

# The struggle for organisational change: how the ActionAid Accountability, Learning and Planning System emerged

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## Introduction

How does a development agency make real its belief in the rights of the poor? ActionAid is one NGO that has made space and time to change its organisation and relationships in quite a different way, involving a leap of faith in what it means to run a development agency.<sup>1</sup> The opportunity for a new approach came about when, after a period of upheaval, the organisation's beliefs about the rights of the poor and marginalised, its anti-poverty objectives, and its aid delivery structures all began to align with one another. Introduced in 2000, ActionAid's Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS) is part of this change. It details processes for appraisal, strategy formulation, programme review, and regular reflection across the organisation's programmes, departments, and partnerships. The system is different because it seeks to increase accountability to the poor and to ActionAid's partners, while maintaining traditional accountability to sponsors and donors. It is important because it explicitly recognises the contribution the procedure is hoping to make to the quality and style of the organisation's relationships and the impact of those relationships on ActionAid's goal of eradicating poverty.

It is too early to say whether this new system will succeed in contributing to global anti-poverty efforts or to increasing the access of poor people to their rights. A critique of ALPS, identifying its contradictions and strengths, will be the subject of later studies once the system has matured and inquiry into it has deepened. Nevertheless, we can say that it has already succeeded in generating spirit, enthusiasm, and debate among many ActionAid staff, and the partners and community organisations with whom they cooperate.

The article opens with an introduction to ALPS, its non-negotiable principles, and what it looks like in practice, at least in a few of its

diverse manifestations around the world; and I ask why it seems to be worthy of our attention. The main part of the article will look at what was going on in the organisation in the decade before the new system arrived and what the key developments were during those years. Finally, I use this history to ask why innovation took so long and what this tells us about organisational change.

## Background

This article is a result of collaboration between the Participation Group at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and ActionAid's Impact Assessment Unit, which started in October 2000. In order to learn about both ALPS and the wider organisational dynamic of which it is a part, we adopted an action-research methodology that involves taking part in the change process itself – supporting, criticising, and learning at the same time. Four members of the IDS Group, Garrett Pratt, Andrea Cornwall, Robert Chambers, and the author have all spent time in different ActionAid programmes in India, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Brazil. We took part in initial workshops where staff and partners considered the new system. We also joined in early stages of work with partners, communities, and community organisations, where the reality of the new ideas of accountability to the poor began to become apparent. As the system matures, the team will collaborate in continued action-research to learn in greater depth about this particular organisational learning and change enterprise.

### *Introduction to ALPS*

*I suggest inclusion of the now often espoused principle that poor communities are our 'principal stakeholders'. The implications of this would be that their views, aspirations, evaluations, would be the paramount driving force behind our work, and how we design and assess it. Not many organisations or individuals could honestly say that this is the case. So while dropping the hypocrisy of the phrase 'primary stakeholder', we need to introduce instruments of real community accountability.*

(Harsh Mander, ActionAid India)

ALPS is about procedures, but it is also about fundamental changes to relationships. It is based on a set of beliefs and principles regarding the rights of the poor to criticise and influence poverty eradication efforts. Instead of information flowing only upwards in the organisation, and requests and guidelines flowing downwards, the system tries to achieve

360 degree accountability, opening up formal channels for *direction* to originate from the poor as well as from management. In order to do this, the system requires that staff at all levels dedicate time to transparency, learning, and negotiation with partners, the poor and one another. ALPS involves consistent and deliberate reflection, which needs to be nourished by accurate and useful information and followed by negotiation on changing procedures, strategies, priorities, and relationships.

ALPS replaces ActionAid's old Annual Planning and Reporting System (APRS). It includes advice on behaviours and attitudes to emphasise that the way in which staff members relate to each other and to others is more important than the documents that are produced. 'ALPS aims to liberate staff and partners from the tyranny of endless forms and writing lengthy plans and reports which mostly adorn some shelf or archive' (ActionAid 2001:iii). An annual report from countries, programmes, or departments, traditionally the mainstay of the organisation's accountability and memory system, is no longer required. Instead, in the spirit of increasing accountability to the poor and to partners, the system asks each of these entities to carry out a set of participatory reviews and reflections with stakeholder groups on the quality of their mutual programmes.

