ON THE ROAD TO ISTANBUL

How can the World Humanitarian Summit make humanitarian response more effective?

HUMANITARIAN ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT

2015
Acronyms

3MDG - Three Millennium Development Goal Fund
AAP - Accountability to Affected Populations
AEI/CS - Accountability, Equity and Inclusion / Conflict Sensitivity
ALNAP - Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
BBB - Better Business Bureau
CAAP - Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations
CERF - Central Emergency Response Fund
CHS - Core Humanitarian Standard
CV - Constituent Voice methodology
CWC - Communication with Communities
DAC - Development Assistance Committee
DFID - Department for International Development
DOA - Description of Action
DRR - Disaster Risk Reduction
ECOSOC - Economic and Social Council
ECOWAS - Economic Community of West African States
EDG - Emergency Directors Group
FSC - Forest Stewardship Council
FSF - Fragile States Principles
GHD - Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative
GIS - Geographic Information Systems
GPS - Global Positioning System
HAP - Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International
HAR - Humanitarian Accountability Report
HC - Humanitarian Coordinator
HCT - Humanitarian Country Team
HLSU - Humanitarian Leadership Strengthening Unit
HNO - Humanitarian Needs Overview
HR - Human Resources
IAF - International Accreditation Forum
IAHE - Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation
IASC - Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IATI - International Aid Transparency Initiative
ICRC - International Committee of the Red Cross
ICT - Information and Communication Technology
IDP - Internally Displaced Person
IFRC - International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IHL - International Humanitarian Law
ILT - Instructor-Led Training
IMO - Information Management Officer
INGO - International Non-Governmental Organisation
IP - Implementing Partner
ISO - International Organization for Standardization
JSI - Joint Standards Initiative
LMMS - Last Mile Mobile Solutions
LRRD - Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development
MENA - Middle East and North Africa
MIRA - Multi-sector Initial Rapid Assessment
MSF - Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)
NGO - Non-Governmental Organisation
OCHA - United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA - Official Development Assistance
OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPR - Operational Peer Review
PIN - Personal Identification Number
PMR - Periodic Monitoring Report
PSEA - Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
PVO - Private Voluntary Organization
RCRC - The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement
SARC - Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SCHR - Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response
SDC - Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SEA - Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SOP - Standard Operating Procedure
SRP - Strategic Response Plan
UN - United Nations
UNGA - United Nations General Assembly
UNIDO - United Nations Industrial Development Organisation
UNOPS - United Nations Office for Project Services
USAID - United States Agency for International Development
WASH - Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP - World Food Programme
WHO - World Health Organization
WHS - World Humanitarian Summit
Ten years ago, I led an UNDAC team to the remote Bagh province of Kashmir, after the devastating earthquake in October 2005. At that time we had no cell phone reception, no social media, no hashtags. Our small team relied on basic maps and most importantly on local people, who knew the terrain and could navigate the rubble strewn streets by sheer instinct. Dialogue with affected people was a necessity to gain insight into their needs, security risks and build trust and acceptance.

Since then, the humanitarian landscape has changed almost beyond recognition. Today’s humanitarian crises affect more people and last longer compared to previous decades. In 2015, the United Nations is seeking to provide life-saving assistance and protection to 78.9 million people across 37 countries. This is nearly double the number of people targeted by UN-coordinated appeals just ten years ago. The average duration of a humanitarian appeal is now seven years. We face new challenges as the environment in which we operate becomes increasingly complex. More than eighty per cent of our work is now in countries and regions affected by conflicts, which globally have forced nearly 60 million people from their homes. These trends show no sign of reversing.

We are also presented with opportunities that ten years ago, in the mountains of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, we could not have imagined. Advances in technology and connectivity have empowered people in ways we would never have thought possible. Using tools such as social media, people affected by crisis are now able to voice their concerns, demand what they need, and connect with each other to organise and lead their own responses.

Against this ever-changing landscape, humanitarian action must evolve and adapt. The consultations leading up to next year’s World Humanitarian Summit have called for a fundamental shift in the way we work. We need to galvanise diverse partnerships to prepare for and respond to crises in the context of global shifts such as climate change and urbanisation, while at the same time adapting our operations to the highly localised realities and contexts in which crises occur.

We have consistently heard that we need to deliver assistance and protection in ways that not only meet people’s basic needs, but uphold their dignity, empower them to make their own choices, and are culturally sensitive and appropriate. This includes both meeting the needs and building on the strengths of those who are most affected in times of crises, including women, youth, older people, and people living with disabilities.

To truly put people at the centre of humanitarian action, we must work together to make some major changes that will help humanitarian actors at all levels – local, national, regional and international – become more innovative, effective and accountable to the people and communities we aim to serve. We all want to ensure the World Humanitarian Summit is worth the climb. To do that, we need ambitious but actionable ideas such as those found in this timely report. Initiatives such as the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS) and other perspectives and ideas offered in this report make a valuable contribution towards turning this vision into a reality.

The World Humanitarian Summit is neither the starting point nor the end of our endeavour to make this vision a reality. It is an opportunity for us to take stock of our strengths and our challenges, and to reaffirm our commitment to deliver on our existing agendas for reform and transformation. But it will only be a success if it mobilises us to look beyond our present ways of working and set an ambitious new agenda for a shared and truly global humanitarianism.

Dr. Jemilah Mahmood
Chief of the World Humanitarian Summit secretariat
Sebastian Cedillos, agricultural technician at FUNDES, a partner of ACT member LWR, inspects a farmer’s corn field during a time of drought in El Salvador. © ACT Alliance/Sean Hawkey
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Introduction

Humanitarian funding has significantly grown over the past 10 years, but so have humanitarian needs. While it is widely accepted that more resources are necessary, humanitarians also recognise that responses ought to be more effective. This requires both process improvement, and a more substantial rethink of how the humanitarian community identifies and responds to needs. We all can play a role in ensuring that those issues are addressed during the World Humanitarian Summit. To achieve this, we need ambitious new proposals as well as the courage to remove often bureaucratic obstacles that have undermined the implementation of past reforms. Taking a quality and accountability approach in this discussion requires humanitarian stakeholders to consider what effectiveness means to communities affected by crisis, not just to donors or humanitarian organisations. This section summarises some of the key areas the CHS Alliance believes to be essential to more effective, accountable humanitarian action and for which we are willing to develop, together with our members, more detailed, actionable proposals.

A consistent, verifiable approach to quality and accountability

As humanitarian response becomes increasingly coordinated and reform agendas mobilise multiple stakeholders, quality and effectiveness need to be unpacked and made actionable in a coherent framework promoting a common language and approach. The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability does just that. It addresses a large proportion of emerging WHS recommendations – not least because it was written with the people affected by crises in mind. Additionally, by incorporating the OECD-DAC criteria for evaluating humanitarian action as an integral part of the Standard, the nine commitments provide structured guidance for programming that delivers impact.

The CHS Alliance encourages humanitarian organisations, donors and governments to endorse the Core Humanitarian Standard and integrate its principles and nine commitments in their policies and handbooks. Should donors match their reporting requirements to the effectiveness drivers included in the CHS commitments, and systematically acknowledge through their funding that quality assurance processes incur costs in the same way that compliance mechanisms do, then such integration would be widespread.

We know only too well that people management at all levels is central to a humanitarian response. When an organisation doesn’t manage its people using the same quality and accountability standard that it expects them to use when interacting with affected communities, it will lose qualified staff, demotivate others, and face issues such as staff turnover and lack of continuity. This is why the CHS Alliance encourages organisations who commit to applying the CHS to also uphold its commitments with regards to their own staff.

Reporting processes that deliver value for money

Aid workers in country programmes often complain about the reporting burden, which they say keeps them in their offices and limits the time they have to engage with communities. The Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative committed to harmonising reporting in 2003, but progress is slow and has been limited. Reporting, evaluation and compliance requirements have continued to grow, though they have, for the most part, only demonstrated limited positive effects on risk management, quality or impact. Today, reporting is compliance rather than results oriented; if effectiveness is truly high on the agenda, this needs to change. The CHS Alliance believes that this could be addressed if donors were to analyse...
a sample of their reporting formats and harmonise those parts that overlap – while still satisfying the requirements of their respective parliaments and sensitising parliament members to the positive impact of harmonisation. Could donors also assess the cost and added value of their current compliance and reporting requirements (assessment, reporting audits and evaluations among others)? The results of such could be used to adapt reporting content and frequency, retaining only those elements that deliver proven value or information that is useful to decision makers, in particular those based at country programme level.

Step by step

Innovation has become one of those words organisations feel obliged to use when writing a proposal or a report. In reality, really innovative programmes are few and the best usually are about adopting the most recent technologies or strategies from other sectors for use in humanitarian programmes. Surprisingly, at the same time, process improvement approaches remain underused in the humanitarian sector, maybe because it lacks such a culture, or because humanitarian leadership has often resisted calls to increase the use of metrics, arguing they could be misused. If we want the sector to make progress however, we need to become better at pinpointing strengths and weaknesses, and work together with communities to identify the innovative approaches that can transform the way we work.

The Verification Framework of the CHS will allow humanitarian organisations to do this by offering a tool that helps assess the performance of the different elements of their quality assurance system, making it easier to identify and resource areas where the need is greatest.

Community-driven M&E

If putting communities affected by crisis at the centre of response is indeed one of the key messages emerging from the WHS consultations, then we should make it a priority to acknowledge them as a key stakeholder in the monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian performance. A good way to make this happen would be to use or adapt the performance indicators contained within the CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators to monitor the degree of satisfaction of crisis-affected people. The leadership of humanitarian organisations has a key role to play in ensuring these tasks become part of the responsibilities of all project and programme managers, are integrated into routine monitoring activities, and are supported with appropriate resources. In addition, humanitarian organisations also need to better inform crisis-affected communities about the service level and behaviours they can expect from their staff, and set up safe and responsive feedback mechanisms, particularly ones that can effectively deal with complaints that relate to sexual exploitation and abuse.

Making national and local NGOs equal partners

There is a strong discourse in favour of developing the capacity of national and local NGOs to play a bigger role in humanitarian response. International organisations, including INGOs, have invested significant resources in developing national and local capacity, while increasingly relying on this capacity to implement programmes. At the same time, when rapid-onset emergencies take place, international organisations often end up undermining their development by poaching their staff or standing in the way of direct access to funding. National and local organisations are, of course, not a uniform group, and represent a wide variety of capacities, organisational cultures and expertise. This is why the CHS Alliance believes it is so important that humanitarian organisations who work through partners take a long-term approach to planning, prioritising and assessing capacity development efforts.

Detailed self-assessments against the CHS offer an effective way to ensure capacity development efforts are directed to the right priorities while assessing the impact of these efforts. Current administrative requirements can be an obstacle for national and local NGOs to access funds. A sensitive way to ensure an increase in direct funding – whether bilateral or multilateral – would be to adapt the level of administrative requirements to the size of the grants, with a system allowing good performers to graduate towards larger grants.

Accountable together

Efforts to improve accountability to affected populations have started at the level of individual organisations. This has led to the critical mass that made this theme central to WHS discussions. Now might be the right moment to also progress on the inclusion of community-focused accountability measures within clusters and improve the transparency of the decision-making process within HCTs or clusters. At the CHS Alliance, we envision a humanitarian response where donors, organisations and all collective forums make the voice of the population their guiding principle by using jointly agreed, country-specific collective accountability and quality standards.

This report discusses the interaction between accountability and effectiveness from different perspectives, and provides suggestions on actions the sector can take to maintain and improve the relevance of its work. The CHS Alliance is committed to contributing to the WHS process by sharing its expertise and insight through collaborative research, the joint development of context-appropriate solutions and through the critical thinking and solid recommendations outlined by contributors to this report.

We wish to take this opportunity to thank all contributors and peer reviewers who have taken the time to share their insights and experience in this publication. We are confident that each chapter contains a wealth of actionable recommendations that can be used by the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, and by humanitarian actors across the globe. We hope you enjoy reading it.

Judith Greenwood
Executive Director, CHS Alliance

Robert Glasser
Chair, CHS Alliance Board
Accountability: everybody’s responsibility

As the curtain comes up on the World Humanitarian Summit process, it’s clear that accountability is going to be a hot topic in the months ahead. Everyone involved in humanitarian response has a stake in the issue and a part to play – none more so than the people affected by crises themselves. Dayna Brown gets the debate started.

Background and connection to the World Humanitarian Summit

Given the theme of ‘#reshaping aid’ for the first ever World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, there is more open discussion than ever about the need to listen and be more accountable to people affected by humanitarian crises. Those affected and those funding responses are increasingly demanding more accountability and greater effectiveness. People and organisations in affected communities want to be recognised for the effective roles they play in preventing and responding to crises, and to see a revolution in how outsiders engage with them. However, many in the international humanitarian system also want existing commitments to reform implemented, and are suggesting other ‘tweaks’ to make humanitarian action more effective. The WHS is thus attempting to bring all of the actors engaged
in humanitarian action – including, importantly, more people, government representatives, civil society organisations and businesses from crisis-affected countries – into the process to find a balance between these two aims and to chart a way forward.

Participants in the WHS consultations are openly discussing the objectives and limits of humanitarian action, the appropriate roles of different actors, power dynamics, financing, responsibilities and lines of accountability. Tackling these issues is important not only in terms of improving humanitarian action, but also of being accountable for its effectiveness. Accountability is critically linked to effectiveness for people affected by crises, local organisations engaged in responses and governments who have participated in the regional consultation processes. For instance, in the Middle East and North Africa WHS consultation, people were very concerned about the lack of accountability for violations of international law by both state and non-state actors which have contributed to the many lives lost, and emphasised that “humanitarian aid cannot continue to be a substitute for political action.”

Parallel to and in conjunction with the more political WHS process, accountability to affected populations (AAP) has been acknowledged as one of the unmet commitments in the implementation of the 2011 IASC Transformative Agenda. To date, much of the focus on improving accountability has been at the individual, organisational and project levels (for behaviours, inputs and outputs), rather than at the sectoral and collective levels (for outcomes and impacts), which matter most to people affected by crises. The discussions among those engaged in humanitarian operations are now focusing on the need for collective accountability to ensure that humanitarian needs and priorities are being met and that the dignity of people affected by crises is upheld.

Those on the frontline, as well as those who work on humanitarian policy, are wrestling with differing interpretations of the goals of humanitarian action; questions about how to measure the effectiveness of achieving these goals; who should be held accountable for reaching those goals; and how best to hold those responsible to account.

To help answer these questions and to introduce the rest of the report, it is important to look at what it means to be effective and accountable in principle, in practice, and in the short and long term. Only then can we explore ways to improve practice in the future and examine the potential role of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS).

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2/ See: http://interagencystandingcommittee.org/node/2803.
What does being effective and accountable mean?

In principle

Accountability and effectiveness mean different things to different people and are measured in different ways. Those who fund and provide humanitarian assistance often define and measure effectiveness and accountability based on different assumptions and expectations than those in communities affected by crises. Those responding are often focused on measuring what happened—what assistance people received, if it was appropriate, whether it was on time, etc.—while those in communities are equally concerned with how assistance was provided.

Definitions and expectations are shaped by the cultural and political contexts in which humanitarian action takes place, as well as by local, national and international power dynamics and funding streams. For instance, in the Spanish-speaking accountability-related thematic meetings for the WHS, it was noted that “the Spanish term normally used for accountability, ‘rendicion de cuentas,’ does not accurately reflect the English meaning of the word and focuses the attention on accounting rather than balancing power relations and engaging in meaningful dialogue.” In the Philippines, accountability was not easy to translate into local languages and the “western, service-delivery, and consumer-oriented language of feedback and complaints mechanisms that many international agencies use” to be accountable did not fit well with the cultural norm of owing a debt of gratitude to those who provide help.

HAP’s (now the CHS Alliance) conception of accountability touched on several drivers of effectiveness for crisis-affected communities: access to information; meaningful participation; opportunities to complain and give feedback; to receive a response; programme adaptation; and continuous improvement. These elements of good programming have been expanded on in the new CHS, which aims to be the benchmark by which the quality, accountability and effectiveness of humanitarian action, primarily from the perspective of those affected by crises, is measured. But for many in crisis-affected communities, accountability is still quite a foreign concept and not something they have often experienced (lack of accountability is often both a cause and an effect of many of the crises in the world today).

Being effective and accountable requires knowing who is responsible to whom and for what, and this differs from context to context and from community to community. Determining responsibilities and lines of accountability is often confusing to both those affected by and those responding to humanitarian crises, particularly when relationships, institutions and lives are stressed, broken or lost. In these contexts, being accountable is primarily seen as a responsibility of those who hold power—which in some humanitarian contexts has mainly fallen on UN agencies and the international NGOs that have the most resources. The CHS, which has been developed by a range of humanitarian actors, defines accountability as “the process of using power responsibly, taking account of, and being held accountable by, different stakeholders, and primarily those who are affected by the exercise of such power.” The Nine Commitments in the CHS are meant to be applicable both to international and national actors, whose roles and responsibilities are increasingly acknowledged in humanitarian contexts.

Being accountable is about taking responsibility for actions (and inaction), results, behaviours, successes, failures, mistakes, and for learning (not just gathering) lessons. Accountability does not flow only ‘upwards’ to donors or ‘downwards’ to communities, but rather in all directions between people and organisations who have a relationship to one another. Being accountable is something that every person and organisation engaged in and affected by humanitarian action can and should take responsibility for and be committed to, although this is certainly challenging in many contexts. Rachel Scott of the OECD offers a similar definition of accountability to the CHS that can be applied by any actor in any context: “Accountability is the acknowledgement and assumption of responsibility for decisions and actions, including the responsibility to report, explain and be answerable for the resulting consequences.”

7/ CHS Guidance Notes, p.51.
Petros Abyio grows apples in Boshe-Ilgira, Ethiopia. Church of Sweden supports several projects in rural Ethiopia to improve poor people’s abilities to support themselves and their families.

© Magnus Åkerström / Church of Sweden
Accountability does not flow only ‘upwards’ to donors or ‘downwards’ to communities, but rather in all directions between people and organisations who have a relationship to one another.

