

ACCOUNTABILITY & PARTICIPATION

In 2015–2017, there was significant activity to improve accountability and the participation of crisis-affected people in humanitarian programmes. More aid recipients were consulted and able to provide feedback. However, the information they provided seldom resulted in major changes.





A focus on information collection as an approach to participation made many people feel that the issue was becoming bureaucratised and seen as a ‘box-ticking exercise’. There were more ambitious examples of ‘handing over power’ in humanitarian programming, but these were generally isolated, and did not lead to changes in the system as a whole.



Accountability & Participation

In brief

Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) combines a large and growing number of activities related to regulating the relationships and power imbalances between people affected by crisis and humanitarian agencies. This report focuses on two areas in particular: participation in decision-making by affected people, and the degree to which humanitarian agencies are held accountable for the decisions they make on behalf of affected people.

Much of the activity related to improving participation in the reporting period centred around establishing systems of consultation – particularly in assessments and feedback systems. Growing activity in this area was noted in the 2015 report, and increased further in 2015–17, reflected in an increased number of respondents in the recipient survey saying that they had been consulted on the assistance they received. However, this is a limited form of participation, and is further limited by the fact that the views of crisis-affected people collected in these ways do not seem, in most cases, to have been influential in creating or changing humanitarian plans. The focus on information collection systems as an approach to participation also made many people feel that the issue was becoming bureaucratized and seen as a ‘box-ticking exercise’. There were more ambitious examples of ‘handing over power’ in humanitarian programming, but they were generally isolated, and did not lead to changes in the system as a whole.

The picture was similar with respect to accountability. There was an increase in reporting mechanisms, but on their own these are not sufficient to improve accountability. There was also some progress on making people aware of their rights and entitlements, but very little on mechanisms for redressing grievances or imposing sanctions. Despite high-level attention to the issue of sexual abuse and exploitation, there was still a lack of joined-up activity on the ground.

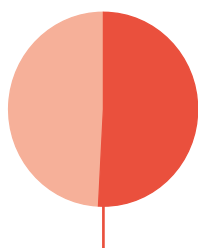
Defining accountability and participation

Accountability and participation is not included in the OECD DAC criteria for humanitarian performance, possibly because the engagement of crisis-affected people in humanitarian responses is considered to be a means to achieving better programmes (by increasing the relevance and impact of programming, for example), rather than an end in itself. Many humanitarians, however, would argue that accountability and participation are objectives in themselves: that no matter how well a programme performs in other areas, it cannot be judged as performing well unless crisis-affected people have meaningful control over decisions, and are able to hold humanitarian actors to account for the decisions they make on their behalf. As a result, we have added accountability and participation as a new criterion in this edition of the SOHS. The criterion refers only to accountability to, and participation of, people affected by crisis (and not wider forms of accountability, such as to donors or to the affected state).

Accountability has been the subject of much debate and some confusion. Several key informants suggested that the term ‘AAP’ is used to mean different things by different people (see also Donino and Brown, 2014), including communication of information to crisis-affected people; the ability of affected people to make complaints about, or suggest improvements to, aid programmes; the ability of affected people to design and implement their own activities; and the prevention of sexual exploitation and other abusive behaviour by aid workers. Key informant interviews also suggested that discussions on AAP are being expanded to cover aspects of ‘localisation’. What all of these activities have in common is that they concern the relationship between the people in a crisis and the people who aim to assist them – a relationship that contains large disparities of power.

ALNAP’s work on this topic generally distinguishes between two key areas: the ability of crisis-affected people to make or influence decisions about the use of external funding (‘participation’) and the ability of crisis-affected people to hold humanitarian actors to account for decisions that are made on their behalf (‘accountability’) (Knox Clarke and Obrecht, 2015; Obrecht et al., 2015). These areas differ significantly – in ambition, in rationale and in the mechanisms and approaches that would be required for them to be fully achieved. However, at present many AAP activities aim to address both.

Of the 5,000 aid recipients who took part in the SOHS 2018 survey,



51%

reported they had been consulted on what they needed prior to distribution. This suggests

1 in 2

people had been involved in some form of assessment.

To what extent are affected people able to participate in/influence decisions that affect them?

Although this area has continued to receive attention at both the policy and operational levels of the humanitarian system, the period 2015–17 did not see any large-scale shift in decision-making power away from humanitarian organisations and towards people affected by crisis. In the recipient survey, a slim majority of respondents (51% overall) reported that they had been consulted on what they needed prior to distribution. On the face of it this is a remarkable figure (particularly given the fact that there was no significant difference between men’s and women’s responses), suggesting that one in every two people had been involved in some form of assessment: responding to questionnaires, being interviewed or participating in community meetings. It is also a significant increase on the 2015 (33%) and 2012 surveys (34%).

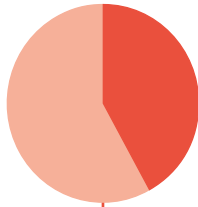
In the evaluations, including people in assessments and targeting exercises (deciding what people receive and who should receive it) appeared to be the most common approach to enhancing participation (Khan, 2015; Moughanie, 2015; Poulsen et al., 2015). It was also presented as an example of participatory programming by interviewees in several case studies. However, answering a questionnaire on needs or participating in an interview are very limited forms of participation, particularly when answering questions entails a choice between predetermined options. As one UN official explained: ‘Do we include affected populations in design? No. Do we include them to find out needs? Yes. Are we allowing for needs to be broadly expressed? No. Are we allowing it to be addressed by a tick in the box? Yes’.

There are, of course, good reasons for standardising assessment tools, but doing so does not add greatly to the empowerment of crisis-affected populations, and may further reduce their sense of dignity and agency. One local NGO staff member explained an assessment process as follows: ‘they come to their houses and do the assessments, asking about their expenses, their debts, how many times do they eat meat. Some, they think this is ... humiliating for them’.

A second approach to consulting affected people – and one which appears to have become more widespread over the 2015–17 period, is the provision of feedback mechanisms as part of project implementation. In many cases, these mechanisms are designed (or used) to provide feedback (inputting into decisions) and make complaints (holding to account), and thus have both accountability and participation functions. In the recipient survey, a slightly higher number answered yes than no (36% to 32%) to the question ‘were you able to give opinions on programmes, make complaints, and suggest changes to the aid agencies?’. This is a significantly higher number of positive responses than in the 2015 survey (where 19% of respondents said yes and 44% said no) and a lower number of negative responses to 2015, where 37% said yes and 55% said no. Overall, there were no statistically significant differences according to the gender of respondents, although there were statistically significant differences in Afghanistan and Iraq. The responses of refugees and people affected by ‘natural’ disasters were very similar to each other (the responses of people in conflict were slightly less positive: 29% yes, 32% no). There was no statistically significant difference in responses between people who received support from international and from national organisations.