**Box 1: An ALPS reflection meeting with some 30 women and men of the Manja clan (an excluded minority) at Gendo village, Ethiopia**

The ActionAid facilitator invites the group to choose their own agenda as part of a review of their work together. The debate is raw and truthful; it is about people's rights. ActionAid is challenged on its own behaviour:

*Manja man: There is just one minority person working for ActionAid, a cleaner. But is there anyone of our clan working with you as a programme person? No. Do we live a life of baboons, eating fruit and roots? A permanent remedy will be when our representatives get positions in government. Other remedies appear and disappear ...*

*Project officer (later): We've never had a conversation like that before.*

**Box 2: Khema, a community organisation, speaks after ActionAid has presented the budget for the last three years, Kwale, Kenya**

The analysis of spending over the last three years is broken down to show money spent by ActionAid on itself in the local office against how much has been spent on programmes. It also shows how the community organisations decided to use the money for different activities:

*Khema secretary: Can we take this [financial] information away and analyse it further? We should have had this information before. It has a benefit. I feel that we are like a child growing up, when the child gets real information from an elder, then he knows he is growing. This has opened our eyes and given us a picture. It satisfies us about the work we did and helps us see the gaps. These astronomical figures! When we go back to the village it will be very difficult to explain, so we have to look into how we do it. It could cause problems and conflict. There are some suspicions of the community organisations; at times we have not been transparent.*

As ALPS is based on principles rather than on a blueprint of required actions and procedures, there will be a wide diversity of interpretations in each context. Where ActionAid funds community organisations, ALPS may take the form of critical reflection meetings including poor people, staff, and government representatives. Where a programme supports anti-poverty advocacy efforts by social movements, there may be joint action-learning activities. Inside ActionAid itself, it could be new transparent and reflective approaches to managing meetings or staff-appraisal systems. Each of these will lead to different ways of ensuring change happens after reflection and that the organisation is held to account.

### ***Principles of ALPS***

- *360 degrees accountability, emphasising accountability to the poor and marginalised, women, men, boys and girls;*
- *Commitment to gender equity;*
- *Application to the whole organisation at all levels, not just to the frontline;*
- *Relevance of information to both the people who supply and those who receive it;*
- *Feedback to the information provider on reaction to information;*
- *Learning rather than writing long reports;*
- *Linking financial expenditures to quality of actions;*
- *Critical reflection: learning from success and failure.*

(ActionAid 2000:3)

Through aligning *principles* of rights with *procedures* for accountability, ALPS offers an elegant procedural solution to making rights real. In ALPS there are no centrally dictated rules, just principles. They echo the principles set out in ActionAid's overall strategy and the strategies of individual country offices, which staff use and refer to often, at many levels and in many contexts. In each case, people have the opportunity to discover the implications of these principles and decide upon actions that fit with local realities. ALPS offers no specific guidelines about how this should happen, as the essence is that it should be invented and reinvented to suit each relationship and context.

ALPS is coherent with what ActionAid is saying about the rights of the poor to have influence and the role of that influence in reducing poverty. It aligns the organisation's use of resources and its reporting procedures with its rhetoric. On the merits of being consistent, a

Buddhist monk once said: 'If you're going to over-eat then over-eat. If you're going to meditate then meditate. Just don't wobble!' Alignment of what an organisation believes in, what it does, and what works well in a given social, political, economic, or physical environment is a successful strategy. The Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) (1998) argues that the most important element in organisational capacity is 'a conceptual framework which reflects the organisation's understanding of the world' and procedures and resources come at the other end of the scale. Organisational effectiveness, it says, results from coherence between these elements. Coherence smoothes the progress of work and the organisation becomes easier for outsiders to understand and work with.

Of course, alignment can make an organisation more effective, but it doesn't always make it good. An overly coherent organisation is a tyranny. In the words of Harrison (1995:101):

*I am somewhat suspicious of the aligned organisation because of its potential for exploiting or 'taking over' organisation members, and because of its prevalence in war and the military. The aligned organisation is not noted for its sensitivity to nuances of communication from its environment, nor for its harmony and adaptation to the ecosystems of which it is a part. Rather it tends to be aggressive and 'daimonic' in its proclivity for expanding beyond all limits which are imposed from the outside. In other words, it appears to need checks and balances and these are not provided from within.*

