

ALNAP

Essential briefings for humanitarian decision-makers

Putting people at the centre: accountability to affected populations

Despite long-standing, system-wide commitments and activity, progress on accountability outcomes for people affected by crisis continues to be underwhelming.

The 'participation revolution' promised by the Grand Bargain has not materialised and despite years of accountability to affected people being at the forefront of the humanitarian discourse, the needle has hardly moved when it comes to on the ground results. Community members who have provided feedback, but have seen no resultant change, are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the humanitarian system.

The stagnation raises questions about whether the system is tackling accountability in the wrong way, at the wrong level, and whether the aid sector should adjust its expectations of what is possible given its current configuration.

At a time when the humanitarian system is stretched like never before, with donors and agencies forced to make tough choices over where and who gets assistance, some are questioning whether resources should continue to be spent on community engagement and accountability mechanisms when pressure to focus on 'lifesaving' activities is growing. As donors and agencies are forced to prioritise, will they include affected people in targeting decisions? What happens when their opinions differ from donors and others in the aid system?

Ultimately, the fundamentals of aid have not changed along with the calls for greater accountability. Feedback mechanisms – widely seen as the instrument for making aid more accountable – are prolific at this point, but they only go so far in making aid more responsive and in line with people's expressed priority needs.

Recent data from Ground Truth Solutions finds that even if people were satisfied with the response they received from a feedback mechanism, this ultimately did not improve how they felt overall about the relevance or usefulness of the aid they received. In other words, these mechanisms may address local concerns, but ultimately don't touch the underlying nature of the aid system.

The humanitarian system does well in addressing short-term needs, but struggles to deliver the longer-term solutions that people affected by crisis repeatedly request.

Without shifts of this nature, the system could continue to spin its wheels on delivering a truly accountable response. That said, a few promising practices – taken on by individual organisations – have begun to emerge. They may not be on the scale of a revolution, but could result in smaller, yet more substantial shifts for people in crisis.

The evidence on accountability points to strikingly poor progress, despite its prominence on the humanitarian agenda for decades. The proliferation of formal approaches – frameworks, technical working groups, guidelines – have had limited impact for people on the ground.

- A recent global [analysis](#) by Ground Truth Solutions found that while the majority of crisis affected people want communities to have a say on aid provision, only 36% of respondents in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic felt they could influence the humanitarian response.

'Promising practices – taken on by individual organisations – have begun to emerge.'

- The latest Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS) 2022 [Humanitarian Accountability Report](#) found specific commitments related to accountability were among the lowest scoring of the nine commitments.
- Recent multi-agency evaluations of key responses also indicate poor progress in supporting accountability, including the inter-agency [COVID-19 evaluation](#) and the Disasters and Emergency Committee's real time [evaluation](#) of the Ukraine response.

Part of the problem is international fora committed to improving system-wide Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) tend to stay at the procedural level, amounting to tweaks to the system without improving outcomes for people in crisis.

- Despite 57% of Humanitarian Country Teams having a response-wide accountability framework for affected people and 66% having a country-level working group on AAP or community engagement in [2021](#), these processes have shown few tangible results for people in crisis. The [2022 State of the Humanitarian System \(SOHS\)](#), which covered the period 2018-21, found only 36% of aid recipients surveyed reported agencies did well in communicating information about plans and activities, while only 33% said they were able to provide feedback or complain. These figures both represent a decline on the previous reporting period.

'Discussions have focused on how AAP and localisation can complement each other and move to substantive outcomes for people in crisis.'

- An [Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(IASC\) Task Force](#) on accountability and inclusion, set up in 2022 (replacing the IASC Results Group 2) has had a number of procedural outputs, including developing a collective [accountability framework](#) for response coordination, launching a [portal](#) of resources on accountability and inclusion and creating a [helpdesk](#) for technical queries. But senior IASC leadership has recognised that these have not translated into meaningful engagement with communities. Current discussions have focused on how the IASC Task Forces on AAP and localisation can complement each other and move beyond processes to substantive outcomes for people in crisis.

The elements of accountability – both gathering community perspectives, but also responding to feedback – continue to challenge the system for a host of reasons, but some organisations are adjusting their practices and experimenting with new approaches.

