

# WHO'S LISTENING?

Accountability to affected people  
in the Haiyan response

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# KEY FINDINGS

During the response to the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan, international humanitarian agencies invested more in “accountability to affected people” (AAP) than ever before. This had the dual aim of (a) helping agencies better understand social issues, so they could provide appropriate assistance, and (b) helping local people and organisations better understand agencies, so they could manage their own recovery.

This briefing paper summarises powerful research into what this investment achieved. While important advances were made, there are still some fundamental obstacles to overcome. International agencies set up many different communication mechanisms. Some worked well, such as responding to individuals’ concerns and a collective approach to summarising feedback. However, local people were reluctant to talk openly to agencies or criticise them. They felt obliged to be grateful. They were highly aware of agencies’ power to direct and withhold assistance, in ways that were mediated by community leaders. Agencies did not demonstrate an understanding of these constraints.

Overall, affected people described their relationship with agencies as distant - contrary to agencies’ beliefs. International agencies invested in technological approaches, while local communities preferred face-to-face contact. Consultations were regarded as one-way communication from agency staff to local people. International agencies did not generally make major changes as a result of feedback from affected communities. For instance, the practice of targeting assistance according to individual needs did not fit the cultural context and caused real social division. This issue was discussed; but agencies did not adapt their approach.

## SIX KEY LESSONS

- 1** The term “**accountability**” was difficult for people to translate, understand and use. Alternatives like “community engagement” may work better.
- 2** Agencies have to invest in **understanding the cultural and social context** so they can adapt the ways that they communicate and work with local people.
- 3** **Effective leadership** by influential staff on the ground, dedicated to AAP, was a key driver of good practice, supported by adequate resourcing and an enabling environment.
- 4** **Independent monitoring** should be undertaken of affected people’s experiences of humanitarian response.
- 5** Donors have a key role to play in **re-orienting the incentive systems** that shape programming, in order to encourage staff to listen and respond to affected people.
- 6** **Face-to-face interaction** has more to offer to improve mutual understanding and collaboration than technology-driven databases.

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## INTRODUCTION

International humanitarian agencies invested more effort and energy into being “accountable to affected people” (AAP) in responding to the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan response in the Philippines than ever before. This briefing paper summarises powerful research into how affected people experienced these accountability efforts, comparing their perspectives with the perspectives of the agencies themselves. It reveals that, while important advances have been made, there are still some fundamental obstacles to overcome. This paper summarises the organisational and systemic factors that enabled some agencies to make real progress in AAP and the factors that inhibited others. The overall aim is to inform current debates and initiatives to improve the ways in which humanitarian agencies engage with affected populations.

The research was carried out between November 2014 and February 2015 as part

of the Pamati Kita common services project<sup>1</sup>. It is based on qualitative methods. Affected communities were consulted in four sites across the Haiyan-affected area Tacloban City, Bantayan Island, and Roxas City/Estancia, Iloilo, through focus group interviews in 22 different villages, supplemented with individual in-depth interviews with feedback platform users. Interviews were carried out in Tacloban City with staff in four national and six international NGOs actively engaged in AAP activities, some of whom shared their feedback data. This was supplemented by an online survey. In order to put this case study in context, interviews were also carried out with a number of key individuals who have been at the centre of efforts to promote AAP over the years, as well as researchers and commentators on these efforts.

1. See Jacobs, A. (2015). Pamati Kita: “Let’s Listen Together.” HPN Humanitarian Exchange No. 63. January.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES’ EFFORTS TO BE ACCOUNTABLE

From the late 1980s there was growing unease with humanitarian agencies’ apparent lack of accountability. The Rwanda crisis in the mid-1990s threw this into sharp focus: the humanitarian response was put under the microscope and found wanting. This triggered a wave of initiatives to improve the accountability of humanitarian agencies, particularly to crisis-affected people, with the primary aim of improving the quality of humanitarian action. Some agencies also emphasised the rights-based implications of empowering affected people. Two decades later, evidence consistently shows that progress has remained limited. While there have been improvements in some specific areas, mostly focused on information and complaints mechanisms, the prevailing power dynamics within the humanitarian system have perpetuated the dominance of “upwards accountability” to donors and to organisations, squeezing out “downwards accountability” to affected people.