In other words, accountability is a key driver of effectiveness. In the eyes of those most affected by crises, humanitarian actors that are present, transparent, accessible and responsive aren’t simply more accountable – they are also more effective.9 Donors also believe that agencies that are accountable for how their money is spent are more effective. The ALNAP issue paper on accountability for the WHS suggests that “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.”10

The CHS defines effectiveness as “the extent to which an aid activity attains its objectives”11. ALNAP’s State of the Humanitarian System report in 2012 looked at effectiveness in the same way and as just one criterion with which to measure the performance of the international humanitarian system. The biggest challenge in defining and measuring humanitarian effectiveness is that there are wide-ranging views on the objectives of humanitarian action. In recent years, most humanitarian actors have expanded their goals to include reducing risks and vulnerabilities, strengthening capacities and resilience, supporting recovery, and addressing chronic poverty and vulnerability. This broadening of mandates, combined with the weakness or absence of non-humanitarian actors in many places, has increased the expectations of humanitarians from many people in crisis-affected communities. This in turn has often fuelled their disappointment and frustration over the perceived lack of effectiveness of humanitarian actors in addressing their wide-ranging needs and priorities.

The Nine Commitments in the CHS essentially lay out the objectives for which all actors engaged in humanitarian action can be held accountable. While framed from the perspective of what affected communities should expect, the CHS commitments are still largely about operational effectiveness issues, rather than the strategic and political decisions that so often drive humanitarian responses. The emphasis from crisis-affected people engaged in the WHS process on protection, and their demands for those who violate international humanitarian, human rights and refugee laws to be held accountable, are a reminder that crisis-affected people have other expectations beyond having their immediate needs met more effectively.12 For many local people, this is what effective international action looks like and is an area in which international and national actors need to be more accountable. As an IDP in the Democratic Republic of Congo noted: “Aid does not have an impact if the government does not respect its commitments to its people.”13

The principle of ‘Do No Harm’ requires accountability for actions that exacerbate existing tensions or create more problems, and also for decisions not taken that could have prevented harm from being done. As Lars Peter Nissen notes in chapter 3, the ‘black box’ of decision-making makes it challenging to hold those who make decisions accountable and to ensure that decision-makers learn from their mistakes so that less harm is done in the future. People in crisis-affected communities are becoming increasingly vocal in their demands for accountability and humanitarian effectiveness to be more broadly defined. They want to see accountability for harm that has been done; for lives lost unnecessarily; and for political inaction which has left people more vulnerable, prolonged crises, and increased the need for protection and humanitarian action.


As the founder of the Dalia Association, the first Palestinian community foundation, notes: “Accountability cannot be achieved without honest, critical, constructive discussion about what is really happening. We must tell the whole, complex, discomfiting truth, even if it leads us to conclude that ‘aid’ isn’t as helpful as we want to believe it is.”

Commitment 3 of the CHS starts to address this by stating that: “Communities and people affected by crisis are not negatively affected and are more prepared, resilient and less at-risk as a result of humanitarian action.” However, being accountable for effectiveness more broadly defined will require commitments and action not just from humanitarians, but also from political, economic and development actors.

**In practice**

These different conceptions of humanitarian action, effectiveness and accountability have had significant effects on practice. People affected by crises see close personal engagement between humanitarian staff and communities as central to accountability. Humanitarian agencies, on the other hand, have concentrated on strengthening accountability through formal policies, frameworks and procedures. Significant investments have been made and many international and national NGOs now provide information to affected communities, have put feedback and complaints response mechanisms in place, and employ staff dedicated to ensuring accountability. A few donors and UN agencies have also increased staff and funding to support accountability to affected populations. However, despite this progress, communities and staff are still not always clear on who is responsible for what, and how to fulfill their responsibilities and hold others to account. Despite assurances, some are fearful of complaining or seeking redress for fear of losing assistance.

Over the last 20 years, different initiatives have also been developed to help humanitarian agencies be more accountable through improved communications and information provision; listening to and consulting with affected communities; facilitating participation; and establishing feedback, complaints and response mechanisms. HAP’s experience, among others, showed that most international humanitarian agencies prefer voluntary efforts to improve accountability, while many national and local organisations and governments would like to see more regulation against standards and objectives. With regards to certification, which remains a voluntary effort, national organisations tend to be more interested than international ones, possibly because they see it as a way to demonstrate professionalism to donors and partners. Chapter 8 of this report describes some of the positive impacts certification has had within other sectors, but the complex contexts and underlying power dynamics in the humanitarian system have made it challenging for affected communities to hold agencies accountable, much less to demand some sort of certification. Chapter 3 examines more of a ‘middle way’ approach, using independent sources of feedback and external verification to ensure that standards such as the CHS are lived up to in practice. It is interesting to note that all of these approaches and initiatives have been led and driven by those involved in providing aid, rather than those who are receiving it. As the CHS is rolled out and tested, the hope must be that agencies and governments will ‘open the black box’ and involve those affected by crises in the process of deciding how to be accountable for living up to its Commitments.

Figure 1.2: What are the obstacles faced by humanitarian actors in meeting the needs of communities?

In the WHS Southern African community survey respondents highlighted a lack of contextual understanding and coordination as the main obstacles to meeting the needs of communities.


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Even with significant investments in improving accountability, one of the biggest practical challenges has been demonstrating accountability beyond the project and organisational levels – i.e. within clusters, across the humanitarian system, and in broad strategies and decisions. There has been some recent progress, particularly in the Philippines, on collective efforts to improve accountability and effectiveness. The Pamati Kita project is a promising example of several international agencies working together to provide information, collectively responding to feedback and advocating for policy changes to address local people’s priorities.17 But this was in a large-scale response to a natural disaster in an enabling environment for civic engagement, unlike most humanitarian contexts, and the government and local organisations were not very engaged in the effort. Going forward, the CHS offers a common framework that could be used to collectively measure the effectiveness of all actors engaged in a response, based on the roles they play and what is appropriate and relevant in each context. But that will require leadership, flexibility, collectively responding to feedback and advocating for policy changes to address local people’s priorities.17 But this was in a large-scale response to a natural disaster in an enabling environment for civic engagement, unlike most humanitarian contexts, and the government and local organisations were not very engaged in the effort. Going forward, the CHS offers a common framework that could be used to collectively measure the effectiveness of all actors engaged in a response, based on the roles they play and what is appropriate and relevant in each context. But that will require leadership, flexibility, collectively responding to feedback and advocating for policy changes to address local people’s priorities.

Lastly, people from affected communities emphasise that accountability and effectiveness depend on good relationships. The need and demand for respectful, competent staff who are close to communities, understand the culture, have good communication skills, act impartially, and can facilitate dialogue and collaboration is not new, but continues to be raised. The second and third highest ranked improvements needed in the humanitarian system by aid recipients in the latest State of the Humanitarian System report were “be more respectful of our customs” and “listen to us more”.18

In chapters 5 and 11, Dr. Kamel Mohanna and Jonathan Potter argue persuasively that frontline staff and volunteers – who primarily come from crisis-affected communities and countries – need to be empowered to listen and to respond to concerns as they arise; to know what to do with issues that are beyond their responsibility; to understand what is expected of them and their organisations in order to be accountable; and to be well supported. It is the responsibility of any government body or organisation engaged in humanitarian action to find, train, support and, most importantly, value those who are interacting on a daily basis with those affected by crises. In many cases, these are local and national staff working for international, national and local organisations, as well as the government, who will be there long after the last international humanitarians leave.

**In the short and long term**

People affected by crises emphasise the importance of connecting humanitarian and development programmes and processes to improve accountability and effectiveness.19 While both sectors start by looking at rights and responsibilities, development actors typically work towards improving citizen-state relationships, governance and social accountability, by holding governments accountable. This is in contrast to what has largely been a focus on accountability at project and organisational levels in humanitarian contexts where many actors either have to work around or avoid engaging with governments. In many instances, governments have created hostile environments for civic engagement and limited options for holding them accountable. But even in these contexts, there is often more that can be done to broaden social accountability. In chapter 7, Simon Richards describes HAP’s work to improve accountability for effective service delivery in the health sector within the challenging context of Myanmar. This also provides a useful example of international and local organisations building from their experiences of promoting accountability during the humanitarian response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008.

Research on the impacts of efforts to improve accountability in humanitarian programmes in Myanmar and Kenya has provided evidence of “increased empowerment and self-esteem among project participants.” It also noted “greater willingness of groups to demand accountability from other duty-bearers, such as schools, local authorities and even

18/ (Forthcoming), ALNAP/ODI, London.
private companies.”20 While there is a need for more evidence to determine which approaches are most effective at sustaining accountability practices,21 there is some evidence and agreement in principle that greater accountability will lead to greater effectiveness in the short and long term.22

However, people in affected communities continue to say that while they give input and make suggestions to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action, they rarely see changes made or receive a response. In other words, accountability still remains weak. As an IDP in a camp in Rakhine State in Myanmar told me: “All organisations come to us and listen but nothing changes.” A UN staff member acknowledged the lack of accountability, saying that: “We have to listen and record, but we need to listen and make something happen.” Unfortunately, the focus on accountability systems and procedures, rather than on dialogue and relationships which are important to affected communities, has often lead to the ‘projectisation’ and ‘proceduralisation’ of accountability.23

Similarly, in the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan, community members and Barangay leaders asked for humanitarian responders to consult with them better, suggesting that meaningful dialogue would ensure more appropriate aid, better targeting of the most vulnerable, and less wasting of resources than many of the more technological feedback-gathering approaches used by aid agencies.24 Unfortunately, the focus on accountability systems and procedures, rather than on dialogue and relationships which are important to affected communities, has often been the levels of trust in the international community. This is not a new lesson, as noted in several chapters in this report and many previous reports, and is one which needs to be learned if we are to see greater accountability and effective humanitarian action.

As noted in several of the following chapters, while practice has improved, there have been significant challenges in getting accountability prioritised alongside competing priorities in most humanitarian responses. The ‘report card’ from affected communities on aid agencies in the Middle East shows low scores for effectiveness and critical means of demonstrating accountability (i.e. considering beneficiaries’ opinions and treating people with respect and dignity).25 Most of the well-intentioned individual and collective efforts are simply not ‘adding up’ to the level of effectiveness or accountability that is expected or desired by affected communities (and indeed by many humanitarians). As has been discussed in countless forums and reports, the incentive structures in the humanitarian system have not significantly changed and affected people are still not able to fully demand accountability. There has not yet been a shift to a more accountable culture in the international humanitarian system, dominated as it is by large international agencies which are slow to change, protective of their turf and often in competition with one another. So, what will it take to really change the status quo?

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Moving forward and the role of the CHS

To put the principles into practice, it is important for those engaged in humanitarian action to be accountable for effectiveness as defined by those most affected by crises. Humanitarian actors should hold themselves accountable to the priorities defined by crisis-affected communities and institutions. When expectations go beyond what humanitarian actors can do or reasonably be held responsible for, they should communicate this and work to ensure that those who should be accountable for meeting those obligations or demands are able to do so. This will require clarifying objectives, roles and responsibilities upfront, as well as greater understanding of and support for local capacities and existing accountability mechanisms. It also implies a shift in defining and measuring effectiveness and accountability from a supply-driven to a demand-driven approach.

Matthew Serventy (chapter 10) also suggests that asking people in affected communities for their indicators of effectiveness could help to establish common goals and benchmarks in each humanitarian context to which all actors can be held accountable. Rachel Scott, while not necessarily advocating for effectiveness to be defined by affected communities alone, has suggested that “a common framework of humanitarian effectiveness would mean that each actor would be held accountable for their contribution to the same characteristics of effectiveness – based on what they can control, what they can influence, and where they advocate – no matter who was assessing them.”

In WHS consultations, participants from affected communities in particular have suggested that international humanitarian actors need to focus more on advocacy for political action or for systemic changes that will enable more effective action and improved accountability. This may put humanitarian actors in an uncomfortable or untenable position of holding their own or others’ governments responsible – in some cases ‘biting the hand that feeds them’. For others, taking political or other actions may be necessary to uphold and strengthen the use of humanitarian principles. The decisions on what roles humanitarian actors will play and whether to engage politically will be based on the context and goals of different humanitarian actors, as Jérémie Labbé discusses in more depth in chapter 2 on the role of humanitarian principles in driving effectiveness.

To shift from a supply- to a demand-driven approach to accountability, it is important to have more open discussions and negotiations on roles, responsibilities and the means by which various actors can be held accountable for decisions made and actions taken. Current roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability have largely been defined by those providing aid — and this will need to change. In chapter 3, Lars Peter Nissen discusses how being accountable for the most complex aspects of humanitarian action – that is, the use (and abuse) of power, who makes decisions and who influences them, and where decisions are made – is harder than being accountable for targeting

Participants from affected communities in particular have suggested that international humanitarian actors need to focus more on advocacy for political action or for systemic changes.

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To respond to the demands for greater accountability and effectiveness, those affected by and responding to crises need to be able to talk about power more openly: who has it; how responsibly it is used and to what ends; the checks and balances on its use; and ultimately how it can be shared. To do so, humanitarians need to address how to:

- **Assessing what local accountability systems or practices exist and are effective** in each context, according to those who are using them. This would enable humanitarian actors to strengthen existing structures to ensure the needs and priorities of people are met now and in the future. All actors, particularly donors, aid agencies and governments could include accountability analyses in their assessments and strategies – not just for humanitarian programmes, but also for disaster risk reduction, resilience and long-term development plans. This does not imply that all actors do their own analyses, but rather that they ensure the analysis is done and that they use it when determining strategies and ways to ensure accountability.

- **Clarifying lines of responsibility and accountability** in each person’s job description and in programme plans. This is for the benefit not only of supervisors and funders, but also of peers, partners and, most importantly, those affected by crises and their actions.

Connecting to and strengthening existing mechanisms and systems will enable people to hold their governments and other duty-bearers and service providers to account in the future. This requires breaking down some of the bureaucratic silos and philosophical divides that exist between humanitarian and development actors so that investments made in improving accountability during humanitarian responses are not lost when the crisis ends. Nicolas Seris and Roslyn Hees (chapter 9) highlight practical examples from Transparency International’s work on addressing corruption and improving accountability in Kenya, where the lines are often blurred between humanitarian and development efforts and where making connections to existing systems may be easier.

As they and others highlight in the following chapters, to respond to the demands for greater accountability and effectiveness, those affected by and responding to crises need to be able to talk about power more openly: who has it; how responsibly it is used and to what ends; the checks and balances on its use; and ultimately how it can be shared. To do so, humanitarians need to address how to:

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mistakes or other micro-level issues which are the focus of most of the current accountability frameworks designed by aid agencies.27
Jonathan Potter (chapter 11) and others note that it is important to have more leadership and prioritisation by managers in particular, in order to make more progress on being accountable.

- Simplifying reporting and other requirements so that staff can spend more time listening openly to, engaging in meaningful ways with, and being accountable to affected communities and one another. The CHS offers a framework that could be used as a benchmark to evaluate the effectiveness of various programming and reporting requirements. It provides a common language and signposts that agencies can follow to improve individual and collective effectiveness and accountability as defined by those affected by crises. As with anything new, the CHS needs to be tested and evaluated, particularly by those most affected by crises and responses.

\*Figure 1.4: Overlap between the CHS and emerging WHS recommendations.\*

Considering the broad consensus on the content of the CHS, and its overlap with the 267 recommendations of the June 2015 ALNAP Global Forum (an official WHS event), Robert Glasser, Chair of the CHS Alliance, called for the CHS to be endorsed at the World Humanitarian Summit as a key framework to orient, assess and measure the quality, effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian assistance. For more details, see figure 8.2 in chapter 8.
The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability

1. Humanitarian response is appropriate and relevant.
2. Humanitarian response is effective and timely.
3. Humanitarian response strengthens local capacities and avoids negative effects.
4. Humanitarian response is based on communication, participation and feedback.
5. Complaints are welcomed and addressed.
6. Humanitarian response is coordinated and complementary.
7. Humanitarian actors continuously learn and improve.
8. Staff are supported to do their job effectively, and are treated fairly and equitably.
9. Resources are managed and used responsibly for their intended purpose.

Humanity • Impartiality • Neutrality

Communities and people affected by crisis

Thinking beyond the current crisis
about how better accountability can improve not only humanitarian effectiveness, but development effectiveness too. Some practical ways to break down the barriers between humanitarian and development actors include: development of community- and country-based strategies that are driven by and accountable to people from crisis-affected communities; joint analysis and reflection on feedback from communities; joint planning cells, such as those some donors and agencies have established to focus on resilience; and advocacy for policy and strategy changes that respond to needs, priorities and capacities.

Conclusion
Accountability is not going to be improved through more ‘tweaking’ with technical or procedural fixes. It requires a change in mindset to acknowledge that each and every person affected by and engaged in humanitarian crises has different roles and responsibilities to play, and that they need to be accountable to one another as well as to the collective goals. It isn’t easy to be accountable for the results and effectiveness of humanitarian action to the extent demanded by those affected by crises. But being accountable from the micro to the macro level is essential if we are to support those most affected to prevent, manage and recover from crises more effectively in the future.
How do humanitarian principles support humanitarian effectiveness?

Humanitarian principles aren’t just an ethical compass for aid delivery in complex and dangerous environments, argues ICRC’s Jérémie Labbé, they provide a pragmatic operational framework that contributes to humanitarian effectiveness too.

Effectiveness is commonly understood as the capacity to produce a desired result, to achieve the objectives set out or to solve the targeted problem. Naturally, humanitarian actors have always been concerned with ensuring that the effectiveness of their action benefits communities affected by conflicts or disasters. In the last two decades in particular, they have developed a number of professional and technical standards — including the recently adopted Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) — aimed at improving the quality of their response and thus their overall effectiveness. While these normative developments have arguably contributed to improvements,1 a key question remains: How do the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality,

Jérémie Labbé
Head, Principles Guiding Humanitarian Action
International Committee of the Red Cross

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The author wishes to thank Anike Doherty, Antonio Donini and Fiona Terry for providing invaluable comments on the draft versions of this chapter. The views and opinions expressed in this chapter are however solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the CHS Alliance, the ICRC or those of the peer reviewers. Details of all reviewers can be found on the inside back cover of this report.

1/ The 2012 report The State of the Humanitarian System, which is a system-level analysis and evaluation of the performance of international humanitarian assistance, noted that “most [humanitarian] interventions were found to be effective or partially effective in terms of achievements against projected goals or international standards”. Taylor, G. et al., The State of the Humanitarian System. 2012 Ed. London: ALNAP. p.11.
humanitarian principles: What are we talking about?