So ALPS is new, unpredictable, and risky. People can feel lost without guidelines, especially if they are familiar with a more directive style of management. Having no rules, the new accountability system could be susceptible to unscrupulous manipulation and corruption, so each office needs to negotiate which rules of accountability they need for all parties: the poor, the sponsors, and donors. Because of the diversity of interpretation, the relationships between the activities of each level or location will also need to be negotiated. It is quite possible for the result to be a rapid descent into misalignment, as the organisation splits into factions or regions, where particular leaders take advantage of the freedom to devise new methods of reporting and acting that take no account of the needs of others. There are other areas, too, where things could go wrong, depending on how the principles are interpreted and accounted for. For example, the issue of gender equity requires active attention – has ActionAid ensured a means of accountability for something that perhaps the poor themselves may not stress?

All these potential problems could easily lead to more bureaucracy than before. Avoiding the two extremes of excessive bureaucracy and excessive freedom is a question of balance, requiring attention to detail, negotiation, and resources. But since ALPS generates a degree of interest and commitment among a range of stakeholders previously excluded from information and decision making, it may liberate skills, resources, and trust that can be used to maintain the balance.

## **A selective history<sup>2</sup>**

In the 1980s, Northern development agencies generally believed that development would be achieved through the delivery of projects. At the time, ActionAid's bureaucratic approach was aligned with this belief. As understanding of development changed in the 1990s, procedures continued to be bureaucratic and the organisation became misaligned. Looking back over a period of 13 years, it is possible to see how ActionAid moved through stages of misalignment and deepening contradiction before it reached its current state of realignment. The progression is visible – there was decreasing confidence in the way things were being done, attempts to change, failures, learning, and more failures, all of which eventually led to a new idea and a newly energised and coherent organisation.

### ***A bureaucratic approach***

In 1988, ActionAid managers, concluding that they needed systematic information to inform the appropriateness of their decisions and the effectiveness of their fundraising, introduced an organisation-wide system called the Annual Planning and Reporting System (APRS). At that time, the UK Board of Trustees was required to supervise all activities quite closely, through a group of international managers who directed the efforts of country directors and their staff in 26 countries. The Board used information provided to them through APRS to authorise programme decisions. This included deciding on even relatively local matters, such as the plan for moving into a new geographical area within an existing country programme. To show its progress towards its goals, the organisation used just three global indicators: levels of child mortality, nutritional status of children, and community literacy. Goals were enunciated in terms of significant benefits to children sponsored by ActionAid's supporters, and APRS aimed to provide information on these benefits.

Parallel to APRS were two other systems, the financial reporting system and sponsorship system. Finances were tracked according to budgets and expenditures and were not explicitly linked to impacts. Individuals in Europe would give money to sponsor individual children and their communities in the South, and would receive regular letters from that child. This would be accompanied by annual reports from the sponsorship department as to the overall impact and direction of the work, based on missions undertaken by the department's own staff from the UK.

APRS was part of the bureaucratic approach. It was an upward accountability system that requested regular and systematic information from the field up through the hierarchy to the Trustees. As a procedure, it was congruent with the organisation's sense of itself and its other systems. It reflected the organisation's belief that efficient delivery of basic services, such as health, education, and water, would bring about manifest reduction in the poverty of children and communities receiving these benefits. Donors could be informed by APRS of these improvements and would continue to finance the efforts. Managers could use the system to understand results and guide fieldworkers and middle managers to make appropriate adjustments, through introducing policies, rewarding beneficial practices, and chastising error.

ActionAid's programme-delivery system and its reporting system both helped to reinforce the style of relations between staff and partners and between staff and poor communities. This was a relationship of benefactor and beneficiary, in which the beneficiary's room for manoeuvre was limited to acceptance of the conditions imposed in exchange for the valuable services offered, peppered with some acts of resistance. In the late 1980s this was in alignment with the philosophy of service delivery, which was supported by a mechanistic approach to management. However, things changed.

### *A period of misalignment*

A few years after the introduction of APRS, ActionAid began to change dramatically as thinking about development changed in the early 1990s. It was proposed that the role of a development NGO was to support the rights of the poor not only to services but also to decision making in development and governance. This idea suggests that being 'developed' means being influential and responsible (as well as having resources) and suggests that poor people have the right to be heard and responded to. In effect, poverty will be reduced if poor and marginalised

people find ways to have significant influence over the forces that affect their lives.