## “IF WE CAN’T BE MORE ACCOUNTABLE TO AFFECTED PEOPLE IN THE HAIYAN RESPONSE, THEN WHEN CAN WE BE?”<sup>2</sup>

The well-funded response to the humanitarian crisis triggered by Typhoon Haiyan was widely regarded as a conducive context for agencies to demonstrate their accountability credentials. As a middle-income country with one of the fastest-growing economies in Asia, the Philippines has a well-defined legal structure, a highly literate population and reasonable infrastructure. While this is important and distinguishes the Haiyan crisis from many other humanitarian crises, especially conflict-related crises, our research shows that the wider cultural context is just as important in determining what is possible, and this did not fit well with the formalised approach to AAP that many international humanitarian agencies adopted.

First, the key moral principle underpinning social relations in Filipino culture is *utang na loob*, or debt of gratitude, especially to those who provide help beyond normal expectations, which is how international humanitarian agencies were

2. Quote from an experienced humanitarian aid worker

perceived. This creates an immediate barrier for local people to express criticism. Second, it is compounded by the prevailing patron-client culture in Filipino politics, extended to the international humanitarian response. Recipients regarded humanitarian agencies as patrons in a highly unequal power relationship. Third, and common to other humanitarian crises, there was an underlying fear that support might be withdrawn if communities complained to, or about its providers.

International humanitarian agencies showed limited awareness of these cultural and social constraints that inhibited an open critique from the affected population. Agencies tended to assume that “the aid transaction” was between themselves as service providers and individual vulnerable households, analogous to the commercial relationship between a service provider and an assertive consumer, and paid less attention to the wider societal context.

## ALL ABOUT INDIVIDUAL CONCERNS AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS...

Many international humanitarian agencies set up a suite of feedback mechanisms for local people to communicate their concerns. This was where most of their AAP efforts were concentrated. Feedback channels ranged from visits by agency staff and community consultations, to suggestions and complaints boxes, help desks, and hotlines. Agencies – especially the larger international NGOs – tended to favour more formal and technological approaches to AAP, for example SMS hotlines which automatically registered on their computerised databases, thus facilitating follow-up and individual redress. WVI had one of the most thorough systems for receiving and recording feedback. Their database recorded over 4000 items of individual feedback between March 2014 and February 2015, and monitored action taken against that feedback.

But the overwhelming message from local communities is their preference for face-to-face communication, because of the human interaction and the opportunity for dialogue. They were skeptical of using SMS hotlines, not knowing who was at the end of the line. While some agencies made an effort to promote face-to-face communication, for example through help desks and community consultations, they struggled to capture the issues discussed in many of those conversations in their databases, especially from day-to-day conversations between affected people and agency staff. Thus the richness of these interactions and the trends they revealed over time were at least



Group photo of the participants during Plan International's AAP CwC Accountability Project in Tacloban. © Plan International / Joey Reyna

partially lost. Local people reported that many of the community consultations were dominated by one-way communication from the agencies who were keen to communicate the details of their programming; there was less time for listening to members of the community. It would appear that consultation fatigue at local level stems more from the quality of the consultations than their overall quantity.

## ... OR ABOUT LISTENING AND RELATIONSHIPS?

Overall, affected communities described their relationship with international humanitarian agencies as quite distant, characterised by a sense of ambivalence. From the perspective of local people, international agencies were less accessible to them than the agencies believed themselves to be.

How agencies engaged at the *barangay*<sup>3</sup> level was a key determinant of the nature of the relationship between agencies and local communities and the extent to which agencies received honest and insightful feedback and could therefore be accountable. For example, where agencies had a weak relationship with the community, the influence of *barangay* officials as “gatekeepers” was strongest; this hindered feedback where local officials discouraged residents from raising concerns, partly to “maintain face” to the outsiders. Where agencies had a strong relationship with the community, local people were more likely to tell them their concerns, and to use their SMS hotlines.