Suggesting a change is one thing; having that suggestion acted on is another. Case study interviews with aid recipients and humanitarian staff indicate that, in a limited number of cases, agencies had made changes as a result of feedback, but that generally these were quite small (changing the items in a food distribution, for example). Similarly, the review of evaluations provided some examples of changes as a result of consultation or feedback, such as adjustments to food baskets (Duncalf et al., 2016), the design of transitional shelters (IFRC, 2015) and winterisation activities in refugee camps in Syria (Austin, 2016). One evaluation gave examples of more substantial changes being made as a result of feedback (Al Nabhy et al., 2017), but this seemed to occur in only a small minority of cases. In general, interviewees in the case studies – particularly aid recipients – were pessimistic about their ability to influence, let alone determine, how humanitarian assistance was designed and delivered. In Ground Truth surveys in Haiti, Afghanistan and Lebanon, only one in nine respondents believed that their opinions were actually taken into account (Ground Truth Solutions, 2017). Subsequent surveys in six countries also gave low scores for responsiveness (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018).

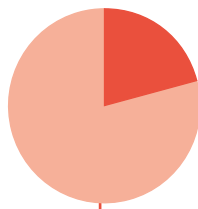
Of the 1,170 aid practitioners who completed the SOHS 2018 survey,



42%

felt that the participation of affected people was good or excellent.

But only...



21%

of practitioners felt that aid recipients held influence or control over decisions.

Humanitarian practitioners were similarly dubious about the ability of affected people to influence decisions. Only 42% of respondents thought that the participation of affected people in their programmes was good or excellent. While this was an improvement on 2015 (when the score was 33%), it was still one of the most negative results in the survey. Even lower, however, were the results when practitioners were asked about the degree of influence or control aid recipients had over decisions. Here, the combined score of 21% was the lowest of any in the survey, again suggesting that, while a growing number of mechanisms are available to give crisis-affected people a voice, they are limited and do not constitute a legitimate consultation, let alone a transfer of control. The system appears to have got stuck at the feedback stage: roughly two-thirds of the key informants who discussed accountability felt that little, if any, progress had been made in this area over the previous three years.

Some interviewees pointed to positive developments, including the potential for technology to allow people to express opinions more visibly, and the role of cash in giving people more choice (the improved agency and control cash can offer were also appreciated by aid recipients interviewed in the case studies). They also discussed increased pressure from donors – in particular USAID – to report on measures to engage people in projects. A few mentioned the Core Humanitarian Standard and Ground Truth Solutions as initiatives that might support change in the future, and the revised HCT Terms of Reference, which highlight accountability to affected populations and prevention of sexual abuse as mandatory issues for all HCTs.

Set against this was a repeated concern that participation was becoming a professionalised, technical exercise rather than a value or commitment. Some mentioned that there had been a proliferation of guidance, but that this was not fully operationalised on the ground – a point that has also been made in a number of STAIT/P2P peer reviews. It was noticeable how many key informants talked of AAP as a ‘box-ticking exercise’. This ‘professionalisation’ of accountability, turning it into ‘a big thing’, had in some cases made humanitarian workers cynical about the whole idea. One local NGO staff member told interviewers: ‘We joke that you put the letters CB before everything, so we have many things, now it’s all community-based and the same things that you always used to do, we just add the letters, community-based’.

At the same time, the case studies and evaluations suggested a number of organisations for whom the accountability agenda is a core commitment (Grünwald and Schenkenberg, 2016; Wihaidi and Wehaidy, 2016). Interviewees from affected populations were clear that some agencies were more interested in taking their views into account than others. These agencies are experimenting with approaches that go beyond assessments and feedback mechanisms, often providing grants to community groups and allowing them to take the lead in decision-making, rather than ‘participating’ through information collection mechanisms. However, many informants spoke of ‘pilots’ or ‘islands’: promising activities that, while good in themselves, were unlikely to create change across the system.

How important is participation?

One important outcome of the recipient survey is that it demonstrates a statistically significant correlation between the degree to which people are consulted on a programme, or are able to give feedback about a programme, and the degree to which they feel they are treated with respect and dignity. People who had been able to give feedback were 3.5 times more likely to say that they had been treated with dignity and respect than people who had not been able to do so, and people who had been consulted were 3.1 times more likely to say that they had been treated with dignity and respect than people who had not.



People who gave feedback were **3.5** times more likely to say that they had been treated with dignity and respect than people who had not.

People who were consulted were **3.1** times more likely to say that they had been treated with dignity and respect than those who had not.

The correlation is striking and important, but we should be careful about the conclusions that we draw from it. We cannot say with certainty that putting feedback mechanisms in place will lead to people feeling more respected: the figures show that relationship, but they do not show that one element causes the other. Similarly, we cannot assume feedback mechanisms and consultation are necessary to ensure that people are treated in a dignified way. One of the highest scores in the survey for dignity (76%) was in Iraq, which scored lowest on questions related to consultation and ability to provide feedback (37% and 15% yes responses, respectively). Other factors – such as the demeanour of aid staff, the efficiency of processes (such as the length of time which people are made to wait for distributions) and respect for local culture – support feelings of dignity, and these go well beyond feedback processes (Holloway and Fan, 2018).

Certainly, some of the people interviewed for this report did not feel they had been consulted about the aid they received, but they were not especially concerned. There may be a number of reasons for this. People in a crisis have other priorities, and may not want to spend time providing information or making decisions. They may also not want to appear critical. Or as one local NGO informant suggested, ‘participation is a culture in itself. People need to be able to know how to participate and have practiced it to be able to do it. This is a culture we don’t have much’. The idea that participation may be more highly valued in some cultures than others received some slight support in the case studies – interviewees in Haiti were consistently more unhappy about being denied the opportunity to make decisions than interviewees in Yemen, for example. This is an area that would benefit from more study. What is important here is the idea that participation is largely about agency, and so should entail choice. In some cases people may choose not to participate, without feeling that this affects their dignity. Even so, while we should be careful not to project assumptions, there can be little doubt that many people, in many places, prize participation (and see also Ground Truth Solutions, 2017).

Participation also seems to correlate with better programming. In the recipient survey, there was a statistically significant correlation between consultation and feedback on the one hand, and the relevance and quality of programming on the other. People who reported that they had

been consulted and were able to provide feedback were around two to three times more likely to give positive responses around the relevance and quality of the aid they had received than those who had not.

The link between greater participation and the quality of programming was particularly evident in the Ebola response in West Africa. The initial response demonstrated the shortcomings of an overly technical approach that relied on external expertise at the expense of the knowledge and understanding of the societies facing the epidemic. This meant, for example, that '[t]he early instructions on so-called safe burial – rigid and unworkable – were, in that context, a textbook manual for unsafe burial that then had to be overcome by working with local religious and community leaders' (DuBois et al., 2015: 31). In that context at least, seeing people's behaviour as a problem, rather than as a key to the response, hampered effective action and cost lives (DuBois et al., 2015; Moon et al., 2015; IRC, 2016f).

