: ia@interaction.org

[9] For more details, see here: http://www.interaction.org/files.cgi/6133_PVO_Standards_Commonly_Asked_Questions.pdf
[10] More specific standards may apply to food aid. TI Georgia is currently in the process of clarifying these standards with InterAction, and will discuss them in a forthcoming report on food aid.


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**POWER TO THE PEOPLE**

TI Georgia hopes that the present study will not only inspire NGOs to improve their programming, but will also serve to slightly redress the inherent power imbalance between aid providers and aid beneficiaries (or those who fail to benefit from aid) by giving Georgian citizens, their political representatives and advocacy groups the tools they need to hold aid agencies accountable for the private donations and tax dollars that NGOs spend in order to bring goods and services to those in Georgia who need them most.

It must be emphasized that the three standards listed above were developed and endorsed by international aid organizations. TI Georgia simply encourages all stakeholders in the aid process to hold NGOs accountable to the values and standards that they themselves have publicly committed to.

**HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?**

TI Georgia's aid monitoring team now consists of ten people, most of them volunteers. The team works according to the principle of "whatever helps". TI Georgia welcomes suggestions for future topics for research that could help the government, donors and aid providers to improve their programming on the ground.

**In order to automatically receive future TI Georgia reports, please join the TI Georgia emailing list by sending a short message to:**

**info@transparency.ge**

**Past TI Georgia reports on aid are accessible at:**

**www.transparency.ge**

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