



## WHS Effectiveness Theme Focal Issue **Paper 5: Accountability**

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**About this paper:** This paper has been produced as part of the work of the WHS Effectiveness Thematic Team in order to clarify key concepts, raise new considerations and identify challenges regarding humanitarian accountability. It draws on the discussions of the WHS Effectiveness Thematic Team as well as the 29<sup>th</sup> ALNAP Annual Meeting paper on engaging with affected people, written by Dayna Brown and Antonio Donini. This is intended to be used as the basis for early discussions around accountability and participation as the WHS process seeks to identify areas for reform on this issue. It does not reflect the views of the ALNAP membership and it is not a definitive statement on humanitarian accountability by the WHS Secretariat. All comments on this paper are welcome.

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## SUMMARY POINTS

- **Accountability and participation are different ways of addressing the inequalities that arise when an actor acquires and exercises power:**
  - **Accountability mechanisms address inequalities by creating structured relationships through which one actor is enabled to assess and approve of another actor's actions** through the provision of information and/or the opportunity to influence how that party acts through rewards or sanctions.
  - **Participation, in contrast, addresses these inequalities by seeking to remove them entirely**, bringing in the stakeholder to take decisions and act alongside the actor and thus re-distributing the power of decision-making.
- One of the main problems in the humanitarian sector today is that there are no consequences for operational agencies when they fail to meet the expectations of other actors (except for donors) and, hence, no 'real' accountability between aid agencies and many of their stakeholders.
- While accountability and participation share connections to quality standards and the humanitarian principles, they should be treated separately, as they specifically address the issues of power and choice.
- Under recommendation areas, points for **action include:**
  - Establish **clear criteria for applying participatory or accountability mechanisms** based on evidence of how these approaches work in different contexts;
  - **Engage national NGOs** as key leaders in reforming humanitarian accountability, soliciting their expertise to ensure that international accountability mechanisms do not compete with or overrun accountability mechanisms already present in the state-society relations in host countries;
  - Generate lessons on the **comparative advantages and disadvantages** of different approaches to accountability and participation, drawing on the lessons being collected by the IASC members;
  - Consider **new technologies and approaches from outside the humanitarian sector** in order to create more choice and voice for affected people and local actors in humanitarian action;
  - Identify new **rewards and sanction mechanisms**—both legal and financial—that support a humanitarian system that is accountable to affected people;
  - **Define collective responsibilities** and appropriate mechanisms for holding multiple actors to account for the impact of a response. This approach to multi-actor accountability should not rest on ideal actor types, but should instead focus on the information and influence available to different actors;
  - Address the constraints of the shorter time horizon of humanitarian action by either **lengthening this horizon**, or finding ways to use participation compatibly with the long term presence of development and DRR structures and professionals.
- Under recommendation areas, points for **further discussion and research include:**
  - Understand the different types of **context** in which humanitarian action occurs and the different roles of actors in these contexts
  - Identify **different levels of responsibility** of different humanitarian actors and the different accountability relationships these require.
  - Consider **new responsibilities** that humanitarian actors will need to meet in order to respond effectively to new types of crisis, in a rapidly changing world.

## 1. Introduction

The World Humanitarian Summit seeks to improve future humanitarian action by addressing a set of issues that are crucial to how humanitarian action is funded, coordinated, implemented and morally guided. Accountability has arisen as one of these key issues. This is unsurprising, as accountability has become a crucial component of modern humanitarian action, reflected in the increasing number of international humanitarian NGOs with accountability frameworks as well as the prioritisation of accountability to affected people by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. Yet, accountability remains an area of practice in which many in the sector feel there is a need for improvement.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Part 1: Accountability, Participation & The Problem They Address

### Accountability and Its Place in Good Humanitarian Action

In humanitarian action, accountability often tends to be defined quite broadly to include anything that qualifies as ‘good’ or ethical.<sup>2</sup> This is largely for historical reasons: in the aftermath of the humanitarian response to the Rwandan genocide in 1994, the international system grappled with how it could act more responsibly and ethically, by seeking to define what ‘good’ [humanitarian aid] looks like and how actors could better meet their responsibilities. Accountability, as embodied in the ‘accountability revolution’, became a catch-all phrase to describe the very broad and varied issues that the sector was engaging with to improve humanitarian action.

Reflecting this history, a common definition of humanitarian accountability is that it is “the means by which power is used responsibly.”<sup>3</sup> This phrase has been important for getting humanitarian actors to think more explicitly about themselves as power holders and about the ethical obligations arising from their power. However, this broad definition combines at least three distinct areas of concern:

- doing good humanitarian work;
- giving affected people influence over decision making; and
- giving others the opportunity to assess and, if appropriate, sanction your actions.

