

Eight Principles of Mutual Accountability Frameworks

In UKNIAF we've entered into mutual accountability frameworks with a number of organisational partners. While the frameworks themselves may differ from organisation to organisation, they are guided by a set of principles, underpinned by the fact that the programme aims to empower our partners to act beyond the life span of our programme. These frameworks help guide, govern, and monitor mutually beneficial relationships with the organisational partners.

A Mutual Accountability Framework is a set of guidelines that provide structure around a relationship between institutional partners. In essence the framework acts as a set of recommendations to manage the relationship and to clearly set out expectations of each of the signatories. It is always better to set up these guidelines at the beginning of a relationship, rather than to try to resolve these in the middle of the project.

Here are seven suggested categories of these guiding principles, with some questions that you might want to ask yourself, and your partners, in drafting your own mutual accountability framework. Please remember that this is not an exact model that needs to be replicated, but rather suggestions that might be taken and adapted depending on your own programmes context.

1. Who is entering into the agreement?

It's important that the institutions that are committing to the mutual accountability framework are clearly identified. At the same time it's important to ensure that the individual signing on behalf of an institution is not only clearly identified, that their role within the institution is clearly identified and, that they have the authority to enter into the agreement on behalf the institution.

2. Why you entering into the agreement?

Set out as clearly as possible the reason you're entering into this agreement. If it is to cooperate in a certain project, then name the project. If it's to cooperate for a certain length of time, identify that timeframe. If it's to try and achieve a certain set of objectives, then identify these goals as clearly as possible.

3. Who needs to know about the agreement?

Obviously those individual signing the agreement need to know what this signing, but these are not the only people that need to know about the agreement's overall purpose. The chances are you implementation team will not be dealing with the signatories of the framework on a day-to-day basis. They will be dealing with operational staff within your partner institution. These operational staff, together with the colleagues with whom they might interact, need to know the framework has been agreed to and signed by their institution's top level decision-makers.

Generally, the responsibility of informing these individuals should fall within their own institution, however, at times your operational staff may need to keep the colleagues informed.

4. What your responsibilities in the agreement?

This type of agreement is not simply a contract between an institution that will deliver, and institution that will receive. Each of the signatory parties has an obligation to ensure the success of the agreement. These responsibilities need to be outlined as comprehensively as possible. Don't forget that sometimes these responsibilities might be active participation, constructive and timely feedback on deliverables. Given that the framework is one of **mutual** accountability – each party has a role to play to ensure overall success.

In identifying each of the signatories' responsibilities, simply for clarity, it might be a good idea to itemise these as separate bullet pointed list.

5. How will you interact with one another?

Your organisations are working closely together to achieve a common objective. While your implementation teams will often be speaking to one another on a regular basis, it's also important for your strategic decision-makers to engage with one another regarding progress. How often will the stakeholders talk to one another? Who will be responsible for calling the meetings? How often will the meetings be held? Will one of the parties be reporting to the other? Or will this simply be a general discussion regarding progress? It would be good to identify these processes upfront.

6. How will you share information with one another?

Again, a number of fundamental steps that need to be considered before your organisations embark on the project revolve around how organisations will share information with one another. In order to progress and achieve their objectives many projects require organisations to share information or data. Are there any internal restrictions within your organisation that prevents you from sharing data with your institutional partner? How often will this information be shared? Who will be responsible for sharing the information?

7. What about confidential information?

Information that is shared might not be proprietary, or trademarked, but it might be confidential. An organisation might not want this information to be shared more widely, but recognises that it is important for their fellow signatories to have access to this, in order to move the project forward. Set out the process and procedures for sharing confidential information upfront. May only certain team members have access to this information? May this information only be accessed within the home organisation itself? Or only using the home organisation's IT infrastructure? Can this information be shared between divisions or departments within the same home organisation?

8. How are you going to resolve disputes or disagreements?

In many projects or programmes they might be disagreements regarding processes or procedures, or even achievements, deadlines and deliverables. While small misunderstandings, which can easily be resolved, might be at the root of some of these disagreements, other differences of opinion might have more significant implications. It is important to think about how these differences might be resolved in a way that keeps the project on track, continuing to benefit all signatories. It is always easier to think about how to resolve these differences before they emerge.

Decide now who needs to be involved in resolving a disagreement or dispute. Is it a simple day-to-day affair that could be resolved operational level? Or does it require input from strategic decision-makers? It is generally advisable to try and resolve disputes at the lowest level of the organisation, before escalating, only if absolutely necessary.