An understanding of rights had begun to take a strong hold in the organisation in the early 1990s, when many field operations began using forms of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) in their work with communities. From this emerged a frustration: how was it that poor people were supposed to use PRA to take control of, or at least influence, decisions, while ActionAid made its plans and allocations thousands of miles away, based on its own ideas of poverty, accountability, sectors, and timeframes? Since the sponsors and other donors, on whose money everyone relied, were the ones to be kept happy first, the poor would never have real influence. While participatory approaches were contributing to narrowing the communication gap between frontline staff and the poor, they did not reverse the pecking order. The right of poor people and their organisations to influence decisions was hardly being met and a misalignment between the idea and the action began to emerge.

Between 1990 and 1998 ActionAid's budget more than doubled, from £20.2 million (US\$28 million) to £49.6 million (US\$70 million) as the organisation expanded to new countries, new activities, and took on more staff. It became increasingly unworkable for Trustees to absorb all the information and make decisions on small and essentially local matters. In 1995, moves were made towards decentralisation: a number of decisions were devolved to new regional directors in Latin America, Africa, and Asia and the bulk of power was devolved to country directors. In some cases, decentralisation allowed country directors to put their own ambitions before the organisation, and in others they moved so far ahead conceptually that they left their staff behind. Mostly, however, the effect was to liberate innovation and diversity.

Meanwhile the reporting and other procedures remained essentially the same, so staff found themselves spending time 'satisfying bureaucratic demands for reports with irrelevant information, while carrying out programme work based on the needs and situations on the ground' (ActionAid staff member, Mombasa ALPS Review Workshop, May 2001). In general there was a tendency for much to be written by fieldworkers that was not used, many decisions to be made by management that were avoided in the field, and much energy expended which could have been better spent. People said they felt they were being pulled in two directions. Participation was increasing stress and mendacity rather than creating influence among the poor and marginalised. Bureaucracy was winning.



One staff member describes the APRS annual reporting period as ‘a time of no sleep’ (Dharitri Pasternaik, ActionAid India). As much as three months in each year would be spent on reporting and budgeting. Because the processes took so long, reviews had no bearing on the plan for the following year. Planning would start in July; projects and programmes would be submitted for approval in September; in December they were approved; and in January work started. Meanwhile the annual reporting time was December. Annual reports and plans were very thick documents, yet a project officer would find herself also answering ‘endless requests for information from headquarters, where managers expected their questions to be answered’ (ActionAid staff member, Brazil).

### ***Efforts to change***

*We have a culture in the institution for the demands of the higher level ... 25 emails a day are requests for information. We have a problem. It is not an ideological problem, not about the relationship of power between us and communities, it is a problem of the higher level ... it is an organisational problem, of time, hierarchy, demands for the quantity of information.*  
(ActionAid staff member, Brazil)

By 1998, ten years after APRS was introduced, demands for a new accountability system were reaching boiling point. A number of attempts to modify the system had already been tried, but to no avail. In 1997, for example, a rewrite of APRS tried to incorporate indicators on gender for the first time, but that just increased the burden on staff to include a section on gender as well as all the other requirements. It did not help to focus action on gender or clarify gender issues. The Trustees were still weighed down with paper, little of which helped them to a clear view of realities of the poor or progress towards eradicating poverty. An international meeting in Addis Ababa in early 1998 recommended urgent action. An internal team, suggesting that the entire mindset surrounding an accountability system needed to change, produced a new system. The ActionAid Accountability System (AAS) contained some of the principles that we see later in ALPS, but fundamentally broke no new ground because it was still a bureaucratic system for reporting up the hierarchy and controlling frontline workers, partners, and the poor. ActionAid had not yet found the point of leverage that it later found with downward accountability. AAS was never ratified.

Immediately a new effort was launched and a system called the Core Accountability System (ACAS) was drafted. It took almost a year to produce, with different working groups mapping the organisation, undertaking benchmarking with other agencies, holding workshops, and producing the plan. But meanwhile there were other changes underway that were to kill ACAS before it was even born.

### ***A new strategy and vision***

It was only after the organisation had thoroughly reviewed and transformed its strategic direction and faced up to the truth of how muddled and unprincipled some of its actions actually were, that it became clear that procedures had to change not incrementally, but radically and extensively.