- **Familiar issues have not been adequately addressed and old mistakes are repeated.** These include: communicating in one language where many are spoken; overlooking people with limited access to mobile technology; inaccessibility of physical meetings for some people; or setting up inappropriate communication systems for more sensitive issues. It is not that organisations aren't setting up feedback mechanisms, it is sometimes the opposite problem – they're tripping over themselves in the process, making it hard for communities to understand who they need to communicate with and how.
- **More junior [frontline staff](#) are the ones engaging directly with communities but often do not have enough [influence](#) to change the direction of projects based on community feedback.** The locus of influence might be even further away if frontline staff are from a local organisation and decisions are being made by an intermediary INGO. [International Rescue Committee](#) has tried to address this by embedding AAP commitments and indicators in staff performance appraisal processes. Importantly, they are one of the few organisations to clearly make the link between the essential role of frontline staff in community engagement and representing the voices of communities to organisational decision-makers.
- **Agencies often lack the systems and processes to manage or analyse large amounts of feedback or to integrate that analysis into decision-making structures, meaning much of it goes unused.** The community feedback mechanism set up in the [Dutch Relief Alliance](#) Joint Response in South Sudan has tried to tackle this by setting out clear pathways for processing community inputs and passing inputs of varying levels of severity to different points in the decision-making hierarchy. Details of the complaints, the action implemented and the time taken to respond to communities is logged on a simple spreadsheet. Thus, they rely on strong management, clear processes and dedicated AAP staff rather than expensive data analysis systems.

- **Humanitarian organisations are not set up for the flexibility and adaptive management that accountability requires, and have trouble giving up control.** Most funding in the humanitarian system is earmarked and programmes are designed without community consultation, making it difficult to change pre-agreed outputs based on community feedback at a later stage. This is further complicated when several agencies are involved in a chain of management, including local partners who are closest to communities to receive their feedback but furthest away from donors who can give requested changes the greenlight. Even when donors offer flexibility to intermediary agencies, the 2022 SOHS found that such flexibility is not typically passed on to local actors.

Some organisations are letting go of the reins entirely, handing over decision-making directly to communities. Christian Aid's survivor- and community-led response programme recognises communities' crucial role as first responders with strong knowledge of the context, who can continue to play an effective role throughout a response, if given the necessary resources. The programme provides individual or group micro-grants directly to communities who conduct their own analysis of needs/opportunities and decide how best to respond. So far, they have used this approach in Ukraine, Haiti, Lebanon and countries in East Africa.

- **Tensions between donors and agencies that can inhibit effective AAP – such as limited flexible funding and treating AAP as a tick-box exercise.** Organisations are able to easily box tick their way out of questions or output indicators on accountability – it is referenced in a response plan, a focus group was conducted here and a feedback mechanism installed there. But these can easily become meaningless indicators which don't do much to change the response.

That said, donors are increasingly incentivising AAP in practice by requiring AAP approaches of their agency partners. The Directorate-General ECHO (European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office) and Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) have adapted their monitoring and reporting requirements for agencies to demonstrate how they are engaging with communities or to provide information about community satisfaction with programmes. The UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Payment by Results approach is another example meant to reward agencies who were fulfilling Grand Bargain commitments, including on accountability.

- **Impartially based targeting decisions about who receives aid may be at odds with community norms around equality and sharing.** Yet sticking to humanitarian formulae of where and whom to target could cause harm in communities and upset existing social norms and structures. Who decides who is the most vulnerable – the aid system or people living in crisis who understand the community dynamics better than anyone? Examples from Ground Truth Solutions research shows communities prefer aid goes to everyone, even if it means it is spread thinner, or community members sharing with the most vulnerable who humanitarians did not actually find.

'Who decides who's the most vulnerable – the aid system or people who understand the community dynamics.'

In Afghanistan, where resources are scarce, the World Food Programme devised a community-based targeting approach to food distribution. Their aim was to integrate social conceptions of who deserves support with needs assessment data. They complemented their assessments with community group feedback for distribution lists, paying attention to social structures to engage potentially marginalised people. Importantly, they initially withheld 0.5% surplus of funds – a challenge when resources are scarce – to enable them to *respond* flexibly to appeals from communities about people who have been missed in the distribution process.

- **The short term nature of aid impacts the extent to which organisations can be accountable, especially in refugee settings.** The majority of crisis settings are protracted where people's needs go beyond lifesaving requirements and priorities include education, permanent housing, employment opportunities and other aspirations, things the humanitarian system is not set up to provide. There are some indications the nexus is happening in some contexts, but the system is still far from addressing longer-term priorities.

Refugees are even more dissatisfied as despite greater community engagement, they do not receive the longer-term more holistic support they require to live dignified, fulfilling lives. Some host governments may be unwilling to consider longer-term solutions for displaced people, putting humanitarians at odds with their accountability ambitions and the role they are willing to play with respect to advocacy and national politics.

The Ugandan government and UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, worked together to engage refugees in decision-making via the [Refugee Engagement Forum](#) (REF) established in 2018. The forum is made up of elected refugee representatives who advocate for the refugee community throughout Uganda. National representation is supported by a system of Refugee Welfare Committees that go down to the village level. Systematic engagement has occurred between the REF and the government-led National Refugee Response Coordination Forum. This collaboration shows how different players can work together to consider the needs for refugees, linked to longer-term institutional structures. It is less clear, however, how such a structure could function in countries where the government is more hostile towards the refugee population.