Factors affecting participation

Clarity around concepts and approaches

As noted above, evaluations and interviews at HQ and in country offices demonstrated a very broad understanding of what terms such as 'accountability' and 'participation' actually mean, and how external actors can most effectively establish systems that give affected people a meaningful say. While there will never be one 'right' way to achieve participation, key informants suggested that confusion in these areas prevents the development of expertise and sharing of knowledge.

One concrete operational area where this confusion can have important implications is the decision on who participates, and who represents whom. Informants suggested that it is unrealistic to expect everybody in a community to participate in decision-making: there will generally need to be some representative structure. However, this raises the question of who does the representing. Should it be the established community authorities? Or representatives of marginalised groups? Either choice has significant consequences (potentially beyond the boundaries of the programme), and it can be difficult to make a decision without clarity on why participation is being encouraged.

Time

The most frequently cited constraint to establishing more participatory programmes – at least among practitioners interviewed as part of the case studies – was time. As one national NGO staff member put it: 'When it is about emergency, usually you have, what, three days? A week, if you're lucky, to draft everything. So, it's not really easy to really involve people'. It is interesting how often time was raised as a constraint, even in situations which were not rapid-onset, and where agencies had been in place for many years. Some interviewees suggested that the need for

rapid proposals was driven as much by agency and donor timescales as it was by needs on the ground, and, to the degree that it is a constraint in longer programmes, shortage of time may be related to business processes and priorities rather than the urgency of the situation itself.

Flexibility in funding and programming

One element that determines the degree of participation – and particularly the degree to which feedback is used – is whether agencies are able and open to changing their initial expectations or plans on the basis of input from affected people. At present, neither practitioners nor affected people involved in humanitarian operations believe that agencies are flexible enough: there were many concerns over needs being determined and programme design shaped by donor priorities and the perspectives of aid professionals, rather than by the views of affected communities (see also Darcy, 2016a; Lawday et al., 2016; World Vision International, 2015). It is hard to judge the degree to which this is based on attitudes of ‘expert’ superiority, or whether it is based on the external constraints imposed by donor contracting processes or the structures and processes of the agencies themselves. The tendency for agencies to specialise in particular sectors renders them unable to respond to requests from affected people that fall within a different sector, or no clear sector at all. Since much donor reporting focuses on outputs over outcomes, many agencies are also unable to significantly change the activities they carry out within a sector, if this leads to a significant change in the outputs being provided (Obrecht, 2018). Within the study period, some donors began to experiment with more open partnership agreements (see section on relevance) to allow agencies to move more flexibly between outputs and activities in order to achieve an overall outcome. However, despite increased donor endorsement of accountability to affected populations (including a requirement passed by the US Congress in 2015 that all foreign aid projects provide opportunities for feedback, DANIDA and other donors’ strong support for the CHS and the ‘participation revolution’ in the Grand Bargain), implementing agencies note that these expectations are in direct tension with the donor push for greater efficiency and the implicit desire for speed and scale in humanitarian response (see also Obrecht, 2018).

Culture

Participatory programming – and accountability to affected populations in general – is fundamentally about power. To be effective, it requires an understanding of how power is constructed and expressed in a given situation. In the case of participatory programming, in particular, it also aims to disrupt and change existing dynamics of inequality.

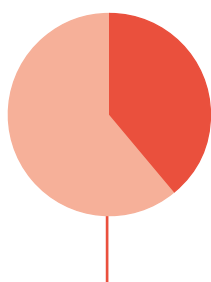
The distribution of power – the basis on which power rests, and the ways in which it is distributed – is a core element of the culture of any society, and differs from one society to another. As a result, key informants were clear that participatory programming is only likely to be effective where an agency has

the skills to understand the power dynamics of a particular society. It is also hard to transfer approaches that work in one place to another, with another culture. Participatory activities need to be bespoke, which sits uneasily with the standardisation of tools and programmes required to ensure some degree of consistency and efficiency across humanitarian organisations.

Incentives

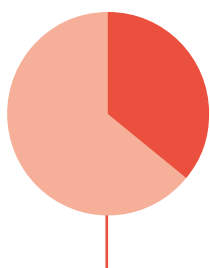
Participatory programming also means giving power away, with decisions currently taken by agency staff instead being in the hands of affected people or their representatives. A degree of resistance to change is an inherent part of the culture of all organisations (Knox Clarke, 2017), and in this case resistance may be reinforced by concerns about loss of power and control (CHS, forthcoming; Steets et al., 2016). Key informants from the Red Cross, NGOs and the UN were all clear that real participation would require a paradigm shift that the humanitarian system is currently not prepared to make.

Of the 5,000 aid recipients who took part in the SOHS 2018 survey,



39%

reported that organisations providing them with assistance had communicated about plans and activities well.



36%

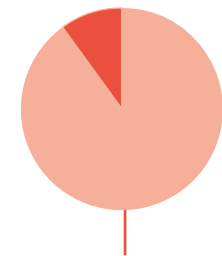
of practitioners broadly agreed, reporting that their organisation was good or excellent at providing information.

To what extent are aid recipients able to hold humanitarian actors to account for decisions made on their behalf?

In order for aid recipients to be able to hold humanitarians to account for the actions taken on their behalf, at least three elements need to be in place: people need to know what they should expect from the humanitarian response and whether this is, in fact, what is happening; they need to have a way to complain when these expectations are not met; and there needs to be some mechanism for redress or sanction. In the recipient survey, 39% of people said that the organisations providing them with humanitarian assistance had communicated well about their plans and activities: again, there was no statistical difference in the survey between those who had received assistance from governments, national NGOs or international agencies. These results suggest that there is significant room for improvement in communicating with people in crisis about the assistance and support they can expect. Practitioners broadly agreed: only 36% of respondents said that their organisation was good or excellent at providing information to aid recipients and allowing them to lodge complaints. It is probably not surprising that the case studies provided a number of examples (in Kenya, Yemen and Haiti) of people being unaware of what they should receive, or when and how they should receive it. At the same time, the case studies also provided a number of examples of organisations actively attempting to communicate with recipients in order to raise awareness of their entitlements and make them aware of their rights.

Turning to the second element supporting accountability – reporting mechanisms – key informants suggested that there had been a significant increase in complaints mechanisms over the reporting period, and this was supported by the evaluations. The practitioner survey also suggested that there were more complaints mechanisms, showing an increase from 30% to 36% in positive responses between 2015 and 2017. Key informants suggested that the growth in such mechanisms may have been driven, in part, by the expectations of donors.