In 1999, after a massive undertaking involving months of wide-ranging consultation right across the organisation, a global team created a new document, *Fighting Poverty Together*, outlining a compelling new vision and strategy (ActionAid 1999). It seems to have been a rallying point for the organisation, providing members with a sense of direction and a set of principles for their work. The new strategic direction was understood and agreed by the majority of staff, particularly those at the top. Those who didn't agree were forced out or left. Between 1998 and 2001 the leadership changed and many new managers were appointed. They brought with them new perspectives and innovation.

#### **Box 3: Fighting Poverty Together**

*ActionAid's mission is to work with poor and marginalized people to eradicate poverty by overcoming the injustice and inequity that cause it.*

*Fighting Poverty Together is about change—about recognising and understanding change in the wider world, and committing ourselves to change in the way we go about eradicating poverty. Key among these changes is:*

- *Recognising that poor people have a right to life's essentials, including food, water, healthcare, and education.*
- *Working increasingly in partnership with others in order to achieve greater impact.*
- *Promoting change internationally in favour of poor people—particularly in relation to private companies, government in the North, and international institutions.*
- *Improving gender equity to counteract discrimination against women and girls.*  
(ActionAid 1999)

The mission and goals had been transformed, decision making had shifted away from the centre, new people had joined, and after a number of attempts to adjust what had become entrenched procedures, the organisation's systems began to align.

## ***'Taking Stock'***

It is possible that there would have been no significant change at all without one further catalytic factor – an excoriating, devastating external review. *Taking Stock*, a global assessment of ActionAid commissioned by the director, was published in June 1999 some months after the new strategy was produced. Insiders have described it as brutal, but true. The external consultants called it a medical examination – looking at the organisation's state of health before it embarked on the difficult journey towards making real its new and powerful strategy, *Fighting Poverty Together*. They said that ActionAid's health was not up to the journey. They pointed out that its actions were contradictory to its rhetoric. Sophisticated analysis of the multi-faceted nature of poverty had led the organisation to think that it must attack on all fronts at once. There was a tendency to 'add on' rather than to make strategic choices. On the questions of control and accountability, the report described APRS as one that involved so much paper that it obscured and limited accountability and that the new revisions did not solve the problem. ActionAid, it said, was neither transparent, as claimed in its strategy, nor did it account to the poor and its partners. *Taking Stock* pointed out ActionAid's complacency. In the words of Antonella Mancini, an ActionAid staff member in London, 'We realised we had been patting ourselves on the back.' The organisation used the review to drive the organisation forward, rather than rejecting its shattering description of their cosy world.

## ***Leadership***

Over the years, executive directors had contributed by putting in place, one by one, the building blocks of change – Martin Griffiths in 1992 wrote the manifesto for the move from service delivery to rights-based work (ActionAid 1992); John Batten in 1995 began the process of decentralisation and reducing the demand for information at the top; and in 1998, Salil Shetty made it possible for staff to create *Fighting Poverty Together*. Then, despite demands to design a new reporting system immediately, Shetty postponed the decision for over a year, waiting for the right conditions. The new strategy needed to be understood by all, or any new procedures would simply be modified to serve the old direction. Perhaps, too, he was waiting for those who would contest the new approach to move on. It was a period of recriminations and angry departures.

In 2000, Rosalind David, leading the Impact Assessment Unit, an organisation-wide network, met Robert Chambers, an ActionAid

trustee, and they brainstormed a system whose primary objective would be learning for all, based on transparent and reflective processes and involving only short reports. The idea of learning about rather than controlling change aligned with the ideas set forth in *Fighting Poverty Together*: poor people should decide themselves what successful development is and in so doing make success more likely. In March 2000, Colin Williams (Africa Director), Ephraim Dhlembeu (Africa Programme Coordinator), Lubna Ehsan (Gender Policy Analyst, Pakistan), Nigel Saxby Soffe (Director of Finance), Robert Chambers, and Rosalind David met in Harare and designed the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS). It called for improving strategy and programme quality by opening up to scrutiny and criticism by the poor, reducing reporting, and integrating finance with programmes.