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, D. & Donini, A. (2014) *Rhetoric or Reality?: Engaging with Crisis-Affected Populations*. 29<sup>th</sup> ALNAP Meeting Paper, London: ALNAP.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell, J. (2003) ‘Accountability: The Three-lane Highway.’ *Humanitarian Exchange Network* Issue 24.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hapinternational.org/what-we-do/hap-standard.aspx>

This paper argues that the first area of concern—doing good humanitarian work—ought to be bracketed out as a separate issue from humanitarian accountability, for three reasons: 1) there is a conceptual difference between accountability and quality/effectiveness; 2) recognising that these are distinct helps us better explore and defend a relationship between the two; 3) Failure to distinguish between the two can result in broad approaches to accountability or participation that avoid addressing the most fundamental aspects of these practices: the redistribution of power.

First, there is a clear conceptual difference between accountability and the broader aim of doing good humanitarian work. For example, humanitarian agencies can ‘use their power responsibly’ by fulfilling certain fiduciary obligations, or by delivering an intervention that is timely, cost-efficient, and of good quality. While these are important *responsibilities*, they are not equivalent to *accountability* practices. Rather, accountability is itself a separate responsibility, one that implies some kind of relationship with another actor—there is someone *to whom* we are accountable, or someone *who will hold us* to account. So, conceptually there seems to be a difference between accountability and other aims or values such as effectiveness, quality and other performance related issues.

Recognising accountability and effectiveness as two separate types of humanitarian responsibility is useful for supporting a better understanding of how these responsibilities support one another. Many in the humanitarian sector believe that greater accountability supports greater effectiveness in humanitarian action (however effectiveness is defined<sup>4</sup>). While this assumption has not been fully proven, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), in partnership with Christian Aid and Save the Children, has led research into how accountability mechanisms can support greater effectiveness and this proves to be a fruitful area of further study and evaluation.<sup>5</sup> We will be unable to explore the relationship between accountability and effectiveness unless we define and understand these as distinct from one another.

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<sup>4</sup> The World Humanitarian Summit has thus far refrained from providing a definition of effectiveness, primarily because there are many competing views on what this concept should mean. To support a more cross-cultural approach to humanitarian effectiveness, Save the Children UK and the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (University of Manchester) are currently conducting a year-long study on how humanitarian stakeholders define effectiveness across different geographical locations. See more here: <http://www.hcri.manchester.ac.uk/collaborations/our-partners/save-partnership/> For ALNAP’s *State of the Humanitarian System Report*, humanitarian performance is defined in terms of the OECD-DAC criteria that have been adapted for use in humanitarian evaluations. See: Beck, Tony (2006). *Evaluating humanitarian action using the OECD-DAC criteria: An ALNAP guide for humanitarian agencies*. London: ALNAP.

<sup>5</sup> Featherstone, Andy (2013). *Improving Impact: Do Accountability Mechanisms Deliver Results?* Geneva: Christian Aid, Save the Children & HAP. See also: Hoffmann, K.D. (2014). *The Role of Social Accountability in Improving Health Outcomes: Overview and Analysis of Selected International NGO Experiences to Advance the Field*. Washington, DC: CORE Group.

Finally, separating effectiveness and programme quality from accountability is crucial for the purposes of reform. Many evaluations and pieces of research have supported the finding that, while rhetoric for accountability and for shifting power to affected people is strong in the sector, in practice, actors outside the traditional power structures of the humanitarian system have little real influence over humanitarian financing and programming.<sup>6</sup> Sanction mechanisms—mechanisms which deliver negative consequences for an actor based on bad performance—are typically oriented around donors rather than affected people. While there are many reasons for this, one contributing factor may be the tendency to group accountability together with performance quality and effectiveness standards, making it appear as though it is an obligation for which aid agencies can hold themselves responsible.

A common example of how the ambiguity around accountability and effectiveness leads to weaker accountability mechanisms can be seen in the claim that the humanitarian sector needs to be more accountable, and that part of how it will do so is to become more effective in achieving its outcomes, or better uphold the humanitarian principles. Statements like these are problematic, as effectiveness will not necessarily bring about greater accountability, nor will greater neutrality and independence. **Accountability is not primarily about fulfilling one's responsibilities: it is primarily concerned with adjusting power and information imbalances in relationships. By definition, accountability cannot be achieved by a single actor on its own**—it requires other actors to whom accountability mechanisms are oriented. We will be unable to think meaningfully about how to adjust power and information imbalances if we continue to be distracted by programmatic effectiveness and other issues which, while important, are separate to the accountability question.

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander, J., Darcy, J., and Kiani, M. (2013). *The 2013 Humanitarian Accountability Report (HAR)*. Geneva: HAP; Taylor, G., et al. (2012). *The 2012 State of the Humanitarian System Report (SOHS)*. London: ALNAP; Rhetoric or Reality 2014.

## Accountability and Participation

By bracketing broader performance issues from the discussion, this paper will focus on the remaining two elements:

- giving affected people influence over decision making; and
- giving others the opportunity to assess and, if appropriate, sanction actions.