The progressive crystallisation of humanitarian principles

Besides international humanitarian law, which recognises that “[a]n impartial humanitarian body, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, may offer its services,” humanitarian principles were first formalised by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (ICRC) in 1965 through the adoption of its seven Fundamental Principles. The ‘master-narrative’ developed by the ICRC and the Red Crescent Movement – itself the result and crystallisation of a century of humanitarian ethics and action – has deeply influenced the wider humanitarian system that broadly adopted the first four Fundamental Principles as the guiding principles of humanitarian action: humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Beyond international humanitarian law and the Red Crescent Movement, the humanitarian principles were endorsed in the 1990s, notably through UN Resolution 46/182 in 1991 that set the guiding principles and the institutional foundations of the formal, UN-led, international humanitarian system. A few years later, at the instigation of the Red Cross Movement, NGOs adopted these principles as part of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. Since then, the central role of humanitarian principles in the normative framework governing humanitarian action has been progressively consolidated:

- Better understanding what affected communities need, and what local and national actors are already doing to address these needs;
- Improving the accountability of the response, not only in relation to the affected communities, but towards donors and affected governments as well;
- Enhancing the complementarity of the different actors responding to crises, both within the so-called international humanitarian system and outside of it (e.g. militaries, private sector actors, diaspora groups, local civil society organisations, religious institutions, etc.); and
- Better tailoring the response to the specific conditions of a given crisis, be it a sudden- or slow-onset natural disaster, an ongoing or protracted conflict, or a situation of chronic vulnerability in a fragile state.

However, as we shall be discussing, humanitarian effectiveness is a relative concept, as it is intimately linked to the various ways in which different humanitarian actors understand the objectives of humanitarian action, which also explains fluctuating interpretations of humanitarian principles.

Based on these premises, this chapter will review some of the systemic challenges to the principles, outlining how they and the boundaries of humanitarian action are interpreted differently, and how this impacts on the very understanding of humanitarian effectiveness. Finally, it will focus on ICRC’s understanding of these principles and demonstrate how, for this organisation, humanitarian principles are indispensable, but not necessarily sufficient to deliver humanitarian effectiveness.

But first, here is a brief overview of how humanitarian principles came to be crystallised as the ethical and normative framework governing humanitarian action and how they are commonly understood.

Humanitarian principles:

- **Humanity**
- **Impartiality**
- **Neutrality**
- **Independence**

The seven Fundamental Principles of Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality were adopted at the 20th International Conference of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in 1965 in Vienna, and included in the Preamble of the Statutes of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The seven Fundamental Principles of Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality were adopted at the 20th International Conference of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in 1965 in Vienna, and included in the Preamble of the Statutes of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The seven Fundamental Principles of Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality were adopted at the 20th International Conference of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in 1965 in Vienna, and included in the Preamble of the Statutes of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

**Humanity**

Humanity is a guiding principle of international humanitarian law designed to ensure that humanitarian action is provided with the greatest possible regard for the physical and psychosocial well-being of the affected population, and to ensure that relief is provided on an impartial basis. It is the foundational principle of humanitarian action, and is enshrined in the core humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence.

**Impartiality**

Impartiality is a guiding principle of international humanitarian law designed to ensure that humanitarian action is provided without discrimination and without prejudice to the interests of either side of a conflict. It is the principle that humanitarian action should be provided on the basis of need, and not on the basis of political, religious or other affiliations.

**Neutrality**

Neutrality is a guiding principle of international humanitarian law designed to ensure that humanitarian action is provided without taking sides in a conflict. It is the principle that humanitarian action should be provided on the basis of need, and not on the basis of political, religious or other affiliations.

**Independence**

Independence is a guiding principle of international humanitarian law designed to ensure that humanitarian action is provided without the influence or control of any party to a conflict. It is the principle that humanitarian action should be provided on the basis of need, and not on the basis of political, religious or other affiliations.

**Voluntary Service**

Voluntary Service is a guiding principle of international humanitarian law designed to ensure that humanitarian action is provided through the voluntary efforts of individuals or organisations.

**Unity**

Unity is a guiding principle of international humanitarian law designed to ensure that humanitarian action is provided through the efforts of a single organisation or agency, or through the efforts of a group of organisations or agencies working together.

**Universality**

Universality is a guiding principle of international humanitarian law designed to ensure that humanitarian action is provided to all affected populations, regardless of their nationality, race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

These are:

- **Humanity**
- **Impartiality**
- **Neutrality**
- **Independence**


4/ The World Humanitarian Summit, a two-year consultation process initiated by the UN Secretary-General in 2013, has selected four broad themes to guide and structure its discussions. Yet, as noted by Dayna Brown in the first chapter, there is neither a clear definition of the concept nor a clear list of its components. (Internal study). ICRC. 2014.

5/ Available at: https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/bitcache/e/e6e55d707c1957cde7eb0f5b1ab1d61189078d489272f?ispositioninline&opview (Accessed: 30 April 2015).

6/ Article 3, common to the four Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 (we emphasise). The 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions further state that states should facilitate relief that is “humanitarian and impartial in character” (article 70 (1) API and article 18 (2) APII), thus recognising that humanitarian aid is expected to respect the principle of impartiality.

7/ The historian Katherine Davies refers to the influence of the ICRC and the broader Red Cross Movement “as embodying a ‘master-narrative’”, because all definitions of humanitarian goals and principles directly and transparently follow the Red Cross mandate or humanitarian law, but rather because of the predominance of the ICRC in crystallizing norms of humanitarianism.” Davies, K. (2012) “Continuity, change and contest – Meanings of ‘humanitarian’ from the ‘Religion of Humanity’ to the Kosovo war.” HPG Working Papers. London: Overseas Development Institute. p.1.

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9/ A few years later, at the instigation of the Red Cross Movement, NGOs adopted these principles as part of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. Since then, the central role of humanitarian principles in the normative framework governing humanitarian action has been progressively consolidated:
Humanitarian action should be motivated by the sole aim of helping other human beings affected by conflicts or disasters (humanity); exclusively based on people’s needs and without discrimination (impartiality); without favouring any side in a conflict or engaging in controversies where aid is deployed (neutrality); and free from any economic, political or military interest at stake (independence). While the definition of humanitarian principles provided by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is widely referred to and recognised (see box above), these principles are subject to multiple interpretations within the humanitarian system and inconsistent application. Paradoxically, despite their broad recognition as principles guiding humanitarian action as demonstrated above, these principles remain contested in both theory and practice, even within the humanitarian sector.

**Systemic challenges to humanitarian principles**

**Some principles under attack**

Even as humanitarian principles were being formally adopted during the 1990s, they rapidly came under fire for not providing an adequate and politically astute enough framework to

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<td>Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.</td>
<td>Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.</td>
<td>Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.</td>
<td>Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regards to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.</td>
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Paradoxically, despite their broad recognition as principles guiding humanitarian action as demonstrated above, these principles remain contested in both theory and practice, even within the humanitarian sector.

**Definition and understanding of humanitarian principles**

Broadly speaking, the humanitarian principles set the ethical goals of humanitarian action and provide an operational framework and tools that distinguish it from other forms of aid.

- Since Resolution 46/182, states reiterate their commitment to humanitarian principles on an annual basis through resolutions of the UN General Assembly and of the Economic and Social Council on the strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian assistance (ECOSOC). Some states have gone further and integrated these principles into intergovernmental and regional policy instruments – such as the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative, the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid and the Humanitarian Policy of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – and even in legally binding regional treaties, including the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and the African Union’s Kampala Convention on IDPs.

- Beyond the Code of Conduct, international and national NGOs have developed and adopted other general and institutional policy documents referring to the principles, such as the SPHERE Humanitarian Charter and, more recently, the CHS. While all these texts do not necessarily refer to all humanitarian principles (the Code of Conduct omits neutrality for instance), the principles remain a recurrent subject in NGOs’ public communications and debate.

- Increasingly, so-called ‘non-traditional’ organisations (i.e. humanitarian organisations from non-Western countries that have been either recently created or whose existence has only recently been ‘noticed’ by the formal international humanitarian system) are using the language of the principles. Some of these, for instance in the Muslim world, have done so by developing their own codes of conduct inspired by Islamic precepts in a manner mostly compatible with the principles.

- Finally, in the context of the WHS, the importance of humanitarian principles was reaffirmed throughout the consultations, including in the various co-Chairs’ summary of the regional consultations.

11/ For instance, ECOSOC resolution E/RES/2014/13, adopted on 25 June 2014, reaffirms the four humanitarian principles in its second paragraph.
15/ Article 214 of the TFUE states that: “Humanitarian aid operations shall be conducted in compliance with the principles of international law and with the principles of impartiality, neutrality and non-discrimination,” omitting the principle of independence.
19/ For instance, one of the key conclusions of the co-Chairs’ summary of the North and South-East Asia WHS Regional Consultation held in Tokyo on 23-24 July 2014 is that “accountability to affected people, as well as observance of the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, humanity and independence, are fundamental to effective humanitarian action.” See co-Chairs’ summary (p.2), available at: https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/bitcache/458935b00311af7b4af0e6c5a9c2ee2fa452331?vid=490805&disposition=inline&op=view. [Accessed: 29 May 2015].
respond to the complexity of crises, especially conflicts. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss in detail the developments of the international community’s response to crises in the last two decades, it is important to briefly present some of its main features, as it explains why humanitarian principles have been the subject of recurrent criticisms. Joanna Macrae noted as early as 2002 that: “The 1990s saw the concept of humanitarianism transformed, from a distinctive but narrow framework designed to mitigate the impact of war, into an organising principle for international relations, led largely by the West.” Indeed, in the post-Cold War era and in response to state collapse and mass atrocities in Somalia, the Balkans and Rwanda, the international community, including through the UN, has vastly expanded its toolbox to respond to and manage crises. This includes peacekeeping missions, peace-enforcement operations, peace- and state-building approaches, and also humanitarian action, which is expected to espouse these broader objectives. A minority of influential scholars and long-time observer of humanitarian action to criticise organisations such as the ICRC that “still maintains an apolitical veneer (…) and is unwilling publicly to admit that its principles should be adapted to political exigencies.”

On the moral front, the application of humanitarian principles – especially neutrality – has been criticised for putting victims and their tormentors on an equal footing. Humanitarian principles are seen in some quarters as helping fuel conflicts by justifying the provision of aid to all sides without distinction, regardless of their moral rights or wrongs, and the refusal to join efforts with political actors better equipped to address the root causes of conflict and put an end to the suffering of civilians. This trend was further compounded in the 2000s with the generalisation of ‘stabilisation’, ‘whole-of-government’ and, in the UN jargon, ‘integrated’ approaches that “encompass a combination of military, humanitarian, political and economic instruments to render ‘stability’ to areas affected by armed conflicts and complex emergencies.”

Principles are also under attack because of the nature of the environments humanitarians operate in, which are typically characterised by chaos, destruction and, as far as conflicts are concerned, radicalisation and political polarisation. Conflicts exacerbate radicalisation, suspicion and hatred, and the mere idea of assisting all those affected without discrimination, in line with the principles of humanity and impartiality, is instinctively regarded as unacceptable. Explaining in such polarised contexts that one does not take sides and that aid is provided solely on the basis of need, including to ‘the enemy’, inevitably arouses suspicion and raises questions about the perceived neutrality and independence of humanitarian actors. These difficulties inherent to conflict were further aggravated in the post 9/11 context of the ‘Global War on Terror’ in which the dominant ‘with us or against us’ political discourse contributed to an environment in which groups designated as terrorists were ‘evil’ and populations sympathetic to their cause were considered not worthy of assistance and protection. This posed new challenges to the very principle of humanity.

Diverging interpretation and inconsistent application

These ‘attacks’ on humanitarian principles resonate within the so-called humanitarian system itself, which is as much defined by its differences as by its commonalities. Indeed, the humanitarian system is composed of a wide variety of actors that have different institutional mandates, ambitions and objectives. A minority are single-mandate agencies focused mainly on addressing acute humanitarian needs, while most humanitarian actors are multi-mandate agencies engaged in development, human rights, social justice, peace-building or other transformative activities beyond humanitarian action.

Although all are arguably driven by the principle of humanity, the philosophy and ethics underlying their work differ substantially. Some organisations are driven by deontological ethics—that is, ethics that considers the moral good of a particular action and not necessarily its wider consequences, as noted by Hugo Slim.  

Others are driven by consequentialist ethics, which considers that the morality of an action must be measured by its broader consequences. To take a concrete example, pure deontologists would consider healing a wounded fighter intrinsically good, while consequentialists would be more inclined to consider the risk of the fighter returning to the battlefield, and their act inadvertently prolonging the conflict. 

Other scholars classify humanitarian organisations within four distinct groups characterised by distinct ambitions and goals, and different degrees of respect for humanitarian principles: the ‘principle-centered’ Dunantists who adhere closely to humanitarian principles and have a relatively narrow understanding of humanitarian action (as envisioned by Henry Dunant, the founder of the ICRC); the ‘pragmatists’ or ‘Wilsonians’ who espouse a more consequentialist approach to humanitarian action and show less reluctance to align with states’ political agendas if they consider it serves their broader mission; the ‘solidarists’ who have a much broader vision of humanitarian action as encompassing human rights and social transformation and are, at times, openly partisan; and the ‘faith-based’ actors who are driven mostly by religious precepts, although in practice they cut across the three other groups.

These different categories are somewhat artificial and, in reality, few organisations would fall squarely into one group or another. Nonetheless, they show the diversity of brands of humanitarianism, representing different ambitions, objectives and degrees of respect for humanitarian principles. While most have a common understanding of humanity and impartiality (although the interpretation of these principles may vary between deontologists and consequentialists), the principles of independence and neutrality are subject to a much broader range of perspectives. Oxfam, for example, which engages in humanitarian action but also promotes a human rights-based approach, openly acknowledges that abstaining from engaging in political or ideological controversies, as prescribed by the principle of neutrality, runs counter in many contexts to its commitment to campaign on human rights or socio-economic inequalities and to engender broader changes. As stated by Nigel Timmins, Deputy Humanitarian Director at Oxfam GB: “The risk is that by claiming to be neutral but then speaking out will lead to accusations of hypocrisy and so undermine the trust we seek.”

This results in widely inconsistent application of these principles by organisations that profess support for all of them in theory, but pick and choose which ones to apply in practice.

The problem remains that few organisations acknowledge that humanitarian principles—which have become a defining element of what humanitarian action should be—might not best serve the goals they have

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Humanitarian principles as a moral compass and driver of effectiveness: reflection on the ICRC’s experience

Given the ICRC’s long experience in a wide range of crisis contexts and its influence on the formulation of humanitarian principles – known within the RCRC Movement as ‘Fundamental Principles’ – it is worth examining how it understands, interprets and applies them and how this contributes to humanitarian effectiveness. Although the organisation’s approach is only one among many, the ICRC has proven its efficiency and effectiveness time and again in conflict situations and, in that respect, it deserves to be looked at in more depth.27

The theory

For the ICRC in particular and the RCRC Movement in general, the seven Fundamental Principles provide an ethical, operational and institutional framework that guides humanitarian action. In the words of Jean Pictet, a famous ICRC jurist who theorised the Principles and studied their deeper meaning: “The principles of the Red Cross do not all have the same importance. They have a hierarchical order [and] an internal logic, so that each one to a degree flows from another.”28

ICRC’s interpretation of the Fundamental Principles

The very objective of humanitarian action – and therefore a central component of humanitarian effectiveness – is defined by the principle of Humanity,29 qualified by Pictet as the ‘essential’ principle. Humanitarian action’s sole purpose is to prevent and alleviate human suffering, to protect life and health, and to ensure respect for the human being. Humanity provides the ethical basis of the humanitarian gesture that aims not only to deliver assistance to victims of crises but also protection, regardless of their nationality, religious beliefs or political allegiance, even in wartime. The inevitable corollary of this is non-discrimination, embodied in the principle of Impartiality, which provides that aid should be given on no other criteria than the severity of needs and in proportion to these needs. The moral ethic underlying humanitarian action and its overarching objectives is defined by these two ‘substantive’ principles, which set the bar by which humanitarian effectiveness should be measured.

As for Neutrality and Independence, they are practical tools that enable humanitarian actors to achieve this ideal. “Here, we are in the domain of means and not of ends,” says Pictet.30 These two principles, developed out of decades of field experience, have no moral value in themselves. They are operational tools that help humanitarian actors to demonstrate in all circumstances that they are driven only by the desire to bring assistance and protection to the victims of crises without discrimination, and have no ulterior motives. In politically polarised situations of conflict in particular, demonstrating that one does not take sides, abstaining from taking part in controversies of a political, religious or ideological nature, and showing one’s autonomy from other political or economic interests at stake helps to promote acceptance by all, which facilitates safe access and lays the conditions for genuinely impartial assessment of needs.

Finally, the other Fundamental Principles of Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality

They are operational tools that help humanitarian actors to demonstrate in all circumstances that they are driven only by the desire to bring assistance and protection to the victims of crises without discrimination, and have no ulterior motives.
are institutional in character. Although less directly relevant to the present discussion since specific to the RCRC Movement, these principles are crucial to enable the Movement as a whole to abide by its mission as defined by the principles of Humanity and Impartiality. For instance, the principle of Unity, which provides that there should be only one National RCRC Society per country, open to all and that covers its entire territory, is meant to enable these societies to deliver aid based on needs throughout their respective countries, in line with Impartiality. Syria is an interesting illustration in this respect. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent’s (SARC) National Society has 14 branches and 84 sub-branches. This structure ensures that its work is carried out nationwide, yet anchored locally, and fully reflects the political and cultural diversity of the communities in which it operates, as noted in a New York Times article. Although no silver bullet, this attempt to implement the principle of Unity helps foster a public perception that the SARC is relatively neutral and independent of the parties to the conflict. In this way, it is maintaining and/or gaining some degree of acceptance by communities which will eventually allow it to deliver impartial aid throughout the country, in spite of numerous ongoing challenges.

**Proximity to affected communities: a prerequisite of effectiveness**

In summary, the Fundamental Principles provide the RCRC Movement with tools for gaining the trust and acceptance of all parties, in order to secure safe access and proximity to the communities it assists, which is key to humanitarian effectiveness and relevance.