### ***Diffusing ALPS***

What staff in London refer to as the ‘roll-out’ of ALPS started in mid-2000, but most country programmes only began to give it thought in early 2001. Programme staff as far apart as Orissa and Rio de Janeiro said ALPS was asking them to do what they were already doing: ‘At last’, one said, ‘our organisation is catching up with us!’ Another said, ‘It is the operationalisation of transparency, of democracy.’ During the first half of 2001, most ActionAid country offices began to adapt its principles to their local operation and culture. Those who had come up with the idea felt a sense of urgency. In response there was some resentment: it seemed like yet another change invented by the centre that was coming hard on the heels of last year’s great idea. Many were critical of its top-down origins:

*I particularly dislike the term ‘rolling out’, which implies pushing a way of doing things. It evokes, for me, the image of rolling out a carpet: a red carpet, for Important ActionAid who has the knowledge and power, rolling out over what’s already there on the ground, and providing a direct route of passage to communities that rolls over the heads of partners.*

(Andrea Cornwall, IDS, Learning and Support Team member)

*We never get time to review and evaluate any change we make, before a new one takes its place. Anyway it takes time to implement new procedures, it requires so many people to understand them and adjust. We have to hold workshops and pilots, all at the same time as fulfilling so many other plans.*

(ActionAid staff member, Ethiopia)

The reaction to ALPS from country directors and programme managers was mixed. The response was in general positive, particularly among those who had seen the effect that transparency had on their relations with partners and communities. Some said it was what they had been waiting for, a chance to get aligned and reduce the tension between the needs of the field and the sponsors, and for ActionAid to become an honest learning organisation. Others said that it was ‘an anticlimax – it didn’t go far enough’. Others looked at it and saw useful, if imperfect, accountability systems being swept away and replaced by noble ideas, which would be dangerously vulnerable to manipulation and abuse.

Inbuilt assumptions, based on years of experience of the working culture, meant that many people thought that the system was only for field programmes. Human resources managers, finance directors, sponsorship staff, and policy advocates, did not initially get involved even though the idea was to integrate organisational procedures with accountability and change. First steps across the inter-departmental divide were made by the Finance Department. Their accounts were needed for partners and communities to examine. For example in Kenya, the chief financial officer joined teams which sat with community organisations to review and reflect together. As he did this, he and his colleagues realised some of the problems their systems were causing to the realisation of rights and participation. Debate is now going on about to how and what to change in financial procedures to ensure continued careful accountability for funds, while allowing influence over budgets by the poor and their organisations. The sponsorship people were not sure that ALPS was going to serve their needs and did not join the teams. But, in Kenya, it wasn’t long before they were called to come and account for a system of which local people were deeply suspicious.

## **Analysis**

ALPS is creating a degree of energy and enthusiasm inside the organisation, which is unusual for a reporting system. Many who have begun to put it into practice are feeling relieved – it seems better than the old system, it is hardly bureaucratic, more creative, and in greater harmony with their beliefs. But this raises two questions: why did it take ActionAid so long to achieve a new system? And, can we relax now?

### ***Why did it take so long?***

In the development sector, there is considerable confusion as to what to believe in, what the purpose of development is, and therefore what

to do. Over the decades development has aimed at spiritual salvation, technical improvement, economic growth, poverty alleviation, citizen empowerment, rights, good governance and more. It is hard to keep creating procedures for a mission that is so nebulous and changeable. Deciding the organisation's development stance takes frequent applications of time, resources, and skilful enquiry by a range of stakeholders. People may not be able to see things differently if wrapped up in their current vision of reality, so outsiders and new people are needed. Bringing in new people and 'letting go' of others, as ActionAid did, is a painful process that takes time and introduces a difficult dynamic. If people are not included, change exercises may produce just a repackaging of previous frameworks and systems. As ActionAid found with *Fighting Poverty Together*, taking time to understand and agree the organisation's purpose is the first step towards creating coherence and clarifying how associated systems need to change. But it took a great deal of time and energy to develop.

A workable change initiative needs to generate commitment among those who need to appropriate it. Only a few people will agitate for change when all is going well. As the ALPS case shows, decision makers may not even see the contradictions and misalignments that are growing beneath the surface. Yet, because change takes so long in a global organisation, it needs to be considered early if it is to come on-stream at the right moment. When work is running successfully, there are energy, confidence, and resources that could be used to consider how to maintain comparative advantage. Most organisations spend that energy in expansion, taking on new locations and new sectors, replicating successful models, and consolidating systems. Aid organisations are particularly prone to doing too much. The diversity of locations and sectors introduces complexity and the bureaucracy finds it hard to adapt. All too often, new mechanisms are imposed to try and keep control, so new procedures are applied and old ones are also retained, to cover all the eventualities. People spend more time satisfying the bureaucracy than thinking. Energy, confidence, and resources can then drain away, making it much more difficult to contemplate radical change. As we saw in the numerous attempts to revise APRS, changes may then be defensive and additive rather than transformative.