These elements are reflected in many accountability frameworks and definitions in the sector, again including the HAP definition where using power responsibly means, “taking into account the views of, and being held accountable by, different stakeholders.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the IASC Commitments to Accountability to Affected People (AAP) include a commitment on participation: “Enable affected populations to play an active role in the decision-making processes that affect them through the establishment of clear guidelines and practice s to engage them appropriately and ensure that the most marginalised and affected are represented and have influence.”<sup>8</sup>

Acknowledging both of the above elements is crucial for addressing power imbalances within the humanitarian sector, and both HAP and the IASC AAP commitments provide remarkable leadership to the sector in embracing these. However, as mentioned above, while there has been much discussion and interest around furthering these practices in the sector, actual practice in engaging with affected people continues to lag behind, as noted in recent large-scale reviews of humanitarian action.<sup>9</sup> There are two well-noted challenges in particular:

- an over-reliance on ‘voluntary’ or self-imposed approaches to accountability, which fail to provide meaningful opportunities for affected people to reward or punish implementing agencies for how they meet their responsibilities;<sup>10</sup>
- the continuing practical and political constraints for using active participatory approaches in humanitarian assistance.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.hapinternational.org/resources/practical-tools/participation.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-subsidi-common-default&sb=89>

<sup>9</sup> HAR 2013; SOHS 2012; Rhetoric or Reality 2014.

<sup>10</sup> HAR 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Rhetoric or Reality 2014.



To better address these challenges, this paper therefore suggests a separation between participation (“taking into account the views of”) and accountability (“being held accountable by”), as they each fulfil separate functions and therefore also face separate challenges at the global and field level. While in principle accountability and participation can be clearly distinguished, at the field level, participatory approaches often intermingle with accountability mechanisms, making them appear more similar. Treating them separately will enable the sector to more clearly identify concrete solutions for addressing the problem that accountability and participation are intended to address.

### Defining Accountability and Participation

Are you taking decisions on how a project will be run, how budget will be allocated, or what strategic objectives are set?

**If yes** → Participation

**If no** → Can you easily access information on what decisions were taken, why, and what the effects were? If unhappy with these decisions, did you have a clear way of creating consequences for the organisation, through loss of income, access, or any other tangible aspects affecting the organisation’s ability to act?

**If yes** → Accountability mechanism is present

**If no** → There is little, if any, means for influencing the decisions taken by an organisation or in the actions and effects coming out of those decisions.

#### **How to tell the difference between participation and accountability:**

The question then remains: what is this problem, and what distinguishes participatory approaches from accountability mechanisms?

#### **Accountability and participation are different ways of addressing the inequalities that arise when an actor acquires and exercises power.**

Accountability mechanisms address inequalities by creating structured relationships through which one actor is enabled to assess and approve of another actor’s actions through the provision of information and/or the opportunity to influence how that party acts through rewards or sanctions. This definition therefore maximises the transferability of lessons about accountability practice from other sectors, including the private sector and public sector:

**Accountability is a structured relationship in which one party fulfils its obligation to enable the assessment and approval of its actions or decisions by another party.**

This definition reflects the cross-sectoral view that *accountability implies there are consequences for an organisation if it fails to meet its responsibilities*. The problem in the humanitarian sector today is that there are no consequences for failing to meet the expectations or preferences of other actors, and, hence, no ‘real’ accountability between aid agencies and many stakeholders.

In this sense, the kind of **transparency** that supports an accurate and effective **evaluation** of a humanitarian agency’s performance is an important ingredient for accountability, again reflected in the transparency and evaluation components of the IASC Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership framework, and several other humanitarian accountability frameworks.

Accountability mechanisms enable assessment and approval of an actor’s behaviour or performance by rectifying imbalances of information and influence (power to sanction).<sup>12</sup> Because these imbalances will be different across different pairings of actors, accountability mechanisms need to be designed differently for different stakeholders. For example, donors have limited information about how their funds are spent in the field, and therefore require accountability mechanisms that focus on the provision of information, via reporting, from implementing agencies to them. Affected people, in contrast, lack the power to sanction implementing agencies. Accountability mechanisms to affected people should therefore create checks and balances through which affected people can review and, if appropriate, sanction humanitarian agencies. Despite this need for checks and balances by affected people, accountability mechanisms between implementing agencies and affected people often focuses, like donor accountability mechanisms, around the provision of information. This failure to meaningfully address the lack of influence that affected people have over implementing agencies is a key accountability challenge recognised in the sector and discussed below in Part 3.

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<sup>12</sup> Accountability functions similarly in other sectors as well. For example, in the private sector, accountability mechanisms are used to address *information* asymmetries between corporations and their shareholders, so that shareholders are aware of, and can evaluate, how their financial investment is being managed by the company. A competitive market and the freedom to choose amongst products and services is an accountability mechanism that addresses the *influence* asymmetry that a private sector organisation has over consumers: the company’s ability to influence a consumer is kept in check by the consumer’s ability to choose a competing option if they are unhappy with the company’s product or service.