At the same time, the case studies suggested that there were a number of situations where complaints mechanisms had still not been put in place, and this was confirmed in evaluations (Baker et al., 2016; House, 2016; Patko, 2016). Evaluations also suggested that, even when mechanisms were in place, affected communities were unaware of them (Advisem Services Inc., 2016; Turnbull, 2016) or unable to access them (Baker et al., 2016; IFRC and KRCS, 2015). In many cases, mechanisms may exist, but they are not working as intended. Broadly, findings from the evaluation synthesis and from the interviews echo those of a Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) evaluation of activities in Yemen: ‘Engagement sometimes, but not always, includes an adequate, standardised and well-communicated complaint process. Hotlines are common (though often used for requests rather than complaints), as are complaint boxes and the option of channelling a complaint through a member of the community committee’ (Al Nabhy et al., 2017: 21).

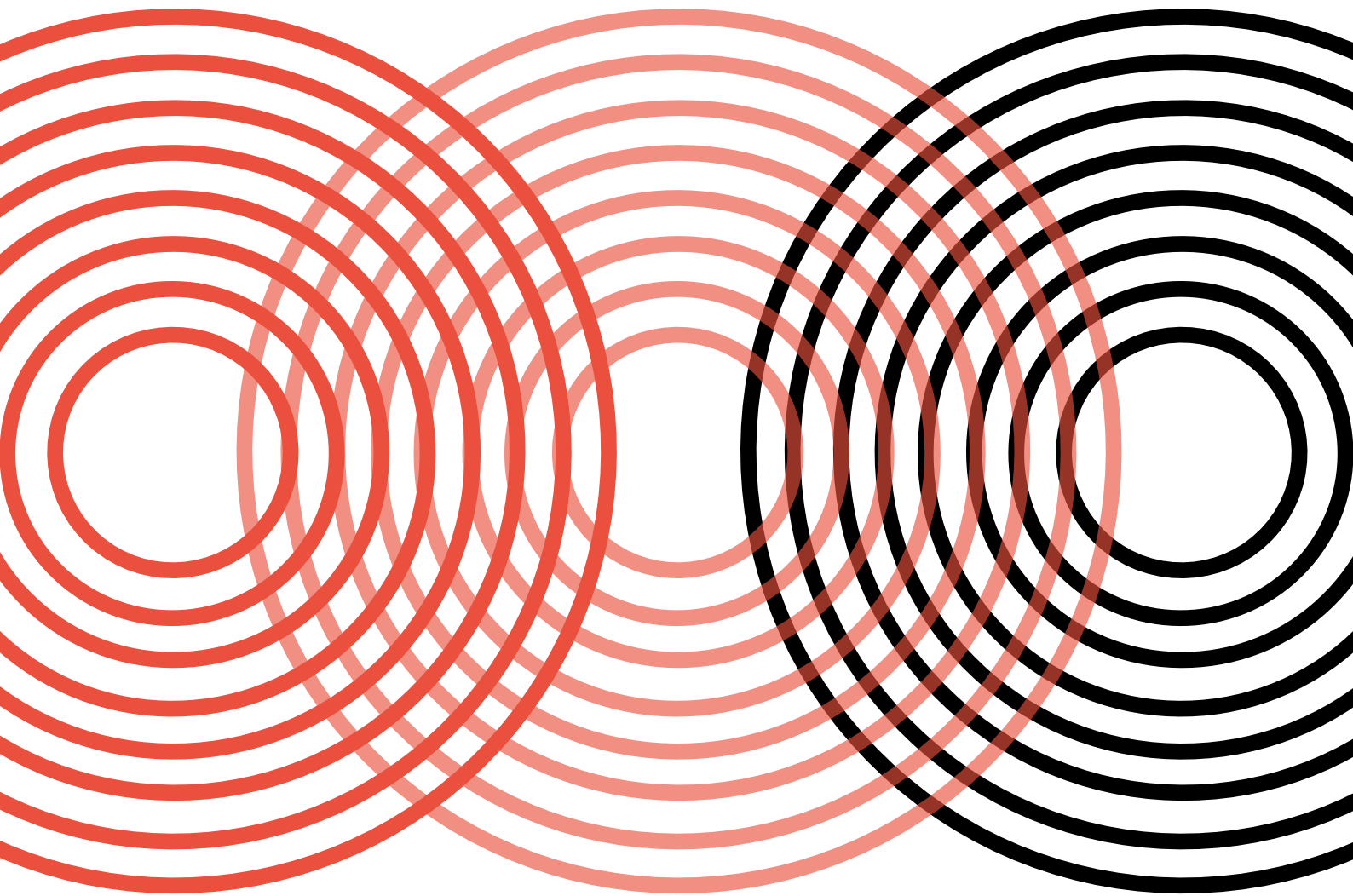


Only around
10%
of Ground
Truth survey
respondents
trusted complaint
mechanisms to
deliver some form
of redress.

The third element one might expect to see as part of an effective accountability system is some method for redress and/or sanction: essentially, if the humanitarian agency has not provided people with their entitlements, it will put things right – and if the behaviour constitutes a particularly flagrant breach of expectations, individuals or organisations will be sanctioned. This element appears to be the weakest of the three: it is not addressed in the evaluations (which tend to look for the presence or absence of mechanisms, rather than how they work), and was not mentioned by key informants or in the case studies. It is, then, not surprising that only around 10% of respondents (averaged across three countries) in Ground Truth Solutions surveys trusted complaints mechanisms to deliver (Ground Truth Solutions, 2017).

One important failing in the area of accountability relates to sexual exploitation and abuse. The sexual exploitation of crisis-affected people by aid workers represents an extreme example of the conscious abuse of power, and provides a basic test of how effective the system can be in holding individuals and organisations to account for violations of law and ethical principles. The issue received increased attention, particularly at the UN: in 2016 the Secretary-General appointed a Special Coordinator on improving the UN response to sexual exploitation and abuse, and the following year presented a strategy to the General Assembly ‘to improve the Organization’s system-wide approach’ to the issue (UN Secretary-General, 2017b: 1). Movement on the ground was, however, slow. The reports of P2P missions were clear that this area saw only limited progress over the period 2015–17. In some cases, reports suggest that ‘agencies and NGOs have specific policies and mechanisms to support a PSEA agenda, including codes of conduct that are mandatory for humanitarian workers to sign and abide by; whistle blowing opportunities; and support assistance to survivors’ (STAIT (P2P), 2016a: 9), but it is not clear how well these policies are being implemented. At the inter-agency level, there appeared to be even less attention to the problem. While in some cases ‘[t]he RC/HC and DHC ... stressed the importance of preventing sexual exploitation and abuse by

humanitarian staff and partners [and] ... elevated PSEA successfully onto the humanitarian agenda' (P2P, 2017: 15), attention to the issue seemed to rest very much on individual efforts, rather than broad systemic commitment. In other situations, '[t]here was an almost complete absence of discussions during the OPR mission on the humanitarian community's obligations to the Protection against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) agenda'. The report goes on to say that 'the fact that it was rarely mentioned, is mentionable in itself' (STAIT (P2P), 2016a: 16). In the SOHS research, only four of 120 evaluations considered agency performance on this issue, and only five key informants mentioned abuse of affected people as a problem. All five felt that the issue was being largely ignored.