For many individuals, change is very risky, particularly for those at the bottom of a hierarchy. They may have spent years understanding the system and working out strategies for making the best of it. There are many frontline workers in ActionAid who worry a great deal about

keeping their jobs, who are not in a position to change radically. Confident people, comfortable with power, will often be those to embrace change with most enthusiasm and they can become exasperated with the resistance they encounter. All through the system interests will inevitably conflict and powers will be used on all sides. Change in these circumstances can be unsystematic, slow, and difficult.

***Now we've got a vision and a matching reporting system can we relax?***

Development is about change and development organisations cannot operate without the ability to adapt to change. ActionAid was built as a bureaucracy. Gareth Morgan (1998) points out that while bureaucratic approaches to organisation work well when the environment is stable and predictable, the problem is that, like machines, bureaucracies are designed to achieve predetermined goals, and they have difficulty adapting to change. Over the last decade, ideas of development have changed radically and continue to do so. In response to this, ActionAid has introduced a system of accountability that commits it to responding to issues raised by the poor and their advocates, meaning that it is *committing* to being a changeable and diverse organisation.

ActionAid is more or less coherent at present, but it is a balancing act between diversity and unity, participation and leadership, principles and rules. As the internal and external environments continue to change, this balancing and alignment process will continue. But it may not be without its periods of inertia and frustration. While misalignment may generate confusion, alignment generates complacency and dominance. These negative states create dynamism between the two. Towards the extremes of either state, people can get anxious and exploitative or anxious and creative. When an organisation's systems get out of step with its environment, or if upon examining and updating its beliefs it fails to update its procedures across the board, the result will be tension. Anxiety generates an impulse for more supervision, more information, and more hesitation. This leads to conflict. This in turn creates frustration and, often, an energetic search for new understanding and new approaches. Frustration leads to a drive towards realignment. Ironically, a new alignment will produce success, which will lead in due course to complacency, conflict, and misalignment once again. Vaill (1996) uses an image of keeping a canoe upright in white water to describe how people and organisations have to keep alert and to learn in order to maintain balance and alignment in a fast-changing internal and external world.

## Conclusion

Confusion and exasperation seem to play an essential energising part in the learning process. It took more than a decade of trying to change before ActionAid managed to put a congruent set of changes in motion. Procedures in particular often endure long after the conditions and aspirations for which they were created have moved on. Many people in many development organisations are aware that their procedures for dealing with partners, funders, and the poor are sending out messages that are contradictory to their own current thinking.

Organisational change is born of tension and succeeds best when it aims for alignment of purpose and action and attunement of the internal and external environment. It is impossible to avoid conflict, inertia, and confusion in this process; the only option is to make use of these forces by being aware of their potential. If a development organisation makes it possible for its staff and partners to thrive on change, then it will be, in essence, a learning organisation. Although the jury is still out on ALPS, as an organisation-wide system that tries to promote good relationships and critical awareness, it seems to have potential. In being transparent and listening properly to poor people and partners, the organisation is attempting to be honest, which helps it to learn and change. In being accountable to these same constituencies, ActionAid is trying to align its principles with its practice, which is an effective strategy. In combination, learning and effectiveness have a fair chance of coping with the forces of inertia and conflict that counter them. As such, ALPS may make it easier for staff and partners to work through and resolve more quickly the next stages of misalignment that they will inevitably encounter.

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## Notes

- 1 Founded in 1972, ActionAid is one of the UK's largest development agencies, with decentralised operations in over 30 countries across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.
- 2 This, like all histories, is a selective one; it is based on a timeline made by a group of 22 people who met at Mombasa in May 2001. The meeting brought together programme and finance staff from ActionAid offices in

Ethiopia, Gambia, India, Kenya, Latin America, and the UK. It was convened by the ALPS Learning and Support Team, a collaboration between the Participation Group at IDS and ActionAid's Impact Assessment Unit.

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