Beyond the agency-donor and agency-affected population relationships, there are many other asymmetries of information and influence in the space of humanitarian action that are currently unaddressed by accountability mechanisms. These include the asymmetry of influence and information between the state affected by crisis and the international humanitarian system, as well as between the military of a country, its affected people, and international humanitarian actors. These gaps point to the need for stronger multi-actor and collective frameworks of accountability, also discussed below in Part 3.

In short, the fundamental point about accountability is that whether an actor meets its responsibilities or not should not be a judgment left entirely to them, but should involve dialogue with, and evaluation by, another party to whom those responsibilities are owed.

Participation, in contrast, addresses these inequalities by seeking to remove them entirely, bringing in the stakeholder to take decisions and act alongside the actor and thus re-distributing the power of decision-making. Participation is even more difficult to define than accountability, as there are different views on the level of influence or control entailed by participation. At the very least, there are different 'levels' of participation in humanitarian action, ranging from two-way communication in which people's views are heard and responded to, to ensuring an active role of crisis-affected people in decision-making.<sup>13</sup>

Increasingly, many in the sector emphasise the importance of higher level, or 'meaningful' participation, in which affected people have a significant degree of control over decision-making in aid activities. For example, the IASC AAP commitment to participation uses this stronger approach, defining participation as the enabling of "affected populations to play an active role in the decision-making processes that affect them." However, it is also felt that weaker forms of participation may be more appropriate for difficult operating contexts, such as conflict settings. We can therefore understand participation broadly as follows:

**A party 'participates' in humanitarian action when they play an active role in the decisions for any of the following: the financing, strategic priority-setting, planning, implementation and/or evaluation of humanitarian assistance.**

Participation is therefore not a type or component of accountability, but a different solution to the same inequalities which accountability relationships are designed to address: participation solves information and influence asymmetries

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<sup>13</sup> Rhetoric or Reality 2014, pp.5-6. See also Arnstein's classic Ladder of Participation, reflecting different levels of participation: Arnstein, S. (1969). 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation.' *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35(4).

by seeking to remove them altogether, bringing in the stakeholder to take decisions and act alongside the power-holding actor. In a scenario with full participation, there is less need for accountability, as the stakeholder has been involved in decision-making and implementation throughout the process, rather than sitting outside the process and ‘peeking in’ through accountability mechanisms.

Participation provides stronger **control** to the interest-holding party and is thus better at reducing power imbalances; however, it can be inefficient, requiring strong time commitments. This is why so many democratic societies rely on representative decision-making rather than direct citizen participation in the creation of laws and the management of government budgets: participation means that citizens have less time for other activities that are central to living full and flourishing lives. Accountability can be much more **efficient**, however it makes trade-offs on control: while accountability practices create space for control through appraisal and approval, they do not provide the same intensive and extensive opportunities for choice and ownership that participation can deliver.

Distinguishing between the two can help us to more clearly and effectively diagnose the asymmetries in information and influence in humanitarian assistance that require greater opportunities for appraisal and approval (accountability), or greater opportunities for active involvement in decision-making and implementation (participation) on the other.

### Key Questions

Based on the above, we might identify six questions to be asked at an operational level in order to think about accountability and participation through the lens of making humanitarian work more ‘people-centred.’ Accepting that, in any given operational context, influence and information are going to be distributed differently, for any specific situation in which we might seek to make humanitarian action more people-centred, we can ask the following questions, as a concrete means of getting to more generic questions on who is accountable to whom and for what (or who should participate in what and how).

By asking this question at global or field level....	We can answer:
<p><b>1. Who is responsible for what, and to whom?</b> 1.1. Are there collective actions/objectives for which multiple agents are responsible?</p>	<p><b>Who should be accountable to whom, and for what?</b> <b>Who should participate in what?</b></p>
<p><b>2. Is there an asymmetry of information or influence?</b></p>	
<p><b>3. Do we believe this asymmetry needs to be addressed?</b></p>	<p><b>Why be accountable?</b> <b>Why use participatory approaches?</b></p>
<p><b>4. Is this asymmetry best addressed by a check and balance (accountability), or is it best addressed by redistributing the information or influence (participation)?</b> 4.1. Will the actor with greater information or influence be compliant in addressing this asymmetry? If not, which other party is in the best position to mitigate it? 4.2. What should be the adequate coordination platforms for addressing accountability and participation across multiple actors at global and field level?</p>	<p><b>Does this aspect of humanitarian action require an accountability mechanism, or a participatory process?</b></p>
<p><b>5. Specifically, how can accountability mechanisms be designed to enable the appraisal and approval of humanitarian actors' actions within the given operational and contextual constraints?</b></p>	<p><b>How should humanitarian actors be accountable?</b></p>
<p><b>6. Specifically, how can participatory approaches be designed to enable the meaningful undertaking of decisions by affected people within the given operational and contextual constraints?</b></p>	<p><b>How, and at what level, should different stakeholders participate in decision-making in humanitarian action?</b></p>
<p><b>7. Can we address inequalities while still delivering efficient and effective humanitarian assistance?</b></p>	<p><b>When is it justifiable to sacrifice accountability or participation for greater efficiency?</b></p>

There are several challenges—operational, conceptual and system-wide—that need to be addressed to move forward on accountability and participation. Part 2 provides an overview of these challenges, organised according to the above questions.