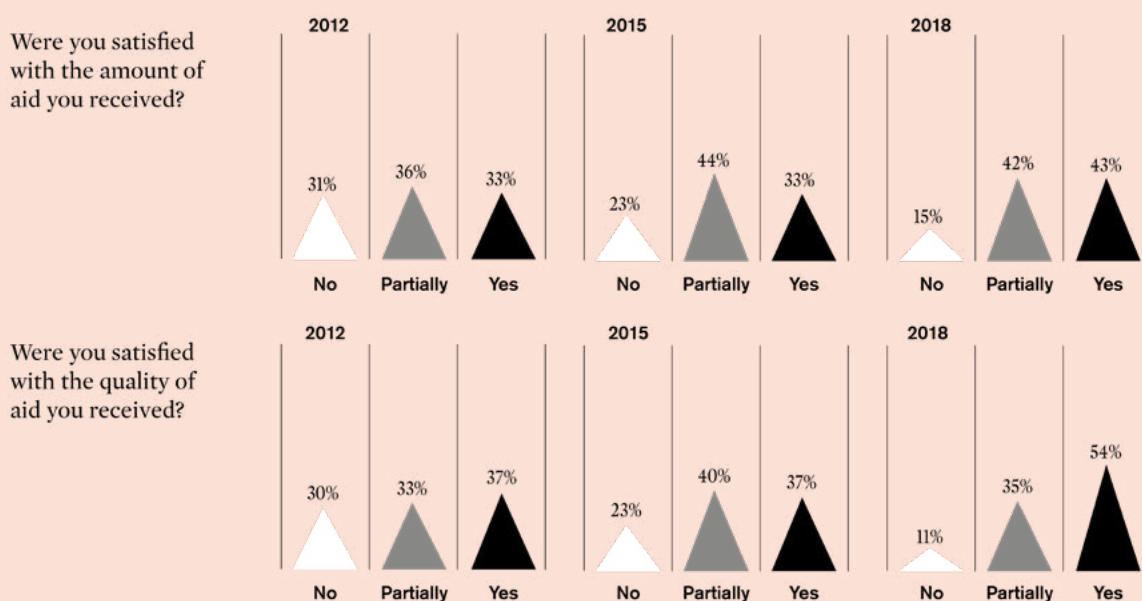
THE PERSPECTIVES OF AID RECIPIENTS

One of the most important ways of assessing the performance of humanitarian assistance is to ask people in crisis to evaluate the support they receive. The perspectives of aid recipients have played a significant role in grounding the findings and analysis of all three State of the Humanitarian System reports.⁷ This section takes a focused look at what we heard from aid recipients in our research for the 2018 report, and highlights key sets of insights from this data.

The way the humanitarian sector consults aid recipients has changed dramatically since ALNAP’s first survey in 2012. Not only are individual humanitarian agencies doing more to collect feedback from aid recipients, but there are also more system-wide approaches to surveying crisis-affected people. Accountability initiatives such as the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (now the CHS Alliance) and Ground Truth Solutions have led to an increase in surveys of aid recipients. These surveys inform both operational decisions and humanitarian policy, for example the implementation of the Grand Bargain.

This section draws on the mobile survey data gathered by GeoPoll for ALNAP and the field-level interviews with aid recipients, as well as Ground Truth Solutions’ Human Voice Index (HVI – a database that includes all of their large perceptual surveys) and the CHS Alliance self-assessment data for 2017.

Figure 18 / SOHS aid recipient aggregate survey responses – SOHS 2012, 2015 and 2018



Notes: The countries covered by the SOHS aid recipient surveys are as follows: 2012: DRC, Pakistan, Haiti and Uganda; 2015: DRC, Pakistan and the Philippines; 2018: DRC, Kenya, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and Iraq.



‘it’s not enough,
but it makes
a difference’

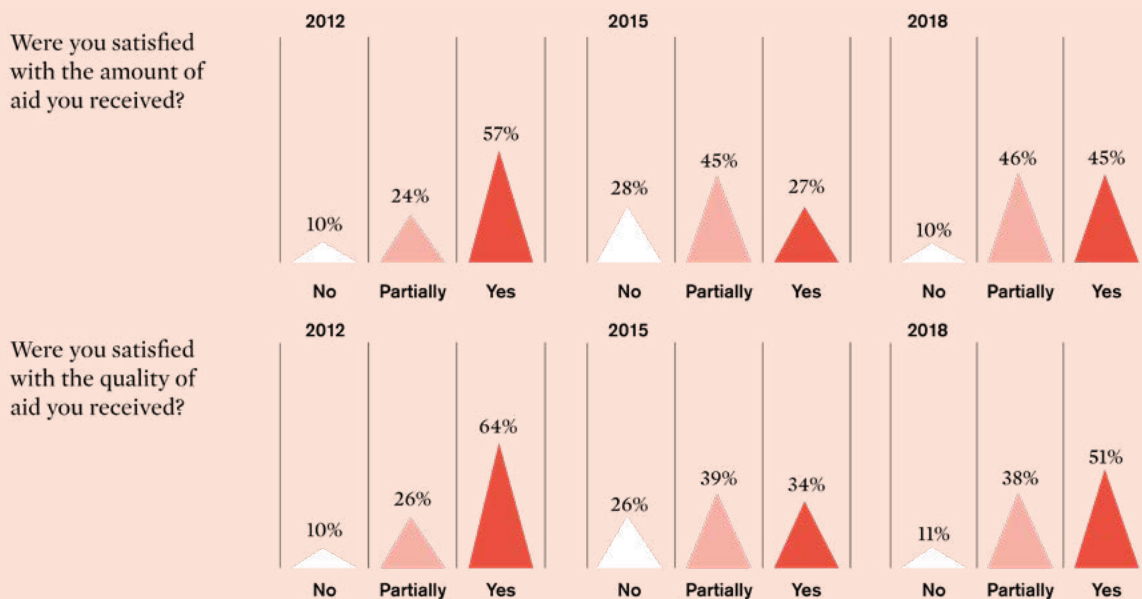
AID RECIPIENT, KENYA

INSIGHT 1: Overall, aid recipients see aid getting better

Overall, aid recipients in 2017 reported higher levels of satisfaction with the quality, quantity and relevance of the aid they received, compared with 2012 and 2015.⁸ A much higher percentage of aid recipients also reported being able to give feedback on programmes, and that they were consulted prior to an aid distribution. In face-to-face interviews, aid recipients were concerned with the quantity of assistance provided, but generally indicated that the support they received was relevant to their needs and highly appreciated (deviations from this trend were most evident in Haiti). Interestingly, given current debates around the ‘localisation’ agenda, we found no meaningful distinctions between different types of aid actors in terms of how aid recipients assessed performance (this is discussed in more detail in section on Accountability and participation).

