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Amnesty International Independent Review Panel Feedback

Accountability Report 2018
Review Round April 2020



Amnesty International Feedback from the Independent Review Panel

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23 April 2020

Dear Julie Vehaar,

Thank you for submitting your accountability report. We, the Independent Review Panel of Accountable Now, appreciate your efforts to strengthen accountability to communities, local partners, supporters, staff, donors, or other key constituencies. Our key focus is on accountability to those you serve. It is against this background that we critically discussed your report and came to the individual assessment below.

Amnesty International's twelfth report is an interim report that addresses the Panel's feedback on its last full report by focusing on the internal changes on culture, wellbeing and ways of working and on the progress on listening to internal and stakeholders.

The Panel did not find major areas of weakness. The interim report speaks of the importance of a journey towards being a kinder and more trusting organisation. The Panel advises that this should remain a top priority. NGOs in financial difficulties often experience increased work-place tensions, criticism of management and staff stress. This may be even more the case for human rights-focused organisations, especially at a time when years of shrinking space for civil society have led to a very difficult and often threatening environment for human rights activists. It may therefore be pertinent to ask whether the internal environment has indeed become kinder and more trusting, and whether the recent resignation of the newly arrived CEO signals that there is further to go in this journey. The panel suggests that this cultural issue be a continued management priority and that a constructive internal discussion be fostered on it.

The Panel appreciates the openness about the internal challenges Amnesty International has faced in the past few years. The report provides a detailed overview of the Employee Experience programme (EEP) and highlights its strong governance structure and its key milestones, which are intended to address root causes of the concerns about staff wellbeing.

We look forward to your response letter, which will be made publicly available on the Accountable Now website along with your report and this feedback letter.



If you have any other feedback or comments on our work, please share them with us by sending them to the Accountable Now Secretariat.

Yours sincerely,

Accountable Now's Independent Review Panel



Amnesty International's Accountability Interim Report 2018

Review Round April 2020

Opening Statement from the Head of Organisation

Amnesty International's new Acting Secretary General, Julie Verhaar, starts her opening statement by noting that previous Secretary General (SG), Kumi Naidoo, has stepped down due to medical reasons in December 2019, and that during the transition period, while recruiting a new SG, accountability remains a key priority.

The organisation has been through a sensitive time and an open approach about the challenges they faced over the past few years has been taken. Julie Verhaar emphasizes Amnesty International's commitment to listen to as many voices both internally and externally to try and understand how prepared the organisation is as a movement to confront the very serious challenges posed by the world around us. This commitment has been realised very clearly in the past year with the development of Amnesty International's #Nextstrategy. As this long term strategy will be guiding the organisation from 2021 onwards, inputs from Amnesty International members, activists, staff, volunteers, partners, global donors, stakeholders, and the general public, have been captured.

The main underlying challenge in the past years was the staff reduction at the International Secretariat due to a financial deficit. The EEP is addressing and responding to the internal challenges of recent years with an emphasis on individual and collective well-being.



Significant organisational developments

Internal changes to culture, wellbeing, and ways of working

This section of the report provides details on the restructure that took place in 2019 to respond to the financial deficit. The transition of the International Secretariat leadership to a new structure, responding to concerns about the current culture, and defining and agreeing the next global strategy have also informed the decision of the restructure. Impact on staff was large, with 110 roles being made redundant. Support to impacted employees included support and wellbeing packages for employees and managers, and training with an external expert on Handling Difficult Conversations. Emotional and psychological counselling was also provided. The resulting new structure has been in place since September 2019.

The Employee Experience Programme (EEP) is described as an integral response to the recommendations of the 3 independent reviews commissioned after the tragic suicides of two employees in 2018. Internal reviews and staff surveys also informed the EEP, which aims to set the “journey to transform Amnesty International into a healthier, kinder and more trusting working environment.” The commitment to the successful implementation of the program is demonstrated by a strong project governance at the highest level in the organisation. Several milestones already achieved by the program are listed, such as the outsourcing of the investigation process for complaints raised from staff under the grievance, bullying and harassment, whistleblowing or disciplinary policies. The Panel would like to be kept informed about the progress regarding this investigation and on the “journey” described above. The panel is also looking forward to seeing the materialisation of 2 milestones of the EPP that are planned for quarter 1 of 2020: A reinforced Code of Conduct, and the Implementing of the Safeguarding Policy. The Panel recommends these policies to be uploaded on the organisation website.

Listening to Stakeholders

The participatory and inclusive process undertaken at a large scale to inform the new strategy, is described. The Nextstrategy Development sought to answer the essential question of “how do we, as Amnesty International, continue to achieve impact and remain relevant in an ever-changing world?”.

The different feedback collection channels are described, from a website with over 39,000 views, to an innovative polling software that allows for participants to comment on other people's comments, which received inputs from 2881 participants.

The Panel asks whether it is intended to continue this listening exercise rather than being an one off intervention.



Work with partners

As part of the Impact & Learning Review 18% of International Secretariat projects indicated that they conducted their annual reviews with input from external partners. Also the organisation reached out to over 180 stakeholders, which included NGOs, researchers, activists, and others, to cross-check, verify, and enrich the impact analysis. External Verification Pilots tested new methods and tools in 4 projects as a follow up to the feedback received.

The Panel encourages Amnesty International to ensure that there be robust and continuous information sharing with external stakeholders on, the changes that are taking place and the manner in which the information collected from them is being used / or has informed change and strategic choices. This is essential to strengthening accountability and avoids processes such as the listening not being merely extractive.

The report also provided an update on efforts to raise internal awareness and strengthen the knowledge base on feedback and complaints. The Panel is pleased to read that part of these efforts also included sharing Accountable Now resources.