Proximity to the people is essential to understand the situation on the ground and assess people’s material and protection needs based on their specific vulnerabilities (due to their age, gender, disabilities, etc.). This physical presence enables aid workers to develop a dialogue with communities, listen carefully to people’s fears and aspirations, give them a voice and establish the human relationships necessary to “ensure respect for the human being”, which is a crucial element of the principle of Humanity. This physical presence enables aid workers to develop a dialogue with communities, listen carefully to people’s fears and aspirations, give them a voice and establish the human relationships necessary to “ensure respect for the human being”, which is a crucial element of the principle of Humanity.

Local initiatives that address the needs of the people and to develop programmes that complement or support them, instead of duplicating or undermining their work.

Driven by this objective to work in proximity to affected communities and thereby maintain acceptance and access, humanitarian actors must also demonstrate accountability to these communities – that is, to respond in a relevant manner to their actual needs in line with the principle of Impartiality. In this sense, proximity is a driver of accountability and a prerequisite of effectiveness and relevance.

**The practice**

Far from obstructing the pragmatism needed to ensure the continued relevance of humanitarian action, the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence provide both an ethical compass and a pragmatic operational framework to navigate the complex and often dangerous environments in which humanitarians operate. As discussed above, critics sometimes argue that insisting on the apolitical character of humanitarian action is to ignore the political reality of humanitarian crises and the political implications of aid. This lack of political astuteness would sometimes undermine effective humanitarian action as it would preclude humanitarian actors from cooperating with other political actors, such as governments or armies, who are ultimately the ones who can bring effective solutions to humanitarian crises. Yet humanitarian principles, especially neutrality and independence, are an acknowledgement, not a denial, of political reality and a guide with which to navigate it. “Indeed, like a swimmer, [the ICRC] is in politics up to its neck,” says Pictet. “Also like the swimmer, who advances in the water but who drowns if he swallows it, the ICRC must reckon with politics without becoming part of it.” The principles provide the tools to make this possible.

In Afghanistan for instance – one of the very contexts where critics of humanitarian principles called for greater political pragmatism⁴⁵ – the consistent application of humanitarian principles has allowed the ICRC to maintain its presence throughout decades of conflict and deliver assistance and protection across multiple frontlines. As Antonio Donini observed in 2010: “[s]o far, only the ICRC has been able to develop a steady dialogue on access and acceptance with the Taliban,” further adding that: “the World Health Organization, for example, needs to rely on the ICRC’s contacts for its immunisation drives.” This acceptance and the access it made possible – at times benefiting other actors such as WHO – was not a straightforward process however, as Fiona Terry emphasised in a study on the ICRC’s neutrality in Afghanistan. Indeed, the ICRC faced multiple ups and downs, including the targeted murder of one of its staff in March 2003. It required perseverance, consistency and creativity in the way it applied the principles “to demonstrate to all sides the benefits of having a neutral intermediary in the midst of conflict.”

**A balancing act in the service of needs**

The ICRC’s internal study on its application of the principles⁴⁷ illustrates how its delegates constantly recalibrate the balance struck between principles and other competing considerations in complex decision-making and analysis. This study shows that these

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principles provide a flexible framework to navigate the demands of various operational contexts, while remaining faithful to the overarching objective of delivering impartial humanitarian assistance and protection.

Even the ‘substantive’ principles of Humanity and Impartiality must be applied in light of the other principles. For instance, a rigid interpretation of the principle of Impartiality might be counterproductive in terms of how neutral a humanitarian actor is perceived to be, and hinder effective humanitarian action in some circumstances. As Fiona Terry noted in her internal study on Sudan and Afghanistan: “while neutrality as a concept has been understood […] throughout the ICRC’s presence in Sudan, the notion of impartiality has not, and the allocation of assistance in accordance with needs gives the impression of favouritism if the needs are not the same on either side.”

While the ICRC always endeavours – in Sudan and other contexts – to tailor its response to the specific needs of different communities by conducting assessments on both sides of the frontline or in rival communities, it is because its staff fully acknowledge the potential for misperceptions about the ICRC’s neutrality that they take special care in listening to all communities and explaining to them the ways in which the ICRC works. Such an interpretation of impartiality through the lens of Neutrality ensures that the most severe needs are met, while accommodating in a relevant manner the needs of other communities who could resent and hinder an aid operation that they perceived as one-sided, and pose a real threat to the needier community or to the ICRC’s staff.

In the same vein, the greater impartiality – and therefore effectiveness – of the response that can be gained from coordination with other humanitarian actors, especially in terms of greater geographic coverage of needs, must be balanced with the perception risks that this association with other actors create, which could impact the acceptance of the organisation. This explains why, as far as the cluster system is concerned, the ICRC has taken the position from the outset that it could neither be a cluster lead nor a formal cluster member. Formal membership would imply accountability to the UN system that would impact its independence and, at times, perceptions of its neutrality.

Indeed, in contexts where UN peacekeeping or political missions are supporting or perceived to support a party to a conflict (when not a party to the conflict themselves as is the case in the Democratic Republic of Congo) any close association with the UN risks undermining the ability of the organisation to engage with all parties and to gain acceptance. Nonetheless, for the sake of ensuring impartial coverage of needs, to avoid duplicating activities and to maximise the operational complementarity of humanitarian actors, a certain degree of operational coordination does take place in the field. Informed by humanitarian principles, ICRC staff regularly meet and exchange with UN country teams’ members either on a bilateral basis or by sitting as observer in cluster meetings, depending on the context and the associated reputational risks.

39/ The ‘cluster system’ was put in place in the framework of the 2005 Humanitarian Reform developed by OCHA. This approach organises humanitarian coordination by sectorial groups like health, shelter, protection, etc. See ‘Cluster Coordination’ on OCHA’s website for more information: http://www.unocha.org/what-we-do/coordination-tools/cluster-coordination [Accessed: 6 May 2015].
40/ This is echoed by the authors of The State of the Humanitarian System report (see footnote 1 above) who consider that “clusters are also perceived to threaten humanitarian principles, where members are financially dependent on clusters or their lead organisations, and where clusters lead organisations are part of or close to integrated missions, peacekeeping forces or actors involved in conflict” [p.60].
42/ The need to deliver coordinated and complementary assistance is one of the Nine Commitments and quality criteria of the CHS.
These two examples show that, more than a rigid dogmatic framework, humanitarian principles provide a flexible and useful guide to cope with the political complexities of the environments in which humanitarian actors work. Neutrality and independence in particular are driven by the need to manage perceptions and gain acceptance by the authorities, parties to the conflict, influential leaders and the communities themselves. If the objective of an organisation is to deliver assistance and protection whenever there are needs across the entire territory in a given conflict, on either side of the frontline – as opposed to non-discriminatory aid at the programme level, such as in a given health centre – these principles are essential to gain access to, and work in proximity with, affected communities.

The constant and transparent dialogue with all parties, including non-state armed groups, is of paramount importance to cultivate confidence and acceptance, and dissipate possible misunderstandings and misperceptions.

Consistency, predictability and adaptability

However, the ICRC internal study shows that these principles are not sufficient in and of themselves to gain trust and acceptance. Other attributes such as transparency, consistency, confidentiality or discretion, and adaptability to the context appear crucial.

For instance, communicating transparently and in a consistent manner with all relevant parties and authorities is of paramount importance. Neutrality for example does not mean that a humanitarian organisation cannot work with a particular government to strengthen the capacity of its health ministry to meet its responsibilities vis-à-vis its population, or with a non-state armed group to provide international humanitarian law (IHL) training to its fighters. Yet, these kinds of activities can be misunderstood. One case study showed for example the importance of informing a rebel group to provide international humanitarian law (IHL) training to its fighters. Yet, these principles are not sufficient in and of themselves. Neutrality for example does not mean that a humanitarian organisation lends itself well to a ‘box-ticking’ or ‘one size fits all’ approach. Humanitarian principles provide a framework that must be used with consistency (which contributes to predictability, another important element of trust-building), intelligence and creativity. Internal case studies clearly show that the way neutrality is perceived – and presented – in situations of criminal or gang violence for instance,44 is different from situations of conflict that are more political in character. In one particular delegation for example, the ICRC developed a creative communication approach, called “neutralising the vocabulary”.

ICRC’s internal study shows the importance of contextualising the application of the principles.

whereby ICRC delegates identified antagonistic words such as “hitman” and “drug cartels”, the mere use of which could be perceived as reflecting a biased position, especially by some criminal groups. In this context, ICRC staff simply refrained from using such words, preferring more neutral phrases like “organised violence groups”. Although mostly cosmetic in appearance, this subtle communication shift, informed by the principle of Neutrality, considerably improved the dialogue with different stakeholders, resulting in greater acceptance of ICRC activities, better access and greater ability to engage communities and address their needs.

These different attributes must be nurtured as they enable and inform the relevant application of the principles across time and contexts. Ultimately, it is by showing consistency and predictability in the way it applies its principles – but also adaptability to the context – that the ICRC has managed to maintain its presence across frontlines, and over the years in some of the most complex and insecure contexts in the world, from Afghanistan to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia and Iraq. Indeed, it is not only the timely delivery of humanitarian assistance that defines humanitarian effectiveness, but also the ability to persuade all parties to respect their obligations in terms of protecting and assisting the communities they are responsible for. Fostering greater accountability among responsible authorities

44/ For an in-depth description of the role of the ICRC in such contexts, including a brief discussion on ICRC’s neutrality, see: ‘The ICRC’s role in situations of violence below the threshold of armed conflict’. ICRC. February 2014. Available at: http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayFulltext?type=1&fid=9326135&jid=IRC&volumeId=-1&issueId=-1&aid=9326091&bodyId=&membershipNumber=&societyETOCSession (Accessed: 7 May 2015).
Indeed, applying humanitarian principles contributes to gaining acceptance and securing access, enabling organisations to work in proximity to communities, listen to their concerns and aspirations, and address their needs in a relevant manner. – an often overlooked aspect of humanitarian effectiveness – must inevitably be pursued for the long haul and requires continuity and a relational aspect that the consistent application of the principles makes possible.

Conclusion

For the ICRC, humanitarian principles not only support and contribute to the effectiveness of humanitarian action, they also define it as a concept, which is understood primarily as addressing the objective needs of affected communities throughout a given territory affected by a crisis, in line with the principle of impartiality. While it is difficult to draw a measurable and quantitative causal link between principled humanitarian action and effectiveness – an objective that falls outside the scope of this chapter – there is undeniably a qualitative link. Indeed, applying humanitarian principles contributes to gaining acceptance and securing access, enabling organisations to work in proximity to communities, listen to their concerns and aspirations, and address their needs in a relevant manner. In turn, being relevant to affected communities is necessary to maintain their trust and acceptance. In that sense, proximity is a driver of accountability to communities, which is an important parameter of humanitarian effectiveness. In addition, if used intelligently, transparently and responsibly, humanitarian principles provide eminently pragmatic tools that help organisations to adapt and tailor their response to the specific conditions and requirements of the context – another defining element of humanitarian effectiveness – while ensuring consistency and predictability.

Similarly, humanitarian principles – especially independence and neutrality – are useful tools to inform and set the parameters for engagement with other actors such as governments, the military or private companies. They should not be an excuse, however, to avoid engaging with such actors, whose complementarity and added value should be recognised. Rather, they are meant to inform the degree of cooperation desirable, depending on the context, to ensure that such engagement is not detrimental to the ability of an organisation to deliver aid in an impartial manner, which is the ethical ‘bottom-line’ for humanitarian effectiveness and arguably the very added-value of humanitarianism itself. In this respect, humanitarian actors need to recognise and acknowledge that applying humanitarian principles also entails limitations with regard to the type of activities one might engage in. Humanitarian principles serve a specific purpose and preclude engagement in processes of a more political or transformative nature, which are often more likely to address root causes of crises. As Peter Maurer, President of the ICRC, recently explained: “In theory we all share the same aspirations for global peace, development and security, as well as the understanding about the limits of humanitarian action in addressing or preventing the causes of crisis. In practice however, our experience shows that emergency access to vulnerable populations in some of the most contested areas depends on the ability to isolate humanitarian goals from other transformative goals, be they economic, political, social or human rights related.”

Drawing on the above, a few key considerations should be further explored and reflected upon:

1. It is the responsibility of all actors involved in humanitarian response to be more honest about the scope of their ambitions and transparent about their ability or intent to apply humanitarian principles – or, indeed, on the actual relevance of humanitarian principles to achieve their own objectives.

2. Humanitarian principles have become a mantra that all humanitarian actors feel obliged to invoke, while not necessarily walking the talk. This inconsistency reinforces accusations of hypocrisy and distrust vis-à-vis aid actors, negatively impacting the ability of others to deliver effective humanitarian assistance and protection. Humanitarian actors should therefore refrain from dogmatic invocation of principles that they do not support through their actions.

3. Organisations genuinely committing to abide by and apply humanitarian principles must acknowledge and accept the limitations that doing so entails, and equip their staff with the necessary policy guidance and training to enable them to apply the principles consistently and flexibly.

Our experience shows that emergency access to vulnerable populations in some of the most contested areas depends on the ability to isolate humanitarian goals from other transformative goals, be they economic, political, social or human rights related.

A line of internally displaced persons waiting for aid in Kibati, 12 km north of Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo. © ACT International
Originally, this chapter was going to focus on the positive developments in strengthening assessment practices and their impact on the overall efforts to make the humanitarian system more accountable. However, while writing the first draft, I had a conversation with an academic who had recently returned from West Africa where he had been doing research on the response to the Ebola epidemic. When asked what the biggest challenge had been, he answered “to get humanitarians to admit that they actually make decisions.”

The question posed by this remark is whether the main obstacle to improved accountability is not that we do not have an adequate evidence base for making decisions, but rather that humanitarians do not like making themselves accountable for the decisions they make. Therefore, instead of examining progress towards a stronger evidence base for decision-making, this chapter focuses on how humanitarians make decisions, and how to make that decision-making process more accountable.

Gandalfs and geeks: strengthening the accountability of humanitarian decision-making

What do we know about how humanitarian decisions are made, and how can we use it to get to more accountable decision-making, asks Lars Peter Nissen.
In the absence of a strong and commonly accepted evidence base, humanitarian decision-making is more susceptible to political pressures.

What is the problem?

There are four main obstacles to more accountable, transparent decision-making. Firstly, the operational environment itself. The magnitude, diversity and complexity of disasters stretch the capacity of humanitarian actors, pushing agencies to balance the allocation of scarce resources between assessment, coordination and response. Gathering the evidence and working to make sense of a humanitarian crisis requires a significant investment in terms of time and money, and once engaged in a response, coordination and response tend to take priority, while assessment and sense-making are given less ongoing attention.

Secondly, humanitarian architecture plays a role. Aid organisations have diverse mandates, histories, capabilities and interests. This leads to different information needs and priorities, which tend to influence organisational assessments. Just as to a hammer every problem looks like a nail, so to a medical humanitarian agency, every problem looks like a health emergency. This makes it difficult for organisations to agree on one overall narrative for any given common assessment approach and, in turn, to one common understanding of the problem. Without this basic shared understanding or framing of the problem, it is difficult to agree on shared priorities across organisations and sectors.

Thirdly, humanitarian organisations are competing for scarce resources. In the absence of a strong and commonly accepted evidence base, humanitarian decision-making is more susceptible to political pressures. As a result, decisions may be informed more by institutional self-interest than by the needs of the affected communities.

The fourth obstacle is less well-known than adverse field conditions, sectoral ‘tunnel vision’, and competition: it is the fundamental disagreement among humanitarians about whether experience or evidence is the key to making good decisions.

Evidence or experience?

The first school of thought, led by wise old ‘Gandalfs’, values experience as the key element in decision-making. A Gandalf has typically spent a lot of time in the humanitarian sector and appears at the critical moment, waves a wand, and solves the problem at hand. In a recent conversation with a typical Gandalf on the 2015 Nepal earthquake response, I argued that it was really good to have the first overall reports of the scope and scale of the disaster come out just 12 hours after the event. The reply? By that time, this particular Gandalf had already done his analysis and, he said, “I got it right!” — in other words, all that was needed to make up his mind about the disaster were a few initial reports on the event and his extensive experience.

The second school of thought is among a group of people one could describe as ‘geeks’. A typical geek will have a strong focus on clear, quantifiable indicators, which can be measured through extensive collection of data using either traditional questionnaire interviews with affected people or ‘big data’ crowd-sourcing approaches. With these, the geek will summarise the status of a district, village or family. In other words, the geek places the same trust in an algorithm or composite measure as Gandalf does in experience.

The second different decision-making approaches should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Rather they are two different ‘mental gears’, which are both useful, depending on the context. In stable, information-rich settings without urgent pressure to make decisions, the geeks’ rational approach works best. In highly dynamic environments with large information gaps and pressure to make decisions, Gandalf’s approach to decision-making is likely to be most effective.

The role of evidence in decision-making

The overall conclusion emerging from the study of humanitarian decision-making is that the rationale for humanitarian action is constructed without significant use of current evidence. When a new disaster occurs, the humanitarian system essentially repeats past operations, with minor adjustments. A study from 2012 reached the overall conclusion that there is a high level of ‘path dependency’ in decision-making, meaning that decisions on what to do in any given crisis is to a large extent based on what was done during the last emergency.

The humanitarian sector must therefore be challenged to open up the ‘black box’ and make explicit the evidence base, assumptions and options considered in coming to any given decision.

1/ Gandalf is a wise old wizard from J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy.
2/ Nate Silver. The Signal and the Noise.
3/ See for example Gary Klein. Streetlights and Shadows.
Sabita Moktan in front of her destroyed house in Bhattedanda, Nepal. © ACYFCA/Antti Helin
The study found this to be true both in contexts with strong governmental control of information, as well as in contexts where an ‘international narrative’ dominated.\(^4\)

A 2004 study of needs assessment practices in the humanitarian sector found that: “The apparently mutual tendency of agencies and donors to ‘construct’ and ‘solve’ crises with little reference to evidence erodes trust in the system, and calls for a greater emphasis on evidence-based responses.”\(^5\)

However, a 2006 paper, *Evidence-based decision-making in the humanitarian sector*, noted that “knowledge and evidence are not the bottleneck, but rather the lack of political and organisational will to act on knowledge.”\(^6\)

In other words, the way in which the evidence base is translated into decisions is a ‘black box’: that is, we know what goes into the box (information) and what comes out (decisions), but the process whereby information is translated into decisions is not clear.