3. *Barangay*, or ‘village’, is the smallest government administrative unit in the Philippines.

The communities that expressed the most positive experiences of the humanitarian response were *barangays* where an international NGO was physically present over an extended time (i.e. immersed or embedded), and therefore had developed a much deeper relationship. Local people described this as being “adopted” by the NGO, and felt that this contributed to the “outsiders” understanding them better. Concerns could be raised face-to-face as relationships developed between agency staff and local residents. People welcomed agencies taking charge of beneficiary selection lists and relief distribution rather than relying on local government officials who were often associated with favouritism and lack of transparency. In the best practice examples, this did not mean agencies bypassing *barangay* officials, which could create a further source of tension, but rather working with them but with a degree of independence. Most of the examples encountered in our research of NGOs embedded in local communities had happened during the humanitarian response; in only one case was there a development relationship that pre-dated the humanitarian response.

Local people described their more positive experiences of relating to humanitarian agencies using the language of friendship and family. This is in marked contrast with the western, service-delivery, and consumer-oriented language of feedback and complaints mechanisms that many international humanitarian agencies use to describe their relationship with local communities. The language of love, compassion, and care of the Taiwanese Tzu Chi Foundation, the most popular humanitarian agency amongst residents in Tacloban City, appeared to resonate more strongly with the Filipino culture than the language of accountability, which in turn is not easily translated into local languages.

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**“WE CAN ALWAYS TEXT, BUT THE PROBLEM IS, WE DON’T KNOW WHO IS ON THE OTHER LINE. I’M NOT SURE WHETHER THEY REALLY READ IT OR IF THEY EVEN TAKE IT SERIOUSLY.”**

– Low-income female, mid 40s, Tacloban

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## WHAT DIFFERENCE DID “ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE” MAKE?

Our research revealed a number of examples of feedback triggering adjustments in existing programmes. For example an Oxfam programme to support fishing households switched from providing cash grants to providing vouchers to ensure that nets were purchased that complied with legal requirements, instead of illegal nets with fine holes that encouraged unsustainable fishing. Most agencies’ feedback mechanisms were targeted at beneficiaries or potential beneficiaries of existing programmes, rather than other communities or community members.

There were very few examples of agencies making substantial changes to programming on the basis of feedback from local people. The major concern of affected communities was beneficiary selection, the way in which agencies selected some individuals and households to receive assistance, usually based on criteria of vulnerability and need, and excluded others. This accounted for almost 60% of the individual items of feedback recorded in WVI’s database. Communities reported deep unease with this conventional humanitarian practice of targeting according to need, enshrined in humanitarian principles. It struck deep into the heart of Filipino culture where neighbours are regarded as extended family and people’s sense of dignity is defined by their status in the community. Selective targeting triggered social divisiveness and conflict within communities and a deep sense of shame amongst the excluded. Although agencies discussed these concerns early in the response, this did not inform practice and the debate petered out about whether to continue to exclude certain households, or to adapt to cultural norms and sensitivities. Agencies did not change their targeting practices apart from making minor adjustments to beneficiary lists; instead communities had to adapt to conventional agency practice. Our research revealed deep resentment and discord within communities as a result.

Overall, the scope of agencies’ AAP efforts was narrow, focused on communities selected for assistance, and especially targeted households. It was rarely designed to inform more strategic decision-making, such as changing the basic design or objectives of project activities, or to listen openly and engage with the wider community. Thus, people living in geographical areas excluded from humanitarian assistance did not know why they had been excluded

and their concerns went unheard. This was also the case for livelihood groups such as transport workers in Bantayan Island who were excluded from humanitarian assistance whilst neighbouring fishing workers were included.

