



Accountability: A Matter of Trust

Development cooperation is based on the concept of trust. Trust must extend in all directions:

- between beneficiaries and aid agencies;
- between an NGO and its donors, beneficiaries, peers, partners, supporters; and
- within the organisation itself.

And trust must be based on accountability.

Accountability is key for anyone working in development cooperation.

- ★ **Donors**, be they private individuals, corporations or government departments, must have confidence that their money is being put to good use.
- ★ **Beneficiaries** and **partner organisations** must have confidence in the support they are receiving from the NGO. They must feel free to give feedback if they feel that support is not working, and to expect that their feedback will be heard, and acted upon.
- ★ Likewise, **NGOs** must show that their principles of accountability extend right into their partner organisations, particularly where they operate in countries with a reputation for corruption.

For the members of Dóchas, being accountable, and setting **standards** of accountability for the wider development sector, is of great importance.

The diversity of the development NGO sector poses several challenges for accountability. The sheer number of organisations, and the variety in their approaches and ways of working can make it hard for donors to determine the quality of NGO work. Varying standards of regulation contribute to the potential for confusion.

What are Irish NGOs doing to enhance their accountability?

Irish development NGOs are already leading the way in accountability and quality control. Through networks such as Dóchas, they formulate professional standards for their work to regulate the sector through **codes of conduct** and peer accountability mechanisms.

Through the **Dóchas Working Groups and Learning Groups**, Irish NGOs share experience and best practice in themed areas, and promote common policy development and knowledge sharing across the Irish NGO sector.

In addition, Irish NGOs have got to grips with new media technologies to encourage the participation of beneficiaries and other stakeholders in their decision-making.

Accountability: Three key mechanisms

Dóchas members strive to apply human rights standards in their work. Such standards are based on three key principles of accountability:

- ★ **Participation:** Ensuring all those who are affected are involved in decision-making;
- ★ **Transparency:** Disclosing information relating to governance, finances and performance; and
- ★ **Standards:** Articulating and adhering to professional standards of conduct and performance.

‘Downward’ accountability, between NGOs and beneficiaries, has traditionally been the weakest link in the accountability chain. However, through Dóchas, Irish NGOs have developed policies and practices to empower organisations, allowing them to participate more completely in processes.

What mechanisms exist to help NGOs hold themselves accountable?

Dóchas requires that all its member organisations adhere to three professional standards of conduct and performance:

- ★ The **Dóchas Code of Conduct on Images and Messages** helps members maintain a constant standard of communications, as well as aiding them in their interactions with media, and framing how they represent their partners and beneficiaries.
- ★ The **Irish Development NGOs Code of Corporate Governance** helps NGOs develop good internal structures along professional corporate lines to help NGOs hold themselves accountable from within, promote transparency, and operate more effectively.
- ★ The **NGDO Charter** formulates a series of values and principles that should underpin all areas of NGO work.

The **Charities Act 2009** also goes some way towards regulating the sector, and will establish a Charities regulator for the first time. It will also require all charities to be listed on a government register and firm up requirements on keeping and publishing accounts.