From an accountability point of view, this is the key issue. If it is not possible to examine a decision-making process, it is also not possible to evaluate the quality of the decision. The humanitarian sector must therefore be challenged to open up the ‘black box’ and make explicit the evidence base, assumptions and options considered in coming to any given decision.

### The best of both worlds

We are far from the ambition set out in the CHS with respect to having an impartial assessment of needs that we can base our programming on. But the starting-point in changing decision-making culture is therefore not to build the evidence base for decisions, but to recognise the political nature of decisions. Decision-makers prioritise scarce resources between geographical areas, sectors and beneficiary groups.

Neither experience nor evidence will remove the need to consciously choose between different options. Humanitarians at times work in murky environments where information is scarce, the situation is rapidly changing and there is great pressure to make decisions. In these situations, decision-making will tend to be heavily experience-based. When humanitarian action takes place in more stable situations, where more information is available and there is time to consider different options, evidence will play a stronger role. No matter which approach is used, the key to strengthening the accountability of decision-making is openness around the way in which decisions are made. As humanitarians we need to admit not only that we make decisions, we also need to be open about how we make them. This change in decision-making culture is the key to making us more accountable to the crisis-affected people we serve.

As humanitarians we need to admit not only that we make decisions, we also need to be open about how we make them.

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6/ David A. Bradt. Evidence-based decision-making in humanitarian assistance.
Would you recommend this aid programme to a friend?

Nick van Praag explores how customer satisfaction techniques more commonly associated with the commercial world can improve humanitarian performance.

The world is still a long way from treating those whose lives are disrupted by conflict or natural disaster as they ought to be treated: as stakeholders in aid with valuable insight into running humanitarian programmes designed to serve their needs and respect their rights. Yet including greater input from their side can surely only add to the effectiveness of these programmes. It is generally accepted that greater accountability to affected people is a good idea in theory. The challenge today is to ensure it is acted upon in practice. This chapter describes a way of meeting this challenge with a methodology that embraces techniques honed in a world where the customer is king. There are many pitfalls in employing an approach inspired by the customer-satisfaction industry – pitfalls that have blunted other tools of accountability – but its record in the commercial world suggests it can lead to a tipping point in the quest for more responsive aid.

In the humanitarian space, the first systematic attempt to put accountability into operation was the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, an agenda ironically approved in 1994 while the horrors of...
the Rwanda genocide were underway. The chaos of the ensuing relief operation clearly showed that all was not well with the humanitarian system. An evaluation released the following year criticised the humanitarian community’s response for its poor coordination and lack of accountability to either donors or affected people.

Several initiatives were launched in the following decade to do things better. They included an array of standards, codes of conduct, capacity-building programmes, learning initiatives and certification schemes, aimed at spelling out the rationale for accountability, giving guidance on how to make it happen and introducing certification to give a stamp of approval to organisations making the grade. Evaluations of the responses to the 2004 tsunami and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti concluded there was still considerable room for improvement. The conclusions were echoed in DFID’s 2011 Humanitarian Emergency Response Review and later in a joint report by Save the Children, Christian Aid and the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP).

A common thread was the failure of humanitarian actors to consult thoroughly with affected populations or give them a chance to offer their perspective on either relief programmes or the performance of the agencies charged with implementing them.

The most recent effort to address flaws in the accountability architecture is the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), which combines and rationalises the main elements of the leading quality and accountability initiatives – HAP, the Sphere Project and People In Aid. While still in pilot mode in order to let operational agencies test indicators and provide feedback, the CHS breaks new ground with guidelines that stress the importance of giving people supposed to benefit from humanitarian aid the opportunity to say whether or not they actually do so.

Lessons from the commercial world

The CHS indicators are a major advance on previous efforts to encourage greater accountability. If they are followed systematically, the perceptions of affected people could produce the same effect as customers’ views have in the commercial world. Take Continental Airlines for example: it reversed its fortunes by taking stock of, tracking and responding to the views of its customers.

1/ The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief was developed and agreed upon by eight of the world’s largest disaster response agencies in 1994. See: https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-1067.pdf.
3/ For example, HAP’s Standard on Quality and Accountability, People In Aid’s Code of Good Practice, the Sphere Project’s Handbook, the INGO Accountability Charter, the CDAC Network, CDA, ALNAP and so on.
If the sequence of collecting information, learning and course correction is repeated at regular intervals, it can become a powerful tool of both accountability and performance management.

companies adopt successful strategies, while those that have turned a deaf ear to their customers have mostly perished. More recently, Apple’s success owes a lot to its laser-like focus on its customers. Companies don’t inquire into customers’ views out of good manners. Rather, they recognise that customer feedback is a powerful source of intelligence which, when responded to credibly, can help them raise their game and gain a competitive edge. The principle of valuing feedback has now penetrated areas as disparate as education, local government, water supply, health care and philanthropy. Even the notoriously officious security teams at London’s Heathrow Airport will inquire about the traveller’s experience with their ‘service.’

The customer service industry has become increasingly adept at collecting data without burdening clients with too many questions. A minimalist approach to data collection has taken over thanks to the American business strategist Fred Reichheld. In the mid-1990s he waded through thousands of previously asked questions and came up with what he called the Ultimate Question: ‘Would you recommend this to a friend?’ By posing a single question and scoring responses on a scale of 0 to 10, Reichheld provided a key measure of performance (customer loyalty) that can be tracked over time. His was a simple advance on the industry norm—time-consuming, multiple-question surveys that discouraged would-be respondents.

In a wide range of activities, the perception of the end-user is increasingly recognised not just as a gauge of what works but as a valuable tool to fix things that are broken and to alert organisations when new problems arise.

‘Exit’ and ‘voice’

Deploying these techniques in education and government, where people have both established rights and the luxury of choice, makes sense. But does the power of customer feedback translate to the humanitarian space, where affected people have little leverage and where incentives to use the data are small? In other words, can the customer service approach work in the context of market failure or in the absence of a market to begin with? The economist A.O. Hirschman grappled with this dilemma in his 1970 study of how people respond to the deteriorating quality of goods, services and other benefits in a non-competitive environment. He singled out two possible courses of action: ‘exit’ (withdraw from the situation) or ‘voice’ (improve things by complaining or suggesting how to resolve a grievance). A dissatisfied customer can take his or her business elsewhere or talk to the proverbial manager; a victim of political oppression can flee or protest; and a disgruntled worker can find another job or seek redress from their employer. To put this in the context of humanitarian aid, where options are limited, ‘exit’ relates not to physical flight but rather to psychological disengagement as people’s sense of alienation grows. ‘Voice’ on the other hand implies enabling people to communicate their views with the confidence that doing so will make a difference, hence lowering the likelihood of ‘exit’. Enabling ‘voice’ is not just a matter of listening, it also means providing affected communities with information about what they can realistically expect or demand, and about the limits of aid agencies’ capacity to respond.

As the relief effort in Nepal moved into recovery mode a few weeks after the April 2015 earthquake, Humanitarian Coordinator Jamie McGoldrick told his country team:

"Communities need to receive information about who is doing what and where, and importantly, when. This means informing affected people of your agency’s plans during distributions, field visits, assessments and health checks. To be sure, informing people about what is happening and what they can expect from the relief effort is an important first step. But the real game-changer is to systematically collect their views on key aspects of the programme, analyse what they say and communicate the resulting insight back to the affected communities; then, through dialogue, work out how to translate the feedback into a more effective humanitarian response. Hence the proposition explored in this chapter: if the sequence of collecting information, learning and course correction is repeated at regular intervals, it can become a powerful tool of both accountability and performance management.

Constituent Voice

This is the essence of the Constituent Voice (CV) methodology that cuts through to measuring real progress against intended results while fostering trust between implementers and affected people. CV draws on the participatory development thinking of people like Paulo Freire and Robert Chambers as well as A.O. Hirschman’s work. Likewise, it embraces techniques borrowed from the customer service industry.

Adapting aspects of the customer service approach to humanitarian work does not simply mean asking internally displaced people (IDPs) or refugees whether they are satisfied. The experience of Ground Truth Solutions, the programme I manage, shows that questions work best when they relate desired programme results to things worrying the affected people: Do they feel safe? Do they feel better prepared for another natural disaster?

Adapting aspects of the customer service approach to humanitarian work does not simply mean asking internally displaced people (IDPs) or refugees whether they are satisfied.

11/ CDAC Skype feed. 11 May 2015.
Ground Truth Solutions has now tested this approach with several operational partners in programmes as wide-ranging as the post-earthquake transition in Haiti, recovery from the 2010-11 floods in Pakistan, assistance and integration of displaced people in Ukraine, and the Ebola response in Sierra Leone. The focus of inquiry is on people’s perceptions concerning four themes which, based on preliminary evidence from our work in this diverse range of programmes, offer insight into how effective and efficient they are. These themes are:

- **Relationships**: this measures the nature of the relationship between ‘benefactor’ and ‘beneficiary’ through questions concerning trust, competence, respect, responsiveness and so on. It is linked with Hirschman’s views on what drives ‘exit’, with the assumption that disengaged people are more likely to pull back and become less involved in the search for solutions.

- **Services**: this relates to the nuts and bolts of humanitarian action – perceptions on the quality, timeliness and relevance of services such as protection, camp management, shelter, water, sanitation, the distribution of non-food items and cash-transfer programmes.

- **Agency**: this establishes whether people feel able to help find solutions or see themselves as passive recipients of aid. The hypothesis tested here is that empowered people drive effective programmes, whereas alienated ones do the opposite.

- **Results**: this covers disaster-hit people’s viewpoints on the outcomes of aid programmes, by asking how they rate progress relative to improvements in their living conditions and other desired programme results.

### Rapid cycle, continuous insight

The CV approach is rapid-cycle and asks a representative sample of the population only a few questions – from 5 to 10 per survey – but it asks them often. By requiring respondents to score questions – yes/no/don’t know or on a scale of 0 to 10 – answers can be measured and tracked over time. Each round of answers provides aid managers with an updated sense of what is working and what isn’t. Understanding **why** comes from responses to follow-up questions (‘Why did you answer as you did?’) and from further insight provided by affected people during dialogue sessions designed to make sense of the feedback. As the data builds up over time, the story becomes clearer and provides an increasingly robust guide to action.

In Haiti, for example, high levels of insecurity in the IDP camps contributed to a decision to speed up relocations to homes outside the camps, while post-relocation surveys conducted at regular intervals showed that people felt safe and welcome in their new homes. These findings had a bearing on the next stage of the programme. Instead of placing equal weight on community-integration and activities to generate income, which was thought a reasonable balance in the design of the programme, aid agencies shifted the emphasis to helping recipients earn a living. In Ukraine, regular feedback from internally displaced people pointed to the inadequacy of information they were receiving on humanitarian services. The response was two-fold: to provide more specific information on a website targeting IDPs and to upgrade outreach on social media, the information source of choice for young people. In Pakistan, villagers affected by flooding in Sindh in 2010 and 2011 made clear through successive surveys that they did not feel prepared to cope with another natural disaster, which had been a primary goal of the programme. Their responses to a five-question survey carried out every three months brought actionable suggestions for turning their plight around.

### Questions and answers

Designing the right questions is the starting point. It requires diving deep into the ‘theory of change’ of a given programme, i.e. what it sets out to achieve. The next step is checking with the affected people themselves. In Haiti, for example, separate focus groups for men and women were held in the three locations covered by the pilot programme to learn first-hand how they saw things. Analysis of the goals and the input from affected people was then reduced to a list of five questions designed to provide a ‘ping’ of feedback at regular intervals on what all agreed were key issues. The final version of the questionnaire...
included additional input from programme managers and was again checked with people from the affected communities to make sure they were comfortable with phrasing and translation.

Here the aim is to produce questions likely to bring out issues that are both important to affected people and can be acted upon by aid managers. The former want aid that is more responsive to their needs and enables them to play their part in finding solutions. The latter want feedback that informs their decision-making and helps them run better programmes – in other words, they want perceptions to which they can respond.

In Pakistan, where local government is in partnership with a large national NGO in a community-driven recovery programme, one of the questions asked how far the affected people trusted local officials to support their community's efforts. When they consistently answered “not much”, the NGO partner encouraged local government officials to take their role in the programme more seriously. As they did so, feedback became more positive. The pace of data collection can be adjusted to balance the humanitarian agencies’ ability to digest and act on feedback with the need to adapt the line of inquiry to a fast-changing situation. At the height of the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, for example, data was collected from the general public every week, and fortnightly from frontline workers. In protracted situations, like Pakistan and Haiti, three-month intervals between rounds of data collection have been adequate. The right frequency depends on both the volatility of the disaster situation and agencies’ capacity to process feedback and act on the findings. When this capacity is relatively low, the way to reduce survey fatigue on both sides is to match the pace of data collection with the ability of aid managers to absorb it. In emergencies, changing survey questions to take account of fast-moving challenges ensures fresh insight and a more compelling narrative, which in turn helps drive interest and action. Take Sierra Leone, where a question that worried responders early in the crisis was whether harassment at checkpoints undermined the effort to stop people from moving around and thus spreading the disease. Once confirmed cases declined and restrictions on freedom of movement were lifted, the checkpoint question was removed and replaced with one about gender-based violence – an issue that became a major concern in the later stages of the Ebola response.

Data collection technologies

Modern communications technologies work in a wide range of country settings. In low-technology areas such as eastern parts of Pakistan’s Sindh province, data collectors use clipboards and pens and go from home-to-home to collect data. In more connected places like Haiti, they conduct face-to-face interviews and upload responses on their smart phones. In Sierra Leone, SMS was a more practical method for conducting the six-question survey of public perceptions about the Ebola response from a randomly selected sample of the country’s population. Feedback was solicited weekly at first. Later, as the sense of urgency diminished, the pace of data collection slowed to fortnightly. Cost is a limitation when using SMS to hone in on specific provinces because it requires the same sample size (some 350 people for a 95% ‘confidence interval’), regardless of whether the focus is on a particular district or the country as a whole. To obtain more detailed feedback from specific locations, our data collectors used cell phones to call frontline workers using telephone numbers provided by the agencies employing them. A widening range of apps and platforms make collecting this kind of feedback increasingly feasible.

Targeting the Ebola response

In Sierra Leone, programme managers had access to a regular stream of real-time data highlighting people’s sense of the overall success of the Ebola response as well as the link between the stigma of carrying the disease and the willingness to report it. Humanitarian staff used the findings
to improve programme services such as conditions in quarantine, the thoroughness with which houses were decontaminated and the effectiveness of awareness campaigns encouraging people to avoid bodily contact. As for stigma, frontline workers’ feedback showed that fear of social rejection made people reluctant to report cases. These findings helped trigger a communications campaign to encourage the public to see things differently. It worked. Over the course of several weeks frontline workers reported a decrease in the feelings of personal shame that earlier impeded their efforts.

Triangulating objectively verified data with a continuous flow of snapshots of affected people’s viewpoints can validate the percipience of their answers. The graph below illustrates the relationship between people’s views of progress in fighting the virus and WHO data on newly confirmed cases. Asking people about progress in curbing the disease is similar to the ‘right/wrong direction’ question used in political polling and provides a broad indicator of progress. While their answers do not tell the whole story, they can prompt follow-up scrutiny through focus groups and interviews with key respondents to get to the bottom of things. In Sierra Leone, where face-to-face meetings were difficult because of the danger of contracting Ebola, additional information came through surveys specifically centering on people’s experience of quarantine and the decontamination of their homes. The telephone survey of people in quarantine helped clarify what the problems were: a lack of medicine, children’s food and water for washing and cooking. These issues were eventually addressed.

Lessons from experience
So what lessons have we learned so far in testing this approach?

Data collection
It is possible to collect data on affected people’s perceptions quickly and regularly by asking a few key questions often enough for programme managers to get a regularly updated picture of evolving sentiment. Obtaining a representative sample for each survey is relatively straightforward when surveying people in camps or rural villages. For out-of-camp populations, especially in urban areas, it is more difficult. In Haiti, for example, as people left camps and moved back into urban neighborhoods, the sample size fell from 700 in the first round to 500 in subsequent rounds. Even when there is access to names, addresses and GPS coordinates – as was the case in Haiti – people may not be at home when the data collector calls. Shortcomings in the sample size are overcome to an extent by the regularity of data collection, providing managers with a good sense of the trend rather than a precise reading at any point in time. Identifying and training data collectors depends on the instrument used to make the survey. Local data collection capacity is widely available and can be supplemented by mobile survey platforms such as GeoPoll for SMS and other phone-based survey instruments. Once collected, data can be analysed and visualised rapidly with standard tools like R, Tableau or Excel.

Data analysis and visualisation
Asking fewer questions means that data can be processed quickly. Ground Truth’s target turn-around time is 48 hours – from raw data to final report. To make the data more accessible for end users, the emphasis is on clear graphics and minimal commentary. Programme managers want digestible findings, but also recommendations to spark deliberation and follow-up action.

Dialogue and communication
Verifying and making sense of feedback through dialogue with individuals and focus groups is essential. However, most operational agencies have limited capacity to run focus groups
The distribution of hygiene materials to targeted communities in Kakata district, Margibi county, Liberia. Materials include buckets, chlorine, soap and awareness raising posters and T-shirts.
or to listen in a way that provides insight. Nor is there much investment in developing staff capacity to do these things. There are, however, several promising approaches to this kind of dialogue pioneered for instance by CDAC, Integrity Action and Cordaid, who all offer valuable ways of managing this phase of the feedback cycle. A growing number of organisations are also working on communicating with disaster-hit communities. They have an important role to play in ensuring that people are informed about humanitarian services.

Course correction

Continuous signals from feedback data provide regular squibs of intelligence that, while not painting a complete picture, may merit investigation and follow-up. The more frequent the rounds of feedback, the more compelling the data. Our experience suggests that it takes two or three rounds of data collection before the case for course correction reaches a critical mass. Even when the feedback is persuasive, moving to corrective action remains a challenge. Humanitarian agencies may be held back by competing demands on busy staff, the voluntary nature of compliance, rigid mindsets and skewed power relations. The inertia is amplified when several organisations are working together in a cluster or some other multi-agency framework. When this is the case, aid teams are reluctant to revisit an action plan that was hard to agree in the first place and is encumbered, by the time it is funded, with additional donor conditions.

Incentives, incentives, incentives

As is so often the case, incentives are crucial. With growing evidence that paying attention to the feelings and concerns of disaster-hit people delivers results, the challenge is to make it happen.

