



Promoting Equitable and Inclusive Accountability in Our Programs

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This is the fourth article in Palladium’s Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Analytics (MELA) Portfolio series on integrating diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) principles into MELA. This series is a follow-up to the January 2022 [Promoting Equitable Outcomes in International Development](#).

What is Accountability?

Over the past several decades, donors, humanitarian, and development organisations have become increasingly concerned with the impact of aid delivery. With various humanitarian failures occurring in the late 1990s and early 2000s (e.g. a “poorly coordinated” humanitarian response to the Rwanda genocide in 1994) it became increasingly clear that humanitarian organisations and the development industry broadly were not accountable to affected populations and that this was a [significant problem](#). For much of the 20th century, accountability was defined as accountability to donors, and less about accountability to communities served.

As the focus on accountability to communities increases in importance, it’s critical to look at different definitions of accountability. Donor organisations often define accountability in terms of results achieved with their resources. For example, USAID’s Operational Policy/Automated Directives System (ADS) [defines accountability](#) within programming as, “The establishment of clear responsibility for designing and managing strategies, projects, and activities that articulate theories of change and define development objectives and intermediate results to achieve within a specific timeframe and an estimated level of resources; to achieve and report on results; to manage risks; and to use learning from monitoring, evaluation, and other sources to inform design and management decisions and adapt programming so USAID investments are more effective at achieving measurable development outcomes.”

Other organisations are expanding on definitions of accountability, such as [Sphere organisation](#): “the process of using power responsibly, taking account of, and being held accountable by, different actors, and primarily those affected by the exercise of such power.”

For the purposes of this report, we will focus on accountability to participants in aid programming (otherwise known as “beneficiaries”) and practical ways to incorporate accountability into Palladium’s projects. By specifically addressing the power dynamics in development and shifting to more equitable approaches that harness the strengths of communities, Palladium can achieve accountability to communities and donors, an important step in [minimising the impacts of systemic colonisation](#).



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Why is it Important?

Power of communities

When we talk about “communities” in this sense, we are talking about people impacted by a humanitarian crisis or the long-term development project being conducted in their environment. This means that communities do not only include “beneficiaries” but the local community groups, and civic organisations, both formal and informal, that participate in the humanitarian and development systems. The inclusion of these communities, including the prioritisation of their voices and leadership, is paramount in effective and efficient programming. However, it is also important that this inclusion is not performative, meaning that communities have an active and directive role in the decision-making and accountability processes. Regarding accountability, this means community ownership of the accountability process, including creating and deciding on feedback mechanisms and how the data collected through feedback mechanisms are analysed and used for the improvement of programming.

Despite the institutionalisation of accountability processes and plans within development programming (e.g. Accountability to Affection Populations plans as part of donor projects), the literature shows that community members still do not believe they have much of a voice in programs and the accountability process. Though feedback mechanisms such as helplines and surveys may be established as part of projects, reports show that not all international NGO actors believe they are worth pursuing in the face of other priorities. If they do, the concern is about their projects and not how the services provided can improve the community itself. This phenomenon shows that even with accountability mechanisms established, these mechanisms only go as far as diversifying feedback and international NGOs still hold the power to make decisions.

What Does This Mean for our Work?

We want to transform how we operate by systematically holding ourselves accountable to communities. We want to incorporate accountability in our projects at Palladium by increasing our efforts to obtain feedback and shifting to working with communities on understanding what their feedback means and how to adapt programming to better their needs. This shift will mean changing the way we work - from a compliance standpoint where feedback is gathered to “check a box” to elevating the process with community members leading the input and expressing what they would like to see differently from the project and their environment.



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To ensure participant feedback is valued, leadership must integrate accountability mechanisms as part of implementation:

- Develop and track performance indicators related to using beneficiary feedback in adaptive management of projects
- Develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) for how project teams can thoughtfully consider community feedback and engage communities in sense-making and guiding programs in what to improve.
- Coach and mentor project staff on how to implement the SOPs
- Involve communities in the design of new and adaptation of already available feedback mechanisms.
- Communicate what changes were made and why to communities.

Through decolonising the accountability and participant feedback process, Palladium has the opportunity to make projects more inclusive and equitable, ensuring that projects make space for communities to hold organisations accountable. It starts with understanding existing power dynamics that act as barriers to the improvement of accountability, ensuring communities are at the forefront of the accountability process and ensuring that staff are encouraged to value the accountability process.

Where we are working on program improvements based on participant feedback, we must continuously keep communities informed of what aspects have changed and what the barriers are to changing other aspects.



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