### 3. Part 2: Challenges to Accountability and Participation

#### Challenge area 1: Who is responsible for what, and to whom?

##### **Challenge 1.1: Focusing on the wrong level of responsibilities in accountability practice.**

There is a need to reconfigure current accountability approaches and frameworks which, some argue, have focused organisational attention and resources to the wrong level of issues and wrong types of responsibilities.<sup>14</sup> This critique points to the ‘project-isation’ of accountability, in which the sector’s accountability frameworks and mechanisms have largely focused on outputs and immediate outcomes at project level, e.g. ensuring efficiency and quality standards are being met and that affected people are engaged in nuts and bolts decisions at the project level. Many have called for the sector to improve accountability for the overall strategic priorities and principles of the humanitarian system. Any reform agenda will need to re-shift the focus of accountability practices from the micro level up to the areas of humanitarian practice where power imbalances are more entrenched and difficult to address.

##### **Challenge 1.2: Lack of communication across different actors around standards and expectations.**

While widespread agreement on the core objectives and responsibilities of humanitarian assistance may not be feasible, at the very least there can be improvements in the communication of developed standards, principles and approaches, particularly at field level. Current Q&A standards and mechanisms common to international actors are not communicated effectively to local authorities and national-level NGOs, leading to wide discrepancies in expectations around what good humanitarian action looks like.<sup>15</sup> Also, accountability practices undertaken by international agencies often focus on their own responsibilities, ignoring the responsibilities, and thus important accountability needs, between the crisis-affected state and its people. This is due both to competitive incentives that motivate international actors to remain the gatekeepers for quality standards, as well as inadequate knowledge and

<sup>14</sup> HAR 2013; Knox-Clarke, P. and J. Darcey (2013). *Insufficient Evidence?: The quality and use of evidence in humanitarian action*. 28<sup>th</sup> ALNAP Annual Meeting Paper, London: ALNAP.

<sup>15</sup> IFRC (2014). *Outcome Statement of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Global Disaster Response Dialogue*. Accessible at: <https://www.ifrc.org/docs/IDRL/DRD%20global%20conference%20-%20outcome%20document%20-%20final%205%20Nov%202014.pdf>

engagement on the part of local actors and international actors of appropriate platforms on either side for capacity building and sharing of practices.

**Challenge 1.3: Lack of effective mechanisms for collective and multi-actor accountability.**

While many individual agencies are making progress towards being held accountable, the challenge is to ensure that the entire humanitarian response is accountable, not just individual projects or agencies. The IASC commitments for instance provide a common basis for collective accountability but full implementation at the country level by humanitarian actors is still underway. Beyond the traditional humanitarian system, the need for platforms and greater collaboration around accountability is expected to rise, as the increasing number and severity of natural disasters and conflicts around the world are leading to the growing need for more and diverse actors to be active in humanitarian operations, including non ‘traditional’ actors such as military forces and private sector. These actors come to a response setting with different mandates and agendas, different accountability relationships, and different definitions of what success looks like. The range of actors poses a number of challenges, such as the impact on coordination and how the humanitarian principles apply to these different actors, that need to be addressed in order for the humanitarian response to be accountable to the people it aims to serve. Without a strong collective commitment and clear standards, accountability, and in particular accountability to affected people (AAP) efforts run the risk of being implemented unevenly across the humanitarian response, subject to fluctuations in available funding, capacity and prioritisation.

**Challenge area 2: is there an asymmetry of information or influence?**

**Challenge 2.1: Lack of understanding of current dynamics and relationships at field and international level.**

Within the international aid system, imbalances in information or influence are more patterned, stable, and well-known. However, when one looks at these dynamics at the field level, there is an immense amount of variability from one country context to another in terms of which actors have greater information or influence (and of what variety of influence—political, social, financial). The ‘one size fits all’ mentality and lack of contextual awareness by international actors in a crisis setting is a widely identified problem that the World Humanitarian Summit is specifically seeking to address. Specific to accountability and participation, an absence of understanding of the power dynamics and relationships at field and international level leaves us without a

roadmap for identifying who is formally or informally accountable to whom within a crisis-affected state prior to and during a disaster, as well as which information and influence asymmetries need to be addressed. The short-term nature of most humanitarian work prevents agencies from developing this roadmap; however, there is an increasing need and relevance for contextual understanding of power dynamics in protracted and recurring crises. This speaks again to the importance of exploring how the long-term presence, structures and knowledge of development and disaster risk reduction professionals can be leveraged to support greater context-sensitive accountability and participatory approaches in humanitarian action.