My shortlist of incentives includes the following:

1. Providing field managers with a tested and accepted way of gauging, tracking and acting on feedback from those they are assisting (a tool they say they currently lack). At the moment there are so many competing approaches to accountability that managers find it hard to know which to use or how best to combine them. An industry standard bringing together essential features of a range of tools would be the stronger for placing less emphasis on the reporting of often non-essential measures of output and outcome.

2. Encouraging affected people to provide more candid feedback, by acting on what they say and letting them know, through systematic two-way communication, what has been done with their feedback. It is still rare for survey results and follow-up actions to be communicated back to communities. This makes it harder to create and sustain the trust that is essential if affected people are to engage without suspicion and play a bigger part in finding solutions.

3. Getting donors to keep pushing things forward. Some are already funding efforts to build the evidence base on the effectiveness of feedback systems and to promote better understanding of the benefits they bring. Donors should also consider removing reporting requirements that add little value so that agency staff can put their time to better use, not least to engage with affected people. Donors also have an important role to play in addressing entrenched power in the humanitarian system that they alone are in a position to challenge. At present, aid agencies pay a low price for failing to deliver on the accountability agenda. That is now beginning to change but it is time for donors to crank up the pace. In December 2014, the US Congress passed legislation mandating the collection of feedback (as well as evidence of how that feedback is being used) for all humanitarian organisations receiving US funds. DFID, SDC and other government donors are considering similar conditions. Private donors such as the IKEA Foundation and the Conrad Hilton Foundation are also pushing this agenda forward.

4. Encouraging aid agency management to develop internal cultures that prompt staff to become keen listeners to affected people, and equally keen learners. Preliminary evidence from Ground Truth’s work suggests that the stronger the management buy-in, the more robust the follow-through at the programme level. This means top managers must go beyond the rhetoric of accountability and align staff career opportunities with proven commitment to engage with affected people.

Conclusions

Over the last two decades much effort has gone into repositioning people we used to call aid beneficiaries as partners in the design and implementation of relief programmes. But calls for greater accountability have not done nearly enough to induce change in an aid sector reluctant to embrace it. Still, there is compelling evidence that continuously tracking affected people’s perceptions and learning from their feedback improves performance. The hybrid method described in this chapter builds on much existing good practice. By adding insight from the customer service industry it creates a fresh approach to accountability: as an instrument of verification it underpins the progress enshrined in the CHS; as a tool of performance management, it supports the World Humanitarian Summit’s focus on aid effectiveness; and as a new element in the emerging architecture of accountability, it helps ensure that agencies responding to catastrophes respect the basic rights of the people they are there to help. It cannot of course be the end of the search for greater accountability in the humanitarian system, which will come only when affected people are accepted as co-managers of aid. It is, however, a promising way station on the path to that distant goal.
As the Syrian conflict enters its fifth year, the political resolve needed to end the violence is still a long way off, and the humanitarian needs are ever increasing. According to the latest figures, almost 220,000 Syrians have lost their lives to the fighting.1

Nearly a third of Syria’s population has been confined in areas under siege or internally displaced, whilst another 3.2 million have sought asylum outside of the country.2

Crossing the Lebanese border was relatively unrestricted for Syrians until January 2015.3 The resulting influx of 1.2 million refugees has put Lebanon under huge economic and social strain, throwing Syria’s neighbour into a catastrophic situation of its own.4

National and international NGOs: equal partners?

International actors on the humanitarian scene don’t always have all the answers, writes Dr. Kamel Mohanna. Involving in-country partners on a more equal footing would deliver better humanitarian results.

As the Syrian conflict enters its fifth year, the political resolve needed to end the violence is still a long way off, and the humanitarian needs are ever increasing. According to the latest figures, almost 220,000 Syrians have lost their lives to the fighting.5 Nearly a third of Syria’s population has been confined in areas under siege or internally displaced, whilst another 3.2 million have sought asylum outside of the country.6

Crossing the Lebanese border was relatively unrestricted for Syrians until January 2015.7 The resulting influx of 1.2 million refugees has put Lebanon under huge economic and social strain, throwing Syria’s neighbour into a catastrophic situation of its own.8

The number of refugees at present represents approximately a third of Lebanon’s population, and despite the work of the humanitarian community, a great many of their needs are still unmet. The effectiveness of humanitarian assistance has so far been challenged not only by the unprecedented nature of the conflict (i.e. the deliberate targeting of civilians and humanitarian actors, and the proliferation and fragmentation of armed groups) but also by political deadlock and an insufficient level of international solidarity.

Despite the urgency of the situation, the lack of support and solidarity from both governments and civil society within the international community is being keenly felt by Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey – the countries bearing the primary burden of sheltering and providing for an “unrelenting” flow of Syrian refugees. An equivalent of less than 2% of the number of Syrian refugees found in these five countries has been resettled elsewhere in the international community, with many Gulf countries being the least willing to offer asylum. The reluctance of the international community to share the responsibility increases the pressure on the main host countries to provide a competent humanitarian response. In addition, increasing financial constraints (the Regional Response Plan to the Syrian crisis was 67% funded in 2014, but only 24% by June 2015) make accountable interventions challenging to say the least. The integrity of the entire humanitarian response in Lebanon must therefore be reconsidered, to ensure that a genuine commitment to accountability drives the humanitarian response. Given their dynamic interaction with all stakeholders and the value that this adds, national NGOs should play a key role in suggesting improvements centred on the well-being of the most vulnerable.

The current situation, that sees funding flowing to INGOs rather than to national humanitarian organisations, is largely driven by the unwillingness of donors to handle a large amount of partners. They also have an interest in delegating grant-related risk management to UN agencies or INGOs. It has however not necessarily resulted in the most appropriate or cost-effective responses on the ground. To take the case of Lebanon, amongst approximately 100 actors involved in assessing needs and identifying response mechanisms, only 16 were national NGOs. This is not new. The influx of international NGOs that started in the early 1990s changed the face of humanitarianism in Lebanon. The development of the “Charity Business”, the proliferation of “BONGOs” (business-orientated NGOs) and the use of an increasingly bureaucratic, technocratic and compliance-orientated approach to programming by international actors has moved the focus of the response away from our substantive mission and sidelined the incredible value national NGOs deliver through their daily human interactions at the grassroots level.

The current situation, that sees funding flowing to INGOs rather than to national humanitarian organisations, is largely driven by the unwillingness of donors to handle a large amount of partners.

As external organisations and agencies have started to work in Lebanon, local expertise and knowledge have been increasingly overlooked, with humanitarian intervention adapted to conform to the standards of international organisations. The expertise and resources that INGOs commonly bring must of course be acknowledged. But while logical frameworks, performance indicators and other evaluation tools are essential for transparent action, national NGOs have found that these often undermine rather than support the contextual relevance of interventions. Evaluation mechanisms are necessary, particularly when it comes to donor accountability, but do they actually support accountability to beneficiaries as well? The results of consultations leading up to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) indicate that there are indeed obstacles to effective humanitarian response that relate to the insufficient role national actors are allowed to play in the system.

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If we are to deliver principled and effective humanitarian action, there need to be more equal partnerships between organisations from North and South, which value and balance what both national and international NGOs have to offer. We all know what needs to be done, and international stakeholders have committed to the equal partnership agenda in 2007. Now we need to move from rhetoric to practice. A stronger combination of local knowledge and technical expertise is needed to ensure the needs and dignity of those we assist are met.

Contributing to values of integrity and commitment within the humanitarian sector, the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) determines the essential elements for carrying out quality humanitarian action. Amel has worked for years along the lines of the HAP Standard and considers its successor, the CHS, to be equally relevant to its work. This chapter looks at examples of how they have already been used in the field, and discusses the kind of relationship needed between national and international NGOs for these standards to be more effectively incorporated into humanitarian action in Lebanon. We will consider in particular the links between national NGOs and local communities, project sustainability, use of local knowledge and staff, the importance of collaboration and communication between actors, and access to funding.

**Strong links with local communities: a foundation to understanding needs**

The outcome the CHS expects from humanitarian organisations is well-timed assistance that is appropriate and timely.

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11/ These obstacles include the following: a) The international humanitarian system does not take sufficient account of national actors, and should change to ensure it does so; b) National actors are not effectively represented in governance mechanisms of the humanitarian system; c) Direct international funding for national NGOs is insufficient, and overly complex procedures and aversion to risk prevents local NGOs from receiving direct funding; d) Funding for capacity-building in civil society is limited and approaches to capacity-building have not always been effective; and e) National NGO networks receive only limited support. See: ‘Good humanitarian action is led by the state and builds on local response capacities wherever possible’ (Global Forum Briefing Paper 4). ALNAP. 2015. Available at: [http://www.alnap.org/resource/20243](http://www.alnap.org/resource/20243). [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

relevant to needs. That is to say, ensuring that programmes respond to needs and take account of risk assessments in their design. The evolution of the response to the Syrian crisis on Lebanese soil requires an ongoing revision process to ensure that programmes continue to be relevant to the changing situation. Given the strong relationships that national NGOs have with beneficiaries and other stakeholders, founded on a long-standing, reliable presence, and an intimate understanding of context and culture, national actors are well positioned to gather relevant information from different sources. Such trust, developed over time through “tightknit community relations” and proximity, gives national NGOs privileged access to vulnerable community members and the ability to quickly and efficiently identify their needs. This is a feature that large international NGOs recently arrived in the region struggle to deliver swiftly. It follows therefore that the grassroots experience and legitimacy of national NGOs should be given more value by the international community. Through committed and passionate individuals, we can ensure that humanitarian assistance is constantly improved and dealt with, and, ultimately, that assistance are adjusted, complaints are acknowledged improved, lessons are learned, programmes are strengthened and preventing negative impacts, due to their familiarity with the context and the probability that they will remain in the country, supporting projects after international staff have moved on.

Local knowledge and staff: a basis for sustainability and programme continuity

Another important feature of the CHS resides in the importance it gives to measuring the impact of humanitarian action, ensuring that local capacities are strengthened and preventing negative effects. The Syrian crisis is no longer solely a humanitarian but now also a development issue. A response to the crisis cannot be based only on short-term projects, but should also plan for the day when international organisations will have left the scene. This means, in particular for national NGOs, advocating for improved governmental protection and service provision, designing empowering projects that do not create aid-dependent communities, and delivering positive impacts from interventions. There are a number of reasons why local NGOs are central to sustainable humanitarian and development action: they predominantly employ local staff who – often in contrast to expatriates – are able to communicate in local languages, understand the culture, stay longer with organisations and are less expensive (i.e. in terms of salaries, per diems and other benefits). These professionals provide much-needed continuity and are also better placed to avoid interventions that create negative impacts, due to their familiarity with the context and the probability that they will remain in the country, supporting projects after international staff have moved on.

Cooperation between international and national organisations is key to running effective projects. However, this partnership must build and protect the capacity of individuals and organisations who will continue their work long after international organisations have left, so that vulnerable communities can be supported on the way to post-conflict transition. National NGOs must be viewed as the stable humanitarian presence through which change happens.

Given the importance of local staff to national NGOs, the institutional knowledge they possess, and the time and resources Lebanese NGOs have invested in them, it is worrying (though understandable) to see many of them moving into better paid jobs.

A response to the crisis cannot be based only on short-term projects, but should also plan for the day when international organisations will have left the scene.

A majority of HCT and DMT members considers that HCTs are fully open to local actors while a majority of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) considers them as only “somewhat open” to local actors.

Adapted from: World Humanitarian Summit, Regional Consultation for North and South-East Asia, 2014, p.9.

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with international organisations. When this happens, not only is the sustainability and capacity of national NGOs undermined, but also the accountability of the ‘implementing partners’ of international organisations, because they are often one and the same.

We have already discussed the long-term positive impacts of building local capacity and retaining local staff. To achieve this, we must ensure respect for the salary scales and capacities of smaller NGOs, so that the humanitarian ecosystem continues to include small but strong and healthy national NGOs. Maybe, as suggested later on in this publication, international organisations should reflect on their often stated commitment to the development of national capacity, and find a way to fairly compensate the damage they inflict on national NGOs when they poach their staff.

**Forums for dialogue: ensuring comprehensive service provision**

Communication and coordination are essential for an effective intervention. The CHS states that communities and people affected by crisis should have access to information, know their rights and entitlements, and participate in decisions that affect them, within a context where assistance is coordinated and complementary.

Feedback received in a recent stakeholder analysis in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region highlighted that participants were often confused over which organisation was providing which service, and noted duplication in certain areas. The UN cluster approach is intended to avoid such duplication and gaps in service provision, yet does not always succeed, not least because of the variation in funding of the various components of the response plan. For example, WASH programmes received 128% of requested funding in the last month of 2014, whilst the sector of Social Cohesion and Livelihoods, a domain particularly important to the Lebanese context, received just 10% of its target for employment assistance, income generation and business development projects, and 32% for technical training, literacy initiatives and life-skills training. Does the funding landscape reflect the priorities of communities or the interest of donors for specific sectors?

Ensuring that the work of national and local authorities as well as other humanitarian organisations is coordinated and complementary is one of the keys to effective interventions. To achieve that, the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis cannot be led solely by international organisations, while ignoring the value national actors can bring. This is not to deny the value and technical expertise international organisations provide, but rather acknowledge and use existing capacities. For example, national networks, such as the Lebanese NGOs Network, can allow for in-depth mapping of well-rooted, stable services that can act as a basis for responsible and sustainable referral systems. It is positive that Amel, a Lebanese NGO, is as a member of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and other national and international forums. There is however still a long way to go to full acknowledgement that the humanitarian community cannot do without the value national actors can bring.

**Astronomical sums are often spent by international agencies on administration, coordination and security, or for managing the funds that allow national NGOs to implement programmes.**

National NGOs must be viewed as the stable humanitarian presence through which change happens.

Communication and coordination are not only essential between humanitarian actors themselves, but between NGOs and their beneficiaries as well. Techniques to communicate effectively with beneficiaries have of course been developed by the international humanitarian community, but the key to their success is often dependent on understanding of culture and context, and use of appropriate language and dialects. National NGOs are better equipped than international organisations to ensure this is true for field staff and senior management alike. When senior managers don’t have to rely on translators to follow the news or communicate with local communities and refugees, they are more likely to interact with the communities they intend to serve and make impartial, well-informed decisions.

The importance of focused and accessible funding

Responsible use and management of resources is essential in reaching a balance between quality, cost and effectiveness at all stages of the response. Communities and people affected by crisis should expect that organisations assisting them manage resources effectively, efficiently and ethically. Discussions, conferences, seminars and other humanitarian meetings are moments of necessary exchange and reflection. Nevertheless, they are not an end in themselves and the resources which they

16/ See “Responding to changing needs?”, ALNAP, 2014, p. 28, for a description of different approaches to coordination based on context. 
Between 2009 and 2013 only 1.6% of all humanitarian assistance went directly to national NGOs, even though they end up implementing a much larger proportion of humanitarian programmes.

Or the pledges by Kuwait that have also been largely channeled through UN agencies and international NGOs. The difficulties smaller, national NGOs face to directly access funds and their reliance on project funding make their survival yet more of a struggle. Amel is fortunate enough to be in a position where 53% of its funds are derived from the participation of beneficiaries, revenues from its property, and its bi-annual gala dinners. This situation allows Amel to make independent choices for its organisation, its choice of programmes and its ability to act specifically where needs are not covered. Many other national NGOs are not so fortunate. Amel believes that every organisation, regardless of size or capacity, should be able to access funding without jeopardising its ability to act neutrally, and that funds received should not compromise an organisation’s independence. Indeed, funding often represents an extension of a foreign policy and power, placing conditions on how the funding is spent — stipulating, for example, which products an organisation must buy, and from where. This largely influences the development of a project and the effectiveness of the use of resources. Obstacles imposed on access to funding should be reduced to ensure that the needs of vulnerable communities are prioritised. Without addressing this imbalance, true progress, with fair input from national and international organisations, will be difficult to achieve.

Conclusions

Humanitarian action should steer its delivery model towards equal, strategic and long-lasting partnerships based on humanitarian principles. It is with these types of partnerships that humanitarian actors can apply an approach Amel believes in: “our principles define our position, which can then be put into practice.”

The CHS is a tool that supports the vision of a humanitarian response that promotes dignity for everyone, not just a privileged few.


Equal partnership must not only become a universal principle, but also a position that is translated into practice by the international community, allocating equal responsibility to and demanding equal accountability from national and international actors. In order to ensure these attitudes prevail within the sector, the international humanitarian community must allow national NGOs to play a more important role in humanitarian response. By adopting the above recommendations, Amel believes that we can achieve just this.
Aid and the role of government: what we can learn from Colombia

According to ALNAP, good humanitarian action is led by the state and builds on local response capacities wherever possible. Diana Marcela Barbosa Maldonado of the Colombian government’s Unit for the Assistance and Comprehensive Reparation of Victims (Victims’ Unit) explains how her country is working towards this objective.

More than one in seven of Colombia’s 48 million people are victims of internal armed conflict, and over six million have been affected by forced displacement. To respond to this humanitarian crisis, the state has developed the National Public Policy of Assistance and Comprehensive Reparation of Victims.

As highlighted in one of the ALNAP global forum briefing papers: “Under UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 46/182, governments are responsible for leading and coordinating humanitarian assistance. The role of the international system is to provide additional support where the state does not have the capacity or the willingness to fulfil these obligations. [...] In general terms, however, there are clear potential benefits in state leadership of disaster response, including stronger links between humanitarian work and broader development activities, and increased government legitimacy and accountability.”

This chapter aims to contribute to the discussion about effective humanitarian action by sharing: the Colombian government’s experience in developing its leadership and central role in the provision of humanitarian assistance; the strategies it has implemented to support local authorities and improve the quality of aid provided; recommendations related to stakeholder coordination; and its assessment of the relevance of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS).

Across its territory of more than two million square kilometres, Colombia boasts vast geographical and ethnic diversity. Since internal armed conflict affects the whole territory, the dispersal of its inhabitants and their ethnic diversity are both key considerations in the provision of suitable humanitarian aid to victims. In addition, governmental action to protect the victims of conflict is also determined by the constitutional and legal framework.

According to the current legal framework, the 1,120 local authorities in Colombia have the primary responsibility for guaranteeing immediate humanitarian assistance to victims. They must allocate the financial, human and technical resources necessary to supply the victims with the minimum standards of livelihood: i.e. food, water, sanitation, cleaning products, cookware, shelter, transport, and access to medical and psychological services.