## PROMOTING COLLECTIVE “ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE” EFFORTS

The collective efforts to promote AAP in the Haiyan response offer useful lessons. OCHA’s deployment of AAP and Communicating with Communities (CwC) Coordinators in the first weeks of the response played a valuable role in raising the profile of AAP and carrying out initial community consultations to inform the early phase of the response. Community Feedback Forms enabled collective analysis of feedback received by individual agencies, which had an influence at senior levels in the humanitarian system. AAP and CwC Technical Working Groups were established and continued to function long after the cluster system had ended, enabling agencies to share methods, lessons and findings. A common services project, Pamati Kita, was implemented by a consortium of Plan International, the International Organisation for Migration and WVI eight months into the response. Although some of these common services (for example a common hotline) proved challenging to set up, the experience established the potential value of such common services, the need for early donor funding, and the work that must be done in advance of a crisis so that common services can be set up in the early weeks of a response.

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**“FOREIGNERS HAVE NO  
OBLIGATION TO HELP US.  
THE GOVERNMENT YES,  
BUT FOREIGNERS NO. YET  
THEY ARE HERE AND HAVE  
STAYED HERE.”**

– Low-income female, late 30s, Bantayan

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Davina and her family lost the majority of their house during the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. © Plan International

## ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS ENABLING OR HINDERING “ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE” EFFORTS

It is widely acknowledged that WVI made more progress than most other agencies in mainstreaming AAP in its Haiyan response. According to WVI staff, this was due to a combination of leadership, resources (to fund AAP efforts and AAP staff) and capacity (having a dedicated AAP unit, separate from monitoring and evaluation). Establishing the mindset and culture of listening to communities and being accountable to them from the first days of the response was regarded as absolutely crucial, and was achieved through the early deployment of an experienced and assertive accountability officer. Continued championing of an AAP approach and activities by a series of AAP managers also played a key role. While some other agencies paid lip service to AAP, in reality they gave much greater attention to donor reporting and to securing new grants, evidence that upwards accountability continued to be prioritised.

## LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

The Haiyan experience is a rich source of learning.

It raises questions about the **terminology** of “accountability”, not easily translated beyond the English language and unhelpfully associated with compliance. “Community engagement” may be a more useful and intuitive term to capture the listening, dialogue and relationship-building that are essential to a more respectful, empathetic and responsive dynamic between humanitarian agencies and affected communities.

This research demonstrates the importance of **understanding the cultural context**, and taking that into account in how humanitarian agencies engage with local communities. Local people engage with agencies on their own, local terms which are not necessarily the ways that international agencies expect. This is a reminder that AAP approaches cannot be “blue-printed,” and must be adapted to each context.

The most successful practice among international agencies was built on **effective leadership** for AAP, at two levels. First, AAP was consistently championed as an organisational priority at a senior level within WVI. Second, dedicated and influential staff were deployed to focus on AAP from the earliest days of the response. This appears to have been the fundamental driver of good practice, backed up by adequate resources, tools and training, which other agencies should replicate. It is further reinforced by the key leadership role played at the cluster level by the AAP / CwC Coordinators and Working Groups.

The insights from this research into local people’s perspectives, provided by sociologists working independently of humanitarian agencies, lends weight to a recommendation

first made in 1996<sup>4</sup>, that **independent third party bodies** should be commissioned to listen to affected people and their experience of the humanitarian response, to assess and inform the wider response at a strategic level.

The findings of this case study also point to the need to **re-orient the incentive systems** driving humanitarian programming and especially programme managers. Working with the prevailing power dynamics, donor organisations have a key role to play here, as do organisations themselves, to incentivise programme staff to spend time with, listen to, and respond to affected people – rather than just completing pre-determined activities on time and in budget. For example, they could require agencies to feedback on the views of affected people, request budget lines for dedicated AAP staff positions, and build greater flexibility into contracts so that programmes can be re-planned based on feedback from affected people.

A number of good practice examples indicate how agencies can better engage with affected communities, for example prioritising **face-to-face and conversational interaction** between agency staff and affected people, initially through help desks at early relief distributions and expanded as staff can spend more time at community level. Where it is possible for agencies to immerse themselves in local communities, the advantages are clear in terms of understanding communities better and engaging with local people directly while still developing a working relationship with local government officials. The findings of this study suggest that these approaches have more to offer than technology-driven databases.

4. See Borton, J., Brusset, E., and Hallam, A. (1996). Humanitarian Aid and Effects. The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience. Study 3 of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda.



## **ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL**

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