Positive appraisals by aid recipients were also found in the first baseline assessments carried out by the CHS Alliance on how well its members were performing against the nine Core Humanitarian Standards. The ratings aid recipients gave either matched or were more positive than the self-assessed ratings that agencies gave themselves on eight of the nine standards. Aid recipients were particularly positive about the relevance of the aid provided and the competence of aid agency staff.

Figure 19 / SOHS aid recipient survey responses for DRC – SOHS 2012, 2015 and 2018



Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest percentile.

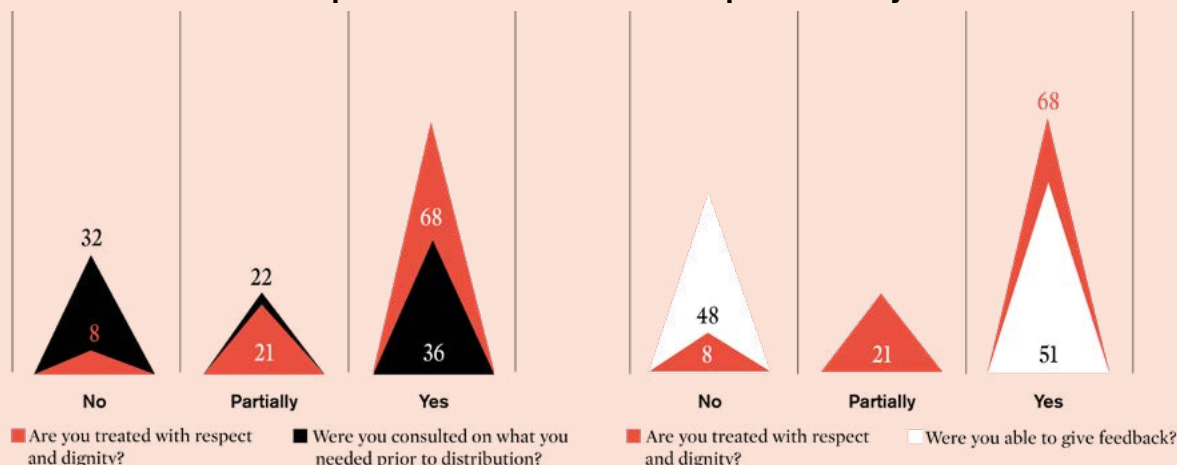
Figure 20 / Assessments against the Core Humanitarian Standard – Scores by commitment



Source: Core Humanitarian Standard

Notes: Aggregated assessments of 15 CHS Alliance members, as of December 2017. For each commitment the upper bar reflects the average self-assessment scores for Key Actions from CHS Alliance members (CHS Requirements at project level) while the lower bar shows the average ratings given by aid recipients served by the CHS Alliance members. The ratings from aid recipients were collected by CHS Alliance members themselves rather than through an independent party.

Figure 21 / Comparison of feedback, consultation and respect responses – SOHS 2018 aid recipients survey



Notes: While consultation and feedback mechanisms strongly correlated with the degree to which people felt respected, many aid recipients who were not able to provide feedback also reported that they had been treated with respect, and some aid recipients who provided feedback did not feel treated with respect.

INSIGHT 2: Overall trends don't tell us what is happening in a specific response

Given the many years of attention and effort invested in improving accountability to affected populations in the humanitarian sector, it is heartening that performance is improving in the eyes of aid recipients. However, while the aggregated data indicates an overall positive trajectory, aggregated trends are not always reproduced within individual countries, which means that global trends can mask, or run counter to, trends within individual countries or crises.

For example, in the DRC, the only country that has been featured in all three SOHS surveys, there has been an overall decline in satisfaction among aid recipients from 2012 to 2017. Aid recipients were less satisfied in 2017 than they were in 2012 with the quantity of aid (57% in 2012 and 45% in 2017) and the quality of aid (64% in 2012 and 51% in 2017), and fewer reported being able to offer feedback (55% in 2012 and 47% in 2017).

Yet aid recipients in DRC in 2017 were more positive about performance compared to 2015, when the humanitarian response was considered quite poor by aid recipients and there were significant declines in satisfaction from 2012. These changes illustrate how humanitarian performance is fluid, not linear: levels of satisfaction can change dramatically, either up or down, and may be shaped by contextual factors affecting aid delivery at particular points in time.

INSIGHT 3: Accountability and participation mechanisms make a difference

Aid recipients are more likely to feel respected and view aid as relevant and high-quality if they are consulted and have the opportunity to provide feedback or complain. The GeoPoll surveys, for example, showed a strong relationship between feedback and consultation and how aid recipients perceived the quality of the aid they received. This correlation was even stronger with regard to feelings of dignity and respect (see more in section on Accountability and participation).

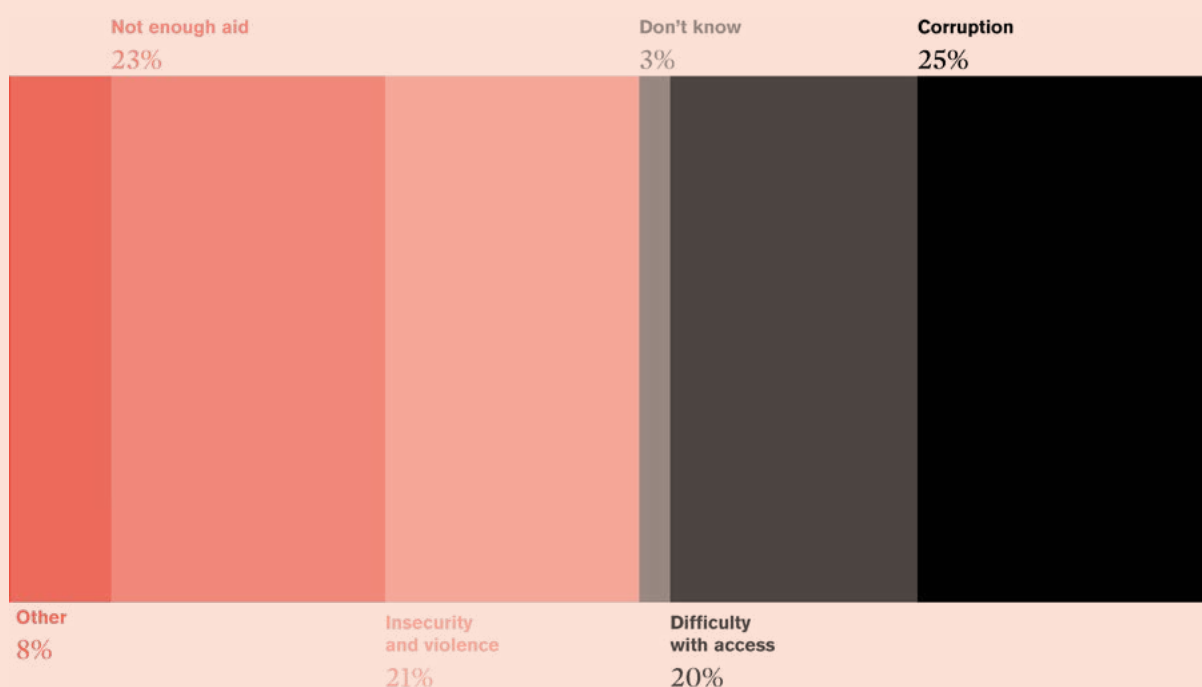
INSIGHT 4: The majority of aid recipients feel respected by aid providers

In the survey, 68% of aid recipients said that they were treated with respect and dignity by aid providers. Similarly, in survey data gathered by Ground Truth Solutions in 2015–2017, the average score for 'respect' was the highest for any question on the survey.