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**Figure 6.1: Victims of the internal armed conflict**

Between 1985 and May 2015, the Colombian government registered 7,124,829 victims of internal armed conflict, of which 86.6% (6,163,315 people) had been affected by forced displacement.

Adapted from: Victims’ Unit, Colombia, May 2014.

**Figure 6.2: In your opinion, who has the primary responsibility to manage disaster risks in your community?**

28% - National and international actors combined

32% - Local government

9% - Local CSOs

31% - Communities

72%

Local actors

When communities were asked who had the primary responsibility to manage disaster risks, local government was cited most frequently, with 72% of respondents referring to local actors. Figures may vary based on the level of development of a given country.

Adapted from: World Humanitarian Summit, Regional Consultation for North and South-East Asia, 2014, p.42.

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2/ 2,129,748 km²

3/ In the past 30 years, victimisation has happened at least once in every single municipality of Colombia.

When a local authority is unable to guarantee these minimum standards to the victims in their territory, or when the scale of the event overtakes their capacity to respond, the national government steps in to provide the additional humanitarian aid needed via mechanisms that meet the conditions in which the emergency is taking place.

**National government strategies for immediate humanitarian assistance**

To provide a humanitarian response according to the criteria of the CHS, the Victims’ Unit, acting on behalf of the government, uses different strategies related to: (i) information and risk management; (ii) coordination with government agencies and humanitarian organisations; and (iii) the development of mechanisms to adapt the assistance to the particular needs of the victims. To implement these strategies, the government provides permanent technical assistance to the municipalities as part of a continual process of learning and improvement. In addition, the government promotes mechanisms that involve the participation of victims. These mechanisms, which are backed by civil society organisations, the Constitutional Court and the National Congress put in place a comprehensive and continuous accountability process.

**From information to action**

To respond promptly to humanitarian emergencies, the Victims’ Unit continuously collects and analyses information. One aspect of this is structural analysis to identify victimisation patterns and risk scenarios.

This is used to anticipate the occurrence of future emergencies and set up local response capacity accordingly. An example is the Victimisation Risk Index (IRV). The index is a quantitative analysis tool that compares the risk of human rights violations amongst municipalities.

Another key task of the Victims’ Unit is to continuously follow up, monitor and document incidents that may lead to emergency situations. This task is carried out by a team of 91 full-time professionals in the worst affected regions. Thanks to this work, the government is able to identify a humanitarian emergency as soon as it takes place and activate an immediate, comprehensive, coordinated and effective response. The Victims’ Unit provides humanitarian aid within two to seven days of an emergency being declared, regardless of the extent of assistance required. The speed and scale of the Unit’s response demonstrates a significant logistical, administrative and financial effort on the part of government to provide both a suitable and effective answer.

**Coordination**

Coordinating and planning, including defining the mechanism for the delivery of assistance, are all key elements of effective humanitarian action. Assistance and Reparations Committees required by law at both national and local levels have operated since 2012. All bodies of the government responsible for providing humanitarian assistance as well as representatives of victims take part in the process. It is within these committees that it is decided how to proceed in the case of an emergency. Contingency plans are developed, including the definition of roles, procedures and actions needed to prepare and respond.

Furthermore, a coordination exercise with international humanitarian organisations, organised into Humanitarian Teams at both national and local levels is carried out. This approach, using national committees and formal agreements, has resulted in improved information flow, better coordination of humanitarian action, standardisation of criteria and progress on the complementarity of actions.

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8/ In some cases, delays can happen due to administrative processes when the call for support is made from the local level to the national level. It can also be a challenge to reach some areas that are only accessible by river.
9/ For in-kind humanitarian assistance, 1,341 deliveries have been conducted in the past three years, comprising a total of 6,945 metric tons.
10/ The Victims’ Unit advises the committees in the process of elaborating the plans. 550 municipalities have been advised in the past three years. According to the IRV, 73 of them correspond to 94% of high-risk municipalities and 91 correspond to 90% of those rated medium to high risk.
11/ Led by the Colombian Chancery in coordination with international humanitarian organisations operating in Colombia (represented by the humanitarian resident coordinator of the United Nations) and Colombian agencies in charge of coordinating assistance to victims of natural disasters, a formal committee was established to assist humanitarian emergencies.
Consultation on the building of the Panamerican Highway through the Darien Gap. The consultation included a variety of stakeholders from the affected communities. Voting on the consultation was overseen by the Comisión Ética de la Verdad.

© Christian Aid
To deliver appropriate humanitarian assistance to victims according to the specifics of each situation, the government complements the actions of the local authorities via three mechanisms:

1. **In-kind immediate humanitarian assistance**
   This refers to the urgent institutional response to humanitarian emergencies that affect very large numbers of people, such as massive displacements and terrorist attacks. It consists of the supply of basic goods according to the Sphere standards. In-kind assistance can include: (i) food and cleaning products, according to the culture and habits of the affected population (there are currently seven groups of different foodstuffs and cleaning products); (ii) lodging kits, designed to provide temporary shelter in high-risk zones; (iii) school kits, consisting of basic school supplies so children can carry on studying even during an emergency situation; and (iv) children’s sporting equipment, for recreational purposes. When dealing with an emergency, a tailored list of staple foodstuffs is used, and the type, weight and quantity of goods adapted according to the specific needs (age, gender, ethnicity, culture, geography) of the community.

2. **In-cash immediate humanitarian assistance**
   This is implemented via agreements between the Victims’ Unit and selected local authorities, and concerns the provision of cash to people recently affected by conflict. Recipients use the money to maintain minimum standards of nutrition, shelter and safe hygiene for themselves and their families, while the registration process with the Victims’ Unit is ongoing. Once registered, victims are subsequently supported through social programmes.

3. **Adaptation and construction of shelter infrastructure**
   This seeks to strengthen local capacity through complementary actions at the national level to develop projects and

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12/ A massive displacement takes place when 10 or more households or 50 or more people are forced to flee their home due to armed conflict.
13/ Due to their budgetary and institutional restrictions, 154 municipalities were targeted in 2013, and 192 in 2014.
strategies to assist communities effectively and appropriately. It includes the supply of building materials, and furniture and construction tools to build and improve social and community infrastructure. Since 2012, nearly US$2.5 million has been invested, benefiting 30 local projects in nine states, located in zones where a high risk of displacement has been identified, and guaranteeing temporary shelter to IDPs.

In the interests of accomplishing the strategies described above, the Victims’ Unit carries out humanitarian missions. They are granted direct access to affected communities by the local authorities and international organisations operating in the area. The strategies used have resulted in more relevant and timely assistance.

Future challenges with humanitarian actors

The Colombian government has built its capacity and developed human, technical and budgetary expertise to deliver humanitarian assistance. The Victims’ Unit has become an increasingly relevant actor in today’s humanitarian context, complementing the work of local authorities, civil society and international organisations over the last three years. The agency is accountable for more than 3,000 humanitarian missions nationwide, and the allocation of US$10 million for immediate in-kind and in-cash assistance to adapt and construct shelter.

We believe that state authorities have a responsibility and role to play in humanitarian response and that under the right circumstances, they can do so more effectively than other actors. In terms of coverage, the Colombian government has a broader, more permanent and predictable presence than any other actor, and can shift its resources geographically based on needs. All our staff are local (or at least regional) to the context where they work, and are therefore intimately aware of the context and culture in which they operate. Because their employment does not depend on project funding, they are more likely to stay in their position and support institutional memory and learning. This longer term presence, together with the direct voice citizens have through democratic elections, makes government institutions more accountable for their actions. Finally, country-wide action under a national framework means we can provide a more coherent and equitable response in any given humanitarian situation.

These achievements have reduced dependency on international actors for the delivery of assistance to victims of internal armed conflict. Coordinated and complementary action between humanitarian actors and the government has already resulted in more appropriate and effective responses. Applying the principles of the CHS to humanitarian response will be key to maintaining this progress in the future. The challenge will be to implement new mechanisms to support more flexible programming by humanitarian organisations. Reinforcing these key aspects in Colombia will enable the humanitarian actors to break into other social realms in which the Colombian government is still incipient, such as the construction of sustainable solutions, or interventions in areas where the action of the government may threaten the well-being of the communities.

To conclude, given the key role that the Colombian government plays in humanitarian action and the importance of having victims participate in the definition of public policy around humanitarian assistance, it is essential to promote the humanitarian principles of the CHS at all levels. The process also needs to be recognised and endorsed by the victims, the sides involved in the conflict and society as a whole. In particular, it is imperative to build upon certain vital aspects of humanitarian action, such as the dissemination of humanitarian standards, access to areas of conflict, prioritisation of the humanitarian role played by government agencies, assessment of the impact of interventions, and accountability.

Figure 6.5: International humanitarian assistance channeled to affected-state governments, 2005-2014

While humanitarian funding via the State is limited by capacity and potential conflict with humanitarian principles in some contexts, it remains low when contrasted with the official discourse calling for more involvement of the State in humanitarian response.

Adapted from: Development Initiatives, Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015, 2015, p.76.
Development funds and accountability mainstreaming

Simon Richards suggests that a development health programme in Myanmar might tell us something about how to integrate accountability-based approaches into programming.

Be honest – how often have you criticised multi-donor trust funds and unwieldy efforts by donors as they do their best to fulfil the 2005 Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness and their political masters’ wishes to reduce administrative costs in distributing government funds, while simultaneously transforming societies and eradicating poverty before breakfast? We’ve all been guilty of criticising aid architecture (possibly in rather colourful language), no matter which layer of the aid spectrum we sit on. Well, I hate to be the harbinger of perhaps cautious, positive news, but there is an interesting experiment occurring in Myanmar at the Three Millennium Development Goal Fund (3MDG).

What’s so interesting?

The blurring of lines between humanitarian, rehabilitation and development contexts demands increasingly sophisticated responses from all agencies operating across this spectrum. Humanitarian actors are increasingly working more directly with governments and their ministries and having to adapt short-term emergency practices to longer-term time frames.
What is 3MDG?

3MDG is a pooled donor fund, managed by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), that supports the provision of health services contributing to Myanmar’s efforts to achieve the three health-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Their strategic focus and activities include prioritising essential maternal, newborn and child health services, and maintaining support for HIV, tuberculosis and malaria interventions. 3MDG supports Myanmar’s Ministry of Health and builds the capacity of 3MDG partners to provide more equitable, affordable and good quality health services, responsive to the needs of the country’s most vulnerable people.¹

The current stage of the experiment

This trial is still at a very early stage, so the jury is out as to whether it will be as successful as hoped. Nevertheless, in the spirit of learning, it is still worth taking a bit of a ‘selfie’ to see how it evolves. A set of such selfies over the lifetime of the programme helps objectively assess the evolution and interpretation of the process simultaneously. This prevents us from (intentionally or otherwise) shaping intentions retrospectively in our favour. The grandest interpretation of this initiative is as a thread in the broader effort to build a transformative movement in governance and effective change at different levels: in society, i.e. how people interact with institutions (in the health sector); and within the aid sector, both with regard to multi-donor funding mechanisms and implementing partners’ (IPs) cultures. This chapter explores the approach of the pooled donor mechanism of the 3MDG fund, in supporting the implementation of AEI/CS principles in their programme to improve aid effectiveness. It considers the challenges and issues observed, and lessons learned to date in the application of partner self-assessments on a set of common standards,² accompanied by technical assistance. The chapter also reflects on the inherent tensions within the application of different principles as well as the potential clashes between competing higher-order approaches. Stakeholder attitudes and perspectives concerning the approach on the one hand and contextual resonance on the other illustrate the issues accompanying the efforts to institutionalise application of the principles.

Adapted from: 3MDG (2015) An approach to ‘health for all’

Why? The rationale behind the approach

The first thing to consider is: why embark on this approach at all? The basic 3MDG theory of change is simple and compelling: if the capacity of institutions and systems to apply AEI/CS is increased, then there will be enhanced, accountable and responsive health services, which will result in increased access and a reduced communicable disease burden. In other words, through implementing AEI/CS, programming will be more effective in its contribution to addressing some of the social determinants of health.²

Multi-donor basket funds can be considered leviathans from anyone’s perspective. The practicalities of implementing specific donor needs and priorities through the application of a large number of separate strategies encompassing gender, disability and other factors are potentially overwhelming. How do you ensure the system and communities really benefit from this multitude of approaches, particularly when filtered through several layers of policy and practice of IPs and their local partners before eventually reaching the community? That’s where AEI/CS comes in.

Self-regulation or compliance?

There is a range of perspectives within agencies around how you ensure the principles are implemented, and an accompanying, parallel spectrum of donor expectations and approaches. At one end is self-regulation and at the other a stronger imperative involving compliance and policing. There is also a gap between rhetoric and reality among many IPs who insist they can be trusted to self-regulate.

The de facto evidence from Myanmar – that self-regulation may not be as successful as hoped – comes from the initial baseline self-assessment survey on AEI/CS standards. On the plus side, participants were ruthlessly honest: they took the process seriously and intended to learn through it. Less positive, putting aside all the inevitable statistical caveats, is that scores suggest participants might need considerably more support than they say they do.

How?

The next question that confronts 3MDG ‘new-age’ architects is: how do you ensure that the experiment delivers the intended results and that the principles and approaches are taken seriously? Are self-regulation, compliance mechanisms or supported incentives the best way to go?

So if we assume self-regulation is not necessarily the most effective way to introduce principles, what is? Controlled regulation approaches such as policing involve a lot of effort and are not very constructive for relationship-building, since they imply a lack of trust, and involve the use of penalties and negative enforcement models. Perhaps the closest description of 3MDG’s approach is captured by (in the jargon) ‘Nudge Theory’. This is the political theory and behavioural science concept that suggests positive reinforcement works better than direct legislation or compliance.

For 3MDG, applying AEI/CS is a bit more than a ‘nudge’, but it is still positive reinforcement rather than force. At its most positive, and because it’s the first time such an approach is used, the process may also assist in defining and reflecting on the best way to refine the approach in order to achieve the objectives. So the initiative is in effect directing more effort into the way partners implement programmes.

Figure 7.2: Average self-assessment scores of 18 Implementing Partners on 3MDG Accountability, Equity, Inclusion and Conflict Sensitivity standards 2014


Emerging challenges and dilemmas

It goes without saying, the vision is a great one and the approach makes sense. But does it really work conceptually and what does it mean in practice? What are the challenges and compromises in applying a package of principles in mixed, complex aid environments? How do you overcome short-term project approaches in the interests of meeting institutional challenges?

A package of principles or individual strategies?

In searching for simplicity in a model, there are always tensions finding ‘one size that fits all’. In this case, the question is to what extent the AEI/CS concepts fit together in one package – especially aspects like equity or conflict sensitivity. How do IPs undertake this work? Do they have the capacity?

Fulfilling accountability, equity, inclusivity, and then conflict sensitivity on top, is a lot to deal with. Each different strand is valid and a significant approach in its own right, despite the enormous overlap between them (which is the very reason they are packaged together). But are they all equal in significance? Do they deserve equal emphasis and investment of time and energy? This is a matter of ongoing debate and depends on the perspective of the individual or organisation asking the question. From the CHS Alliance perspective, the entry point is accountability to others. Others see the equation differently and suggest that having an entry point defines the emphasis too much and risks overshadowing concepts that deserve more light. For instance, one major stakeholder suggested that inclusivity encompassing ethnicity and minority groups and indeed gender is fine, but the amalgamation of all these aspects together dilutes the level of due emphasis that a gender focus requires. Similarly, to what extent should conflict sensitivity be incorporated? A failure to be accountable, transparent and inclusive may result in possible conflict, but one can also argue that equity or lack of equality can also be a cause of conflict if unequal resource allocation drives perceptions of difference, reinforcing conflict divides. Conflict sensitivity is also very context-specific and so cannot be treated in quite the same way as other principles in the package.

Tensions between principles

In other words, there are tensions between different principles as well as overlapping reinforcements. One classic case is currently found in the clash between conflict sensitivity and equity principles in Rakhine State in Western Myanmar. Here, the humanitarian principle of meeting needs and emphasising equitable resource distribution clashes with the need to provide equal resources to both sides of the conflict in order to avoid reinforcing perceptions that one side is benefiting more, or at the expense of the other. Perhaps such tensions are inevitable, but they do present challenges to the smooth implementation of a package of principles and their perceived relative importance by the different stakeholders.

There is also a further dimension relevant to the broader debate, which is the possibility of tensions between various higher level approaches and principles underpinning aid effectiveness and the core humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality. Conflict sensitivity, which is an inherently political endeavour, is a case in point. Harmer and Ray (2009) and Bayne (2012) noted that donors are usually committed simultaneously to the Paris Declaration, the Fragile States’ (FS) Principles and the principles of the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative. This entails balancing three sets of complex commitments: respecting the independence and neutrality of humanitarian action; pursuing ‘state building as the central objective’ of engagement with FS principles; and ensuring countries’ ‘ownership’ over development strategies. 3MDG works directly with the Myanmar government to strengthen the health system, but this risks creating tensions in conflict-affected areas and those not controlled by the government (hence the relevance of an equity based approach). This leads to the risk of further tensions in the application of higher-level approaches as well as within the AEI/CS package. It will be important to keep an eye on how these tensions or compromises play out in the contested areas of Myanmar.

3/ Note that there has been considerable varying emphasis and time allocated to each of them.
4/ Equity in terms of resource allocation addressing health refers to the concept that allocation is in proportion to the needs of the relevant stakeholder to bring them up to the norm. While equality in terms of resources proposes that all stakeholders receive equal amounts. As WHO points out: “Health inequities therefore involve more than inequality with respect to health determinants, access to the resources needed to improve and maintain health or health outcomes.” Implicit in these terms is a recognition that a failure to avoid or overcome inequalities infringes on fairness and human rights norms. See: http://www.who.int/healthsystems/topics/equity/en/ [Accessed: 22 May 2015].
Gaps in the accountability ‘system’
At present there is also an assumption that the full benefit of the AEI/CS principles gets passed down fully through the system. However, the expected trickle-down of positive benefits of the approach is probably diluted, as it reflects the different ways in which the approach is understood by and between actors at each level down the line: i.e. from donors and 3MDG; to 3MDG and its IPs; then to IPs and local partners; and finally local partners and communities.