- **Understanding community culture and dynamics is a fundamental step to engaging effectively with communities, yet these social science skills are not systematically cultivated in humanitarian organisations.** As a result, organisations have a superficial understanding of power dynamics and marginalisation in communities where they work. Some crisis-affected communities or people within them may have their [ability to speak up reduced](#) by their culture, their lived experience of vulnerability or fear of repressive governments. This means some individuals and groups remain unheard, which can have knock on effects for the relevance of the aid provided and who receives it.

Engaging with these questions of community empowerment can be tricky for humanitarians, who may be concerned about the effects of local political dynamics or implications for the relationship between national governments and communities. They may also lack skills to assess community structures and integrate this socio-political nuance into programming. Agencies tend to [overlook](#) the understanding held by local staff or partners who already possess strong contextual knowledge. UNICEF will be releasing a range of outputs to help humanitarian agencies better engage with social science approaches.

'Some communities or people may have their ability to speak up reduced by their culture, lived experience or fear of governments.'

'Social listening: a growing approach to seeking communication channels outside of the humanitarian system and analysing information and opinions conveyed by populations.'

- **Formal feedback mechanisms set up by the international system often miss out on the conversations and opinions expressed by communities that happen within and among communities organically.** Some groups are addressing this through social listening, a growing approach to seeking communication channels outside of the humanitarian system and analysing the information and opinions conveyed by populations. Recently, the [Rooted in Trust](#) project used this approach to examine social media discussions about COVID-19. This was useful for understanding misinformation detrimental to the public health response but also for understanding community concerns. There is potential to use this approach to better understand community concerns and constraints to feed into project design, course correction and evaluations.
- **The sector is still unregulated, self-monitored against a set of voluntary standards, and there is no sanctioning mechanism for bad practice.** The closest thing that exists to date is Loop, an independent mechanism for collecting and publicly displaying community feedback. The system is currently available in six countries and has seen mixed success. While in some contexts communities are using it quite actively and some (particularly local) humanitarian agencies have signed up to respond to feedback directed at them, there is more limited uptake of the [platform](#) by larger agencies who claim to have their own systems. Ultimately, there is no sanctioning mechanism – aside from public view – to make agencies respond to the community comments on the platform.

The Core Humanitarian Standards are undergoing a revision but are still non-enforceable and non-binding. CHS's stated [goal](#) for this revision is a process that 'prioritises listening to and understanding what vulnerable people need and value'. It may represent an opportunity to institutionalise their perspectives in the commitments to which agencies subscribe.

Countless references, commitments, statements for improving accountability exist, but have taken the issue only so far. Many have suggested the humanitarian system needs to completely reorganise itself in order to meaningfully advance the agenda and get out of the perpetual holding pattern for progress on AAP.

'There are glimmers of hope the tide may be changing.'

But there are glimmers of hope the tide may be changing. UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) Martin Griffiths has said he wants to make a more accountable aid system his legacy and launched what is being called the ERC's flagship initiative, currently piloted in Niger, Colombia, the Philippines and one region of South Sudan.

The initiative gives country coordination teams the flexibility needed to redesign the structures of the humanitarian system based on local requirements as expressed by local humanitarian actors and affected populations. Some have welcomed this initiative as a means of turning the system on its head given its existing limitations, but others are concerned about the lack of clarity on how these pilots fit with existing ongoing inter-agency fora on collective AAP.

The initiative has intentionally been developed outside the aid sector's usual global mechanics – like the IASC Task Force to avoid it becoming bogged down in bureaucracy and taking years to progress.

ABOUT EXplain

The greatest learning challenge for our sector is less about capturing lessons and experiences, but creating spaces for humanitarians to absorb and act on what is already known.

Operational decision makers – at all levels – are often the people with the least time to engage with vital new learning and evidence.

That's why ALNAP is piloting new approaches to communicating knowledge tailored to the needs, expectations and preferences of the busiest humanitarians.

EXplain is ALNAP's new learning experience for 2023.

- Straightforward communications to help humanitarian decision-makers make sense of, and exchange on, current evidence and discourse.
- Key learning and links all in one place: sourced, checked and curated by ALNAP's highly-respected global research team.
- Rich and accessible content, provided in a time efficient way, in an open peercomfortable environment.
- Bringing senior humanitarians more up to date on the latest developments, increasing awareness on the implications for their work, creating confidence as part of continuous professional development.

EXplain is an optimal mix of focused presentations, discussion and sharing of perspectives, with a range of high-quality supporting materials. It gives senior operational leaders a better understanding of what's out there and what they really need to know.

EXplain: simple communication, sense-making, exchange of experience.