### **Challenge area 3: do we believe this asymmetry needs to be addressed?**

#### **Challenge 3.1: Disagreement over the value and purpose of accountability**

There are very different rationales supporting accountability practice in the sector, which can lead to disagreement over whether accountability is worth doing as a practice in and of itself, or whether it is only valuable in so far as it achieves certain ends such as greater effectiveness. There are also those, often ‘Dunantist’ organisations, which tend to remain sceptical of the value of accountability practices, be it instrumental or intrinsic. These actors argue that the focus on appraisal and approval processes obscures the deeper and more important challenge of simply ‘being present’ in an emergency and committing to ongoing and daily interactions with those one is trying to serve. Framed in terms of asymmetries, the Dunantist position would contend that information and influence asymmetries are best addressed, not through accountability or participation, but through a third solution: a continuous relationship backed by proximity and daily presence on the ground.

#### **Challenge 3.2: Disagreement over the value and purpose of participation**

As highlighted in the 2014 ALNAP Annual Meeting paper, *Rhetoric or Reality: Putting affected people at the centre of humanitarian action*, there is often even less agreement over whether, and to what extent, affected people should be supported to participate in humanitarian assistance. There are three key ways in which the value of participation is criticised in the humanitarian sector.

The “technical critique” holds that “in rapid-onset disasters, top-down approaches save the most lives, at least in the first few days or weeks, because they allow the unencumbered use of technology – everything from military-style emergency medicine to humanitarian drones – by the military, government, local authorities, media, businesses, and local and international aid



agencies. At that stage, time and technique are of the essence, and centrally managed approaches allow the best mobilisation of disparate response efforts. Moreover, certain humanitarian activities – for example, triage, emergency surgery, nutritional feeding of the malnourished and search and rescue – are guided by technical standards and neither lend themselves to participatory approaches nor require much consultation.”<sup>16</sup>

The practical critique questions whether it is even feasible to do meaningful participatory work, regardless of the costs, particularly when there is such enormous pressure to just 'get the job done.'

Finally, the political critique “argues that development and humanitarianism have different objectives and thus different approaches to politics, and that the participatory approaches derived from (and important to) development work are not necessarily appropriate for humanitarian action...while participation is political, humanitarianism is (in theory at least) apolitical: aid is given on the basis of need alone. Thus, ‘purist’ humanitarians would argue that activities with the goal of empowerment challenge fundamental humanitarian principles because they require an agency to take sides. This presents not only a theoretical challenge but also a practical one. Engaging with affected populations may wittingly or unwittingly involve outside aid providers in local power dynamics, controversies and divisions. An understanding of the context and local relationships is needed to ensure that agencies do not unintentionally strengthen the strong rather than the weak and amplify the role of brokers, translators and gatekeepers.”<sup>17</sup>

All three of these critiques reflect the view that practices used in development settings, such as participation, may not be appropriate to humanitarian work, presenting what some might contend is a deeper challenge for using participation in humanitarian work in contrast to less accountability. While they still feature strong adherents, these critiques are far from knock-down arguments against participation. For example, they tend to rest on the assumption that humanitarian response settings are fundamentally different from development settings, an assumption that can be questioned, given the large percentage of humanitarian funding that goes towards months - or years - long programming. At best, these critiques might be relevant to the first 72 hours of a response (though even that claim has been questioned by many).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Rhetoric or Reality 2014, p.59.

<sup>17</sup> Rhetoric or Reality 2014, p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> Many thanks to David Loquercio for raising this point.

**Challenge area 4: is this asymmetry best addressed by a check and balance (accountability), or is it best addressed by redistributing the information or influence (participation)?**

**Challenge 4.1: Lack of understanding of the comparative advantages of accountability mechanisms and participation and when each approach is more appropriate**

Beyond these broader ideological questions of whether or why accountability and participation are important practices for the humanitarian sector, we also lack a clear understanding of the comparative advantages of applying accountability mechanisms or participatory approaches. For example, if we wish to increase participatory practices in humanitarian action, what are the criteria we can use to identify where we want to increase these approaches? Shall we target relationships or activities where influence asymmetries are greatest? Or 'low-hanging fruit', where participation is most feasible given time constraints and other considerations?

When it comes to accountability, there are two questions: first, which unequal power relationships do we think accountability mechanisms should apply to? A second question, once the basis has been identified, is: do we need formal accountability mechanisms (i.e. contractual accountability) or will an informal system of rewards and punishments be more appropriate to ensure accountability in this relationship?

**Challenge 4.2: Dealing with non-compliant actors in accountability practice**

Finally, there is the question of how to handle non-ideal cases, in which actors who we feel should be accountable are failing to do so. The most common example of this is the case of a failed state in a conflict setting: if there is no will to be accountable to affected people, what does this imply for the accountabilities of international actors? Are there specific approaches that should be taken in the aim of supporting the potential future accountability between the state and its citizens? Or is this in the domain of peacebuilders and development workers? How does humanitarian accountability practice ensure it does not preclude or inhibit the work of those actors?

