

Presentation outline & key points

“Show me the money”: Generating evidence from and for accountability in Humanitarian work

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The interest in better evidence use amongst humanitarian organisations bears many similarities to the accountability agenda that has been on the rise within the sector for over a decade. Both are issues which humanitarian organisations, INGOs in particular, have engaged with as a way to enhance their legitimacy and credibility as actors, on the basis that they make humanitarian organisations better at what they do, and help those organisations demonstrate this performance to external stakeholders. In this brief presentation, we will explore the relationship between accountability and evidence use, and argue that bringing these two closer together in humanitarian practice can help actors better engage with the uncertainties that often drive fundamental questions over the long-term legitimacy of humanitarian actors. However, we offer several caveats as to the approaches that must be taken in order to ensure these processes remain meaningful and capable of driving change in an organisation.

Key argument

In order to improve the quality of humanitarian work, not only do accountability and evidence use need to be brought closer together, but also these processes need to be structured in a way that encourages more future-oriented thinking and critical reflection on what legitimises humanitarian intervention over the long-term.

Part 1: The contribution of evidence to assuring accountability

Drawing on the One World Trust’s research, we discuss how INGOs evidence their accountability, and the strengths and challenges of different approaches. We will focus on collective INGO accountability initiatives, including the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership and the Disasters Emergency Committee’s accountability assessment process, and discuss the different mechanisms of evidence collection and evaluation that these initiatives employ in order to reach conclusions about their members’ accountability performance.

These mechanisms have different strengths and challenges, in terms of the demands that they place upon their members, and the levels of assurance that each initiative is able to reach that the evidence submitted is accurate and representative.

Part 2: Putting it to use: accountability mechanisms as evidence generators

Accountability mechanisms necessarily generate vast amounts of information about the relationships an organisation has with its stakeholders. If collated, and assessed appropriately, this information can be a valuable source of evidence to an organisation that can be combined with other evidence bases to inform its programme design, effectiveness of its work, and areas for improvement. We will discuss how several Humanitarian agencies gather and integrate evidence acquired through accountability practices for purposes of organisational learning, discussing the ways in which evidence from accountability mechanisms can best be drawn up through the organisation.

Part 3: Limitations of accountability and evidence practice in Humanitarianism

Accountability and evidence use are practices that are intended to legitimise humanitarian INGOs by making them better at what they do. But it is possible that these practices can help raise the profile and perceived legitimacy of humanitarian organisations in the short term, without achieving real organisational improvements.

In particular, there are three main limitations facing accountability and evidence use practices that humanitarian INGOs and their collective initiatives should remain aware of, and attempt to address:

- 1) Processes of accountability and evidence use offer a lens through which an organisation can view and understand its performance. Their relationship to the processes by which an organisation actually manages and changes how it performs can sometimes be conflated and unclear, leading to unintentional barriers within an organisation's evidence use processes and a false sense of organisational achievement arising out of accountability processes
- 2) Accountability and evidence typically employ and reinforce backward-looking, short-term thinking, instead of future-oriented, longer-term analysis
- 3) Accountability and evidence use are susceptible to regimentation and tick-box implementation, which creates additional bureaucracy and undermines the spirit of both practices

In order to address the legitimacy question more deeply and more effectively, humanitarian INGOs must remain vigilant to retaining the innovative potential of accountability and evidence use practices rather than allowing them to be subsumed into the standard bureaucratic procedures of a large organisation.