INSIGHT 5: There are a number of ways in which agencies can demonstrate respect for aid recipients

While consultation and feedback mechanisms strongly correlated with the degree to which people felt respected, many aid recipients who were not able to provide feedback also reported that that they had been treated with respect, and some aid recipients who provided feedback did not feel treated with respect. Similarly, in the Ground Truth data, high scores for respect were not accompanied by high scores for being able to voice opinions. This indicates that other factors beyond feedback and consultation mechanisms can come into play in shaping whether aid recipients feel respected, and how they assess the quality of aid. More research and evidence is needed on what these factors might be, and how aid agencies can move beyond feedback mechanisms to improve their relationships with aid recipients.

Figure 22 / Biggest challenges to receiving humanitarian aid – SOHS 2018 aid recipient survey



Notes: Responses to the question: 'What is the biggest challenge to people receiving aid in your area? 1)Insecurity and violence 2)Corruption 3)Not enough aid 4) Difficulty with access 5)Other 6) Don't Know'. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole percent.

Figure 23 / Affected people's relative views of different aspects of humanitarian assistance – Ground Truth Solutions



Source: Ground Truth Solutions (GTS)

Notes: GTS perception surveys with affected people in Lebanon, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Haiti and Uganda provide information about affected people's views on different aspects of the humanitarian assistance and how it affects their lives. The chart above shows to what extent each of the listed performance dimensions deviate from the global mean scores. In other words, it captures to what extent specific aspects of the humanitarian response are rated relative to each other. Positive scores suggests that those aspects of humanitarian assistance work relatively well compared to average scores, whereas negative scores suggest a need for improvements.

INSIGHT 6: Aid recipients identified a number of problems with humanitarian aid, including corruption, access constraints, unmet needs and poor targeting



Aid recipients felt that support does not always reach the most vulnerable and can exclude children and youth, women, elderly people, poor people and people with disabilities.

Finally, while aid recipients are broadly satisfied with the basic aid they receive, they also identified a number of problems and areas for improvement. A majority of survey participants chose corruption as the most significant obstacle to aid delivery, followed by the limited amount of aid available, insecurity and problems with accessing aid. A review of aid recipients' answers to open-ended questions, carried out by Ground Truth Solutions for ALNAP, found that the most common concerns raised by aid recipients over 2015–17 across seven countries were information provision, unmet needs and targeting. Unmet needs cited by aid recipients ranged widely across different countries, from food and cash to housing and employment opportunities. With respect to targeting, aid recipients felt that support does not always reach the most vulnerable: when asked which groups are excluded from assistance, respondents mentioned children and youth, women, elderly people, poor people, people with disabilities, the ill and people without information about assistance. • ALICE OBRECHT, ALNAP



European Union 2018

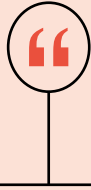
Bangladesh: What future for the Rohingya?



Nearly 700,000 Rohingya people have fled to Bangladesh since August 2017, escaping human rights violations, discrimination and violence in Rakhine State in Myanmar. Villages have been razed, parents and relatives killed in front of traumatised children and women and girls raped and abused. These latest arrivals have joined hundreds of thousands of Rohingya from previous refugee inflows dating back to the 1970s. With a population of more than 800,000, the Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar is the largest in the world. Altogether, UNHCR believes that a million Rohingya are living outside Myanmar. Those still in Myanmar are effectively

denied citizenship, and their movements and access to land, education and public services are restricted.

The Bangladesh Government responded to the latest influx by opening its border with Myanmar, allocating land for shelter and providing assistance. However, it does not consider the Rohingya to be refugees, rejects the possibility of local integration and wishes to see their swift return to Myanmar. Several repatriation plans are being discussed, but the conditions for a safe return of the Rohingya to Myanmar are still not in place. UNHCR and most other UN agencies have not been able to access Northern Rakhine since the crisis began in 2017. Despite the government's ambition to see a quick



Neither the international community nor the Bangladesh Government seems to have a plan to address these people's longer-term needs.

resolution, refugees themselves strongly oppose return until conditions are safe and there has been accountability for abuses suffered at the hands of the Myanmar authorities and army. However, neither the international community nor the Bangladesh Government seems to have a plan to address these people's longer-term needs.

Another massive yet disorganised humanitarian response

A number of people interviewed as part of the case study told us that the early response did not meet basic standards of quality, as the government and local and international agencies struggled to cope with the very large numbers of people entering the country. While quality has subsequently improved, the location of the refugee camps still poses massive challenges. Camps are in low-lying areas at high risk of flooding and landslides. At the time of the study, there appeared to be little in the way of preparedness activities for the forthcoming rainy season, and refugees were extremely anxious about the effects of torrential rain.

Major gaps remain

During the initial months of the response priority was given to life-saving assistance, food security, shelter and WASH over mental health support. However, depression, anxiety and other mental health issues are common, and there is a clear need for consistent mental health and psychosocial support to help the refugees cope with their experiences and begin to heal.

Protection is another challenge. There are questions about safety in the camp, particularly for women and girls, with frequent reports of abuse and exploitation, including within the Rohingya community itself. Victims of gender-based violence may well be dealing with pregnancy and childbirth.

Refugees are not being heard

The Rohingya response in Bangladesh is also failing to meet mandated accountability standards. Refugees are not systematically involved in needs assessments or programming activities, and there is talk of aid agencies being disrespectful towards and excluding them from decision-making.

Language barriers make communication difficult, as neither Bangladeshi nor international staff generally speak Rohingya. Literacy levels are low among the Rohingya, so complaints boxes are not very effective, but as the government does not allow refugees to have Bangladeshi SIM cards or mobile phones other standard approaches to accountability, such as agency hotlines, are also largely redundant. Cultural norms restrict women's involvement in many areas of life, and make it hard for them to raise complaints. There have been accusations that some of majhis (traditional leaders), who should represent the community, have withheld beneficiary cards and demanded money from refugees.