Non-compliance of international actors pose other difficulties, in particular the bodies of the UN, which enjoy immunity from prosecution in national legal systems and which possess only internal oversight mechanisms for malfeasance. Can a more public accountability mechanism be established for the UN, and what would the beneficiaries of that mechanism look like—would they be host countries, affected people, NGOs? What are the best ways to hold international NGOs accountable that do not rest on voluntary accountability schemes or on non-transparent donor accountability mechanisms?

**Challenge Area 5: Specifically, how can accountability mechanisms be designed to enable the appraisal and approval of humanitarian actors' actions within the given operational and contextual constraints?**

**Challenge 5.1: Lack of incentives to formalise mechanisms of accountability to affected people.**

A final and important challenge to improving accountability to affected people and affected states is the lack of donor and thus financial support for engaging in these practices. Accountability mechanisms remain focused on donors, with duplicative requirements that are time consuming to fulfil. This supply-led paradigm has been widely critiqued, including in the 2014 ALNAP Annual Meeting paper which noted:

‘The current structure of the humanitarian system (top-down and externally driven, with a focus on rapid action and short-term project and funding cycles) does not provide incentives for engaging with crisis-affected people. Participants discussed how the ‘corporatisation’ and consolidation happening among many of the larger international NGOs in particular is putting even more distance between decision-makers and crisis-affected communities. Mainstreaming meaningful and active (as opposed to rhetorical and passive) approaches to engagement requires a substantial change to the funding mechanisms, current ways of working and incentive structures in the humanitarian system.’<sup>19</sup>

**Challenge 5.2 Field-level challenges to accountability**

In addition to the field-level challenges mentioned above around costs of accountability and the communication of shared standards and expectations, there are also these further field-level challenges:

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<sup>19</sup> Rhetoric or Reality, p.56.

- **Access:** Lack of direct access prevents any relationship between agency and affected person; operating with partners means difficult to monitor whether accountability is being achieved;
- Information sharing often needs to be balanced against **security concerns or concerns for cultural sensitivity;**
- **Lack of trust** from agencies toward affected people on how information will be used to hold them to account

Some of these challenges may arise more in different contexts, specifically in situations of conflict. This is a link to the work on identifying specific needs in conflict and on solutions for remote management being undertaken as part of work on ‘Serving the needs of people in conflict’

**Challenge Area 6: Specifically, how can participatory approaches be designed to enable the meaningful undertaking of decisions by affected people within the given operational and contextual constraints?**

**Challenge 6.1: Lack of incentives to support opportunities for ‘deep’ participation.**

Because participation involves the actual sharing of influence through co-decision making, it poses significant risks to humanitarian agencies within the current funding system, in which agencies are held to account primarily for their outcomes, not for the extent to which these outcomes were achieved through participatory practices. To put it bluntly: affected people may have different priorities than donor governments, and currently it is the priorities of the latter that have financial backing, creating significant potential costs to agencies, in terms of lost funding, if they choose to cede greater control over programming to affected people. Incentivising deep participation in the sector will require nothing less than a paradigm shift in how humanitarian action is perceived:

‘Having a participation strategy should theoretically mean being participatory at every stage of the operation. But it is difficult to find humanitarian operations which are participatory at every stage, unless there is a real paradigm shift: It’s not the population that participates in the agency’s project but the agency which participates in the population’s project ... engaging with the population throughout the project cycle, especially at the design and monitoring phases,

can be like opening a ‘Pandora’s box’ and turning the humanitarian sector’s priorities upside down.’<sup>20</sup>

### **Challenge 6.2: Field-level challenges to participation**

In addition to the field-level challenges mentioned above around costs of participation and the feasibility of participation in urgent crises, there are also these further field-level challenges:

- **There remains an increasing cultural problem**, in outward attitudes by humanitarian workers convey a focus on the technocratic issues rather than human empathy, demonstrate an air of superiority and undermine any attempt to be more inclusive and participatory;
- **Lack of direct access** prevents any relationship between agency and affected person; operating with partners means difficult to monitor whether participation is being achieved;
- **Short term assignments** result in rapid turnover of staff that undermines the ability to build meaningful relationships and trust in participatory approaches over time.

As discussed below in Recommendation Area 3, in different contexts short term assignments, lack of access and cultural problems will pose different challenges, and require different strategies and tools.

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<sup>20</sup> Grunewald, F. and de Geoffroy, V. (2008) Policy paper: principle 7 of the good humanitarian donorship initiative. Plaisians: Groupe URD, pp8-9, as cited in Rhetoric or Reality 2014, p.57.

#### 4. Part 3: Recommendations for future accountability & participation in the humanitarian system

Given the above discussion, what does a solution for improving accountability or participation in the humanitarian system look like? In lieu of offering specific recommendations, this section outlines three main recommendation areas, with discussion points to consider at the Thematic Teams gathering in Lausanne, Switzerland, 19-21 November.<sup>21</sup>

##### Recommendation areas for both participation and accountability

#### 1. Approaches to accountability and participation will need to start from a clear understanding of the expectations, roles and responsibilities of different actors in humanitarian action.

Effective accountability and participation practices are role and context dependent. For example, some actors may be better placed to use participation due to their 'dual mandate' which enables them to use more political approaches aligned with development programming. Accountability is also role dependent, as it depends upon the relationships and power inequalities that exist in any given setting. In order to understand the roles, expectations and responsibilities of different actors in humanitarian action, we need to:

- 1) Understand the different types of context in which humanitarian action occurs and the different roles of actors in these contexts. For example, accountability relationships and mechanisms will function differently in different countries depending on: the capacity of the government; capacity of civil society, the state-society relations, and the relationship/balance of power between international NGOs and local or national ones, to name a few contextual elements.
- 2) Identify different levels of responsibility and the different accountability relationships these require. For example, at the strategic programme level, are responsibilities, and thus accountability, from implementing agencies owed to the government, rather than individuals? Is it possible or even desirable to have affected individuals or community orgs participating in macro-level decision-making, and, if this instead involves some sort of representative structure, does it make sense to do this outside/ replace the government representation structure where that exists?

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<sup>21</sup> Recommendation areas were slightly modified and updated after the Lausanne meeting to reflect the outcomes of discussion and key areas for further development.

3) Consider new responsibilities that humanitarian actors will need to meet in order to respond effectively to new types of crisis, in a rapidly changing world. For example, how can humanitarian actors be held accountable for the responsibilities of being more adaptive, more innovative, more anticipatory of new crises, and more strategic in their preparedness and response?

**2. We need clear criteria for applying participatory or accountability mechanisms based on evidence of how these approaches work in different contexts.**

**At the System level** this means thinking about accountability and participation under the broader umbrella of system governance<sup>22</sup>, asking: which areas of humanitarian action do we think need to be more participatory? And which areas do we think participation is not possible or not desirable, in which case we need accountability systems to address information and influence asymmetries?

**At the Organisational level** this means generating lessons on the comparative advantages and disadvantages between co-decision making processes and mechanisms for appraisal and approval.

**3. Consider new technologies and approaches from outside the humanitarian sector.**

What innovations and new approaches are being used to manage data, share information and provide checks and balances to stakeholders/consumers in other sectors? How might private sector models of accountability, based around choice, be imported to the humanitarian sector?

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<sup>22</sup> Connecting accountability to system governance was suggested by David Loquercio, HAP.

### Recommendations for Participation

4. **Humanitarians must address the constraints of the shorter time horizon of humanitarian action by either lengthening this horizon, or finding ways to use participation compatibly with the long-term presence of development and DRR structures and professionals.** For those actors that do find participatory approaches to be appropriate, there will be a need to change funding structures to support longer-term time horizons for their work in a country post-crisis, perhaps by adapting each funding horizon on the basis of an assessment of a crisis. This can be further supported through commitments by humanitarian agencies to explore stronger links with development and DRR professionals to 1) Understand context, 2) Link with local organisations more sustainably and 3) Assess program performance through feedback.

### Recommendations for Accountability

5. **We need to define collective responsibilities. This approach to multi-actor accountability should not rest on ideal actor types, but should instead focus on the information and influence available to different actors.**

Collective and multi-actor accountability is often described in terms of the types of actors that exist in humanitarian action. To move to a more concrete understanding of how multi-actor accountability could be designed, we should encourage a context-sensitive approach that looks first and foremost at the distribution of information and influence in a given humanitarian response, then seeks to rectify asymmetries with accountability mechanisms. In particular, we need to think about how each actor balances accountability to other actors, to allow optimum flow of information (and where required, adjustments) across the system.

The risk of considering multi-actor accountability in generic terms, e.g. crisis-affected state—local civil society, is that we view each actor type as a homogenous whole rather than understanding the discrepancies in information and influence that can exist within them. For example, ‘the crisis affected state’ is not a homogenous body but is itself a collection of different agencies and institutions that have varying competencies, influence and motivations. The aim should not be to overcomplicate the issue with taxonomies, but try to make multi-actor accountability flexible, through the use of tools that can be applied based on the kind of



asymmetry that exists and the kind of responsibility that is trying to be fulfilled.

**6. We need to identify new sanction mechanisms—both legal and financial—that support a humanitarian system that is accountable to affected people.**

Since finance is one of the key forms of influence that can shape behaviour and be used to ensure responsibilities are being met, the current reforms being explored for humanitarian financing should pay explicit attention to incentive structures and new ways of arranging sanction mechanisms for failure to deliver quality programming. Specifically, financial reforms could explore the collectivising of humanitarian financing and how to place greater control over the spending of humanitarian funds in the hands of affected states or affected people themselves, using approaches such as cash-based programming at a much larger scale, or democratic budgeting. Connected to this is the issue of donor accountability, in terms of making donor states more accountable for how they fund humanitarian action. It might be advantageous to pursue the issues of financial reform under the driver of financial accountability, with an emphasis on giving financial support to projects which have been developed in consultation with communities and clearly demonstrate effectiveness..