No short-term fixes

With return to Myanmar – at least in the short term – looking unlikely, donors and aid actors are now advocating for longer-term approaches in the refugee camps and with host communities. The future of Rohingya refugees depends on investment in the Cox's Bazar district and Bangladesh as a whole. To achieve a sustainable solution, a major shift in policy will be required, easing pressure on Bangladesh, enhancing refugee self-reliance, expanding access to third-country solutions and supporting conditions in the country of origin to allow a safe and dignified return. • CHARLOTTE HEWARD, GROUPE URD

This write-up is based on a case study conducted for the SOHS 2018 by Groupe URD. The full case study can be found at: sohs.alnap.org



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Factors affecting accountability

Design of accountability systems: completeness

In order to work effectively, formal complaints mechanisms require elements to collect, assess and potentially verify complaints; store them in a confidential manner; input them into decision-making; identify redress; and respond to the complainant (Bonino and Jean, n.d.). Currently, many mechanisms appear to focus on the collection of complaints, and put less focus on other elements: as a result, many existing systems are not particularly effective. In one – not untypical – example, ‘the few complaints/suggestions registered are marked “management look into it” – but it became apparent that there is no internal reference system by which “management” is to be approached, and even less taking action’ (Leber, 2015: 20; see also Advisem Services Inc., 2016; Duncalf et al., 2016; House, 2016; Kenya Red Cross, 2017; Oxford Policy Management, 2015; Turnbull, 2016a). This constraint may reflect a structural challenge in humanitarian agencies: accountability systems are often the province of monitoring and evaluation sections in organisations, and are not ‘owned’ by the organisations’ leaders in country (CHS, forthcoming).

Design of accountability systems: cultural appropriateness

A number of evaluations and interviewees suggested that the systems humanitarian organisations put in place were not appropriate for the societies in which they were working. At its simplest, this could be a reliance on using written complaints in societies with low levels of literacy (Adams et al., 2015; Schofield, 2016). Both evaluations and interviewees suggested that, in many contexts, the best way to encourage people to make legitimate complaints was to spend time with them: ‘Really, the best thing is to be present. Complaint boxes don’t really work’ (see also More, 2016; Wihaidi and Wehaidy, 2016).

Establishing a cultural ‘fit’ is about more than literacy. Just as some cultures may have differing ideas of participation, so the idea of making direct complaints about powerful people or organisations can run against cultural norms (Leber, 2015). It can also be dangerous: one UN interviewee said that ‘refugees in Jordan and Lebanon are in a very precarious legal situation and so their willingness to talk might not be what it might be’. Interviewees suggested that, if complaints mechanisms are to be effective, they must be established on the basis of an understanding of how accountability works within the particular society where the humanitarian operation is taking place. This would involve a variety of designs and formats, tailored to local conditions.



Currently, many mechanisms appear to focus on the collection of complaints, and put less focus on other elements: as a result, many existing systems are not particularly effective.

Design of accountability systems: integration

The accountability mechanisms discussed in the evaluations and by interviewees in case studies overwhelmingly aimed to address the relationship between the humanitarian agency and individuals receiving support from the agency. They were not embedded in existing mechanisms in a society for holding power to account, and ignored the role of the state and other customary structures in addressing grievances. However, a number of aid recipients suggested that people would take a complaint to the local authorities or traditional leaders rather than directly to the agency itself. Moreover, they might be concerned about going to the agency because this might be seen to question the judgements of community leaders and local hierarchies. This suggests that, in many situations, humanitarian accountability mechanisms might be more effective if they built on existing mechanisms within the community (including legal and government systems) rather than establishing new and separate ones.

Resources

Given the complexity of these issues, it is not surprising that effective accountability requires resourcing: funds need to be available, and staff have to know how to establish and maintain accountability systems. Over the period, it seems that more funding became available for AAP (for example, for common platforms in Nepal, Yemen and CAR). However, limited resources were identified as a constraint in Yemen, Haiti and Greece. As one INGO manager explained: ‘some donors want to give us project money for this which is great but it gets more difficult when this is just an additional requirement which has to come out at the expense of something else’. A lack of resources was also identified as a problem in some evaluations (Adams et al., 2015; Schofield, 2016).

Coordination

While an increased focus on accountability is to be applauded, the fact that so many agencies are establishing mechanisms in the same places can lead to overlap and confusion: ‘if you were a community member, you really had to understand how the heck we were structured to even begin to know how to then feed in [your] respective complaint’. A number of countries have begun to address this issue by creating common feedback and complaint mechanisms, but there is still room for improvement. All the P2P reports reviewed for this research mentioned that common accountability systems were lacking, often adding that there was no mechanism to feed information from multiple agency mechanisms into the decision-making of HCTs. At the time of the P2P missions active steps were being taken to develop common mechanisms in CAR and Iraq, and the system in Iraq is now fully functioning.

Incentives

The importance of issues of power to participation and accountability has been noted above. However, with respect to accountability the problem may go beyond a lack of incentives to change to encompass powerful incentives not to change. One factor that may affect the degree to which agencies are prepared to invest in accountability mechanisms (mentioned, admittedly, by only a small number of interviewees) is the response of donors and the general public when the mechanisms start to work. Any effective mechanism should identify problems for which the agency, and individuals, should be held accountable. This can raise difficult questions. One interviewee with long experience in the UN explained: ‘they [humanitarian agencies] are absolutely not ready to get scrutinised from a public eye. They are absolutely not ready for this for one reason and one reason only, negative competition. That they will not be able to withstand public scrutiny that is linked to financial allocation process. Any negative remarks or any negative findings could jeopardise the next funding and so from a humanitarian system perspective, this is something that should be addressed’.

Endnotes for this criterion

1. The ALNAP survey is with mobile phone owners, which might skew the results towards those more capable of engaging with aid agencies. Nevertheless, this would not explain the improvement between this and previous surveys.
2. The question was: were you consulted by the aid group on what you needed prior to distribution?
3. The question was: were you able to give your opinion on the programme, make complaints and suggest changes?
4. Those who were consulted were 3.77 times more likely to give a yes response to the quality of aid question compared to those who said no to consultation. They were 3.05 times more likely to give a yes response to the relevance of aid question. Those who were able to give feedback were 2.12 times more likely to give a yes response to the quality of aid question than those who were not. They were 1.83 times more likely to give a yes response to the relevance of aid question.
5. Including a consultation in preparation for the World Humanitarian Summit: https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/resources/2017/Jul/COMMUNITY_CONSULTATIONS_ON_HUMANITARIAN_AID_-_OVERALL_FINDINGS.pdf.
6. See more at: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/docs/Grand-Bargain-briefing-note-June-2018.pdf>.
7. The aid recipient survey data collected for the State of the Humanitarian System Report is taken from a sample of humanitarian crises for each iteration of the report. Due to year-on-year variations in the geographical location of crises, different countries were sampled for 2012, 2015, and 2017. The 2012 survey covered Pakistan, Haiti, DRC and Uganda; 2015 covered Pakistan, DRC and the Philippines; 2017 covered DRC, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kenya and Ethiopia.