It has to be acknowledged that there is presently a large gap in the current accountability health network and system for the AEI/CS initiative. Perhaps the second biggest stakeholder in health service provision and societal transformation is the government.6 While the communities are the most significant drivers of change, it is critical to involve the government in AEI/CS as progress is likely to be limited without their involvement. In this regard, 3MDG is proceeding with careful, deep consultations with the Ministry of Health to identify existing strengths and approaches that are already built into the health system and to discuss how to build on them to create synergies. This is an area of work and engagement that will continue to emerge over the course of the initiative.

Institutionalisation
A key aspect of the 3MDG approach may be that while AEI/CS is applied through the project, the development and application of institutional standards has implications and consequences for the IP organisation beyond the project. These standards are based on the HAP Standard but have been modified a little to better fit the Myanmar context (see figure 7.1). This has included the additional standard of conflict sensitivity that was not in the HAP Standard, but which is a welcome and necessary addition.7 Alongside the application of the set of standards, there are other elements within the initiative that reinforce the institutionalisation of AEI/CS. These include having a focal point for AEI/CS (a funded position) within each IP, supporting their training in methodologies and in the delivery of a training programme (i.e. a Training of Trainers, or ‘ToT’), to be rolled out within their own organisations. To support a culture of continuous learning and peer support, there are also communities of practice being developed. In the case of AEI, this has its historical genesis in the work of HAP following Cyclone Nargis, but under 3MDG there are also additional conflict sensitivity communities of practice being developed.

At one end is self-regulation and at the other a stronger imperative involving compliance and policing.

Stakeholder perspectives and insights
Interviewing participants about their perspectives, even at this very early stage of the experiment, surfaced a range of insights and potential lessons. These ranged from the ‘fit’ of values with the context, attitudes to the above-mentioned ‘nudge’ approach and the methodology of the technical assistance.

Contextual fit
How can general principles be applied consistently across such a fragmented and diverse environment as Myanmar? Across the country you find active armed conflict, ‘post-conflict’ situations, humanitarian and development programmes, and all flavours in between. The second and perhaps more striking aspect is the obvious range and diversity of cultures, religions and ethnicities with different values which are often expressed through different forms of community governance. So are AEI/CS principles simply neo-colonialist western values or do they have inherent resonances with the multitude of different world views? Interestingly, Myanmar respondents felt the concepts were a good fit with different value systems across the country but terminology is new and needs further adjusting to the context. In this respect, the praxis in applying AEI concepts has become rusty and has not really been applied to government leadership due to the restrictive governance environment. National partners also noted the need to build up a critical mass of practitioners and understanding across different development sectors, not only health. Broadening the approach will enable discussions, application and progress towards faster and stronger societal transformation.

Stakeholder attitudes to the AEI/CS initiative
Stakeholder attitudes have been an interesting area of discussion. At one end of the spectrum are the agencies with ‘we are experts already’ syndrome: those who do not want support and believe they are already implementing AEI/CS principles more comprehensively than any technical assistance agency ever could. While this may well be true in some cases, the challenge is how to harness this expertise for peer learning, create momentum for the change of norms, and instil a sense of group responsibility for progress. In this respect, the existing AEI group has been active and it is pleasing to see the openness with which participants are willing to bring resources to the common pool. There are also positive signs of other emerging communities of practice and opportunities, as well as a willingness to share learning and expertise across organisations that will hopefully result in faster progress. In such a pressurised sector with little ‘system redundancy’ (and in the light of management efficiencies), sparing human resources for common benefit is not easy.

6/ The author would argue that the ‘people’ are the biggest stakeholder overall.
7/ Some might argue that CHS standard 3 incorporates or covers this aspect, but the author considers that this is insufficiently explicit in its articulation of conflict sensitivity.
At the other end of the spectrum there are partners, particularly local organisations, who do not have a high level of expertise and have not yet had the chance to be trained, nor to apply AEI/CS principles in any depth. The awareness is there, but the depth in application and knowledge across the sector is not yet cohesive. In fact, a consistent description from both international and national partners was that their application of AEI/CS had been fragmented and inconsistently applied before the initiative began, and that they were relying extensively on their intuition and contextual understanding rather than technical knowledge. As a result of the initiative, application of AEI/CS standards has been more systematic. Agencies described cases where AEI principles may have been taken forward but the energy (and resources) died out and progress halted or was in abeyance until the system was re-energised (and re-funded). In other words progress has been sporadic.

International organisations agreed and acknowledged that the specific areas of reporting formats, budgets and being accountable to 3MDG for implementation of AEI/CS ‘focused the mind’ and definitely improved their application. As one respondent admitted: “We would have done it anyway, but perhaps not so carefully or systematically!”

**Sustainability**

A common concern expressed by national partners was around the ‘sustainability’ of progress in AEI/CS implementation, and the need for a critical mass of agencies applying them consistently to achieve a broader momentum. They were also similarly concerned whether there would be an ongoing investment of funding through different projects to enable the continuation, expansion and deepening of the inculcation of AEI/CS principles. For instance, some voiced concerns that if 3MDG funds were no longer available to support this development, there might be a danger of it falling down the agenda again, and the gains achieved being lost. Other major funding sources for health programming were reportedly not so supportive of AEI/CS, suggesting the need for a common application across similar funds.

**Funding incentives**

A well-appreciated characteristic of the 3MDG approach has been funding responsiveness to the context through a contingency budget line. While not allocated specifically to AEI/CS, 3MDG staff noted examples where IPs had proposed activities associated with conflict sensitivity. It would be a sensible next step to dedicate a similar budget line to AEI/CS, as this would incentivise creativity and provide an in-built piloting/learning approach that could reveal new context-specific ways of ‘doing business’. Similarly, allocated funding for dedicated staff was also considered very positive.
On the road to Istanbul: How can the World Humanitarian Summit make humanitarian response more effective?

The students of Kyaiklat Ka Lay primary school.

© ACT/DKH/CWS
Accessing support

While the library of resources is still an ongoing development, Myanmar partners appreciated the availability of toolkits, best practice examples and case studies facilitated through 3MDG-funded technical assistance. Comprehensive training has been a good entry point through which to engage with partners, but it remains to be seen how the CHS Alliance is able to provide ongoing tailored technical assistance across such a wide range of partners and needs. Nevertheless overall, partners felt support methods had helped create momentum and improve understanding and application of AEI/CS.

Emerging lessons

This section outlines lessons that are already emerging at this early stage, including: the perennial issues of synchronising processes in pooled funds; the usefulness of formal self-assessments in the middle ground between compliance and self-regulation; and how best to address long-term institutionalisation processes within project timeframes.

A key element of learning is assessing what difference it is making. How do you know if mainstreaming AEI/CS is actually increasing programme effectiveness? In the absence of any counterfactual, this is tricky – as is assessing when success may emerge (which could be within or outside the project timeframe). Current experience and indications would suggest this is taking longer than anticipated and this may also reduce programme effectiveness and impact. However, the institutionalisation of standards will, at least, be clearly measurable in terms of scores. The deeper question on institutionalising these standards is the extent to which they have created new norms within institutions. For conflict sensitivity, it is perhaps even harder to assess success, but 3MDG has invested significantly in methodologies to identify change related to conflict sensitivity practice or impact and it will be extremely interesting to see learning outcomes over the next couple of years.

The standards

The use of self-assessments may well be the most effective approach to address change at multiple levels, simultaneously affecting institutional policies and their application without reverting to policing. It is hoped that they will also encourage and increase healthy internal ambitions to improve organisational scores and demonstrate the relevance of these approaches in all types of context.

Some classic slips revisited

Given that it’s still early days to assess progress and meaning, some participants have already made useful observations reflecting a broader perspective. For instance, 3MDG and donors both recognised an apparent (and typical) paradox. On the one hand, the 3MDG programme has been significantly overdesigned and is prescriptive (as evidenced by consistent feedback from stakeholders and, more concretely, by the description of action (DOA)). On the other hand, while the DOA does reference accountability, social inclusion and other principles, the implementation model came later. This means the AEI/CS initiative has been perceived as an ‘add-on’. This perception has been exacerbated by an underestimation of the challenges facing HAP in 2014 as they got up to speed with the context, needs and expectations of all stakeholders, and how to deliver efficiently. Greater integration earlier on might have helped better synchronise AEI/CS with broader 3MDG processes and also avoided the ‘catch-up syndrome’.

For instance, one partner noted that the ToT on AEI/CS was well received but as a result of the training, the IPs realised that they needed and wished to undertake further AEI/CS activities in the future, which were not budgeted for. This event happened after broader 3MDG budgeting processes, reportedly making it difficult for them to fund these new activities. While 3MDG reports that there is flexibility to adjust funding lines throughout the year, some IPs understand this as only being able to fund newly proposed AEI/CS activities at the expense of other activities and by going through additional budgeting processes.

Vertical institutionalisation

A far more positive tension is that encountered as 3MDG try to support a long-term process in a short-term project. The AEI/CS initiative is project-driven in terms of timing and parameters under 3MDG. However, it is also simultaneously supporting a process based on institutionalising AEI/CS principles throughout all the stakeholders’ work, not only the 3MDG project. This positive approach encourages longer-term transformative change processes in all actors. It will be interesting to see the effect of this vertical institutionalisation and understand its evolution outside the 3MDG project (more ‘selfies’ needed in the future). To what extent will it create norms across the sector (and the community)? Will incremental change be passed on to other projects or will impact dissipate with staff transfers, or when projects end?

Conflict sensitivity

An interesting aspect and consequence of specific investment in conflict sensitivity has been the dramatically increased understanding by 3MDG and other stakeholders of the complexity associated with such a range of conflict environments. Myanmar encompasses the whole spectrum of conflict environments from active conflict zones to ceasefire scenarios, post-conflict contexts and areas that have remained relatively untouched. It has also raised a series of interesting questions about what it means to operate there. For instance, what does programme success look like in a ceasefire environment like Kayah State in southeastern Myanmar, (i.e. neither post-conflict nor humanitarian), compared to a context like Rakhine State? At its most basic, success may constitute simply continuing to function and work with all actors in a positive manner — that is, contributing to the enabling environment, opening space, educating and creating good will for all aid investment for the benefit of marginalised people. However, what is the role of a programme like 3MDG in peace-building, if the opportunity to contribute or do more arises? Perceived neutrality and the commonality of ‘health as a bridge’ across divides can provide opportunities that other approaches don’t. These are tricky moral questions as well as questions of mandate, particularly if actors have the capacity for such roles.

Humanitarian and common funds – what does this mean for the future?

Pooled funds are common disbursement mechanisms in both humanitarian and development contexts. Nearly 20 have been set up in humanitarian situations since 1998. In development environments, they are particularly common in the build-up to key events, such as elections, referendums and constitutional processes, although they can also encompass sectors from peace to civil society strengthening.

8/ According to the United Nations, 77% of the 540,700 people deemed to be affected by conflict or inter-communal violence in Myanmar are located in Rakhine state. See http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2015%20Myanmar%20Humanitarian%20Response%20Plan_0.pdf, [Accessed: 26 June 2015]


10/ The ‘ERFs’ – CERF, ERF, – can learn a number of useful lessons from the 3MDG approach. The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) is a global fund that allows donors to contribute to a pool of funds that is then allocated to UN agencies by the Emergency Relief Coordinator in New York, USA. The Emergency Response Fund (ERF) is an in-country mechanism to provide rapid and flexible funding to agencies (mainly NGOs) to address unforeseen humanitarian needs.
The strategy of 3MDG is particularly relevant because it takes an institutionalising approach to the agencies rather than just the project.

Firstly, and most importantly, these principles, once adapted, are applicable and relevant for any environment, whether humanitarian or development. The majority of contexts where the bulk of aid funds are directed are chronic complex emergencies where humanitarian and development programmes may be implemented simultaneously. The introduction of AEI/CS through major funding mechanisms provides for a more consistent application of principles across contexts, rather than one set for one type of actor (e.g. development actors) and another for another type of actor (e.g. humanitarian) – or more likely the same actor (with a dual mandate) applying funds from another source in the same environment. The strategy of 3MDG is particularly relevant because it takes an institutionalising approach to the agencies rather than just the project.

Read any funding proposal and you will see a range of codes of conduct and principles listed or alluded to, but rarely do these proposals explicitly outline budget implications and specifics on how principles will be applied. So the introduction of AEI/CS into the common pooled funds methodology is an accountability mechanism itself, even if at face value it is ‘upwardly’ accountable to the donors, in order to be ‘downwardly’ accountable to the beneficiaries!

Secondly, it normalises practices and application of AEI/CS principles throughout the system, rather than only the rhetoric in one portion of the sector – at the centre. This is in both directions; accountability upwards to donors and downwards to implementers but also to people and communities. Generally, the CHS Alliance has found that staff have a greater understanding of AEI at the centre of organisations, but the level of staff understanding of these principles decreases the further from the centre you travel. This is not surprising since the people at the centre are likely to have written the proposals – i.e. career professionals in the aid sector who know the jargon perfectly. At the outer margins are likely to be staff recruited locally for the project, who have received less training, are more junior, and less familiar with the terminology. However, these are also the staff at the coalface, trying to put the principles into practice. So ensuring that AEI/CS is instituted throughout all key stakeholder approaches ensures the normalisation and coherency of practices throughout the system.

Thirdly, the 3MDG approach provides for a platform of learning and development of praxis that can then benefit all actors. The development of communities of practice in pooled fund mechanisms inculcates two important elements: encouraging and institutionalising learning; and sharing knowledge for immediate application in the field. Too often in both humanitarian and development fields, learning may take place in an organisation but rarely reaches a broader audience, even if it is in a smart, swish report (whether it is even transferred to an agency’s other programmes is not guaranteed either). Who has time to consistently read all this learning that is going on, and actually apply it? Nevertheless, while this emerging methodology may be difficult to implement, it does increase the likelihood of reinforcing exposure to (and hopefully application of) shared learning and knowledge.

It is clear that there is enormous potential within the approach. The litmus test for 3MDG is as follows: Firstly, will data collected through monitoring mechanisms result in a strong evidence base demonstrating the basic theory of change, i.e. that AEI/CS approaches will significantly affect social determinants of health and the incidence of communicable disease (as just one measure of impact on health)? Secondly, is the way in which this approach is fostered and implemented through positive ‘nudges’ in a multi-donor funding mechanism successful? Thirdly, is the delivery method – externally provided technical assistance for all partners – the most effective?

If the answer to all these questions is yes, the 3MDG donors, who provide probably the majority of global ODA and humanitarian aid, are in a strong position to support the use of a common framework and language.

The 3MDG donors, who provide probably the majority of global ODA and humanitarian aid, are in a strong position to support the use of a common framework and language.

Conclusions

The experiment is unleashing something, but what exactly? To go beyond this promising start, an evidence base needs to be developed that tests the following hypotheses: firstly, that this approach may change attitudes and behaviours more broadly within aid agencies; secondly, that the consistent coherent application of AEI/CS principles across a whole sector with technical assistance is appropriate and can be applied to the whole spectrum of humanitarian to development contexts, and conflict environments; and thirdly, that the incentives are more likely to create behaviour change, norms and learning across pooled fund mechanisms.

Important parts of the puzzle have still to emerge: does AEI/CS actually create more effective programmes, and to what extent do its influences extend simultaneously through agencies into other non-3MDG programmes, downwards to the community and upwards to donors?

Based on the indications at this early stage of the experiment, it seems reasonable to make the following recommendations:

1. Donors and pooled fund mechanisms should promote consistently improved AEI/CS quality upfront by supporting standards similar to 3MDG rather than only investing in ex-post evaluations.

2. Pooled fund mechanisms should support the incentivisation of AEI/CS quality through built-in allocated programme funding and simultaneous support for organisations to develop their capacity, rather than exclusively demanding programme results.

3. Donors are encouraged to support a variety of ongoing learning methodologies to reinforce the institutionalisation and application of best practice for these principles within pooled funding mechanisms. This also means researching and developing more sophisticated tools for supporting change and measuring the effectiveness of aid provision in mixed complex aid environments.

While HAP had a field presence in Myanmar from 2014 to mid-2015 to provide capacity support on AEI&CS, from August 2015 this capacity support will be undertaken by the CHS Alliance from its Geneva office, based on requests from 3MDG partners.
Mother and child attending a Rural Health Clinic in Kayah State

© Simon Richards

Harvesting rice in Myanmar.
© ACT/DDH/CWS
Bringing aid to account: the CHS and third-party verification

The Core Humanitarian Standard and third-party verification are vital accountability tools to help us deliver the aid that communities affected by crises need and want, writes Philip Tamminga.

The World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) is a unique opportunity for a global dialogue on improving humanitarian assistance. Despite considerable efforts over the past two decades, progress has been frustratingly slow: international funding falls miserably short of needs, and aid efforts are often too slow, uncoordinated, inappropriate and ineffective.1 Perhaps one of the biggest gaps of all is a consistent and collective lack of accountability when it comes to ensuring the needs and priorities of people vulnerable to and affected by crises are at the centre of the way assistance is provided. In order to have a long-term impact, the WHS must lead to actions. The CHS is a vital tool to move us on from debating how we deliver effective aid accountably to those we aim to assist, to taking practical steps to achieving it.

This chapter argues that the CHS, along with its accompanying third party verification mechanisms, can help us make measurable progress towards improving aid effectiveness and accountability, reducing vulnerability and increasing innovation. Widespread application and verification of the CHS provides the sector with a much-needed common approach to defining how quality and accountability is measured, verified and improved. Most importantly, verification of the CHS gives us the tools necessary to provide independent, objective assurances that aid organisations are living up to their commitments to put the needs of affected populations at the centre of response efforts. Before discussing the CHS and third party verification, it is useful to put the CHS in the wider global context and address some of the critics of third party verification.

How standards and third party verification work in other sectors

The idea behind most standards is that they offer a way to systematise approaches to doing things, and through this ensure higher levels of efficiency, consistency and quality in people, processes, products or services. Typically, standards emerge out of a necessity, perceived or real, to provide order in what would otherwise be a chaotic, fragmented operating environment for organisations.

While standards have been around for some time, it was only after the establishment in 1947 of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) that standards truly became global, offering a means of achieving rationalisation, interoperability and interconnectedness between different sectors and countries. Since then, ISO’s work has expanded exponentially, with standards organisations operating in almost every country in the world, and the application of over 20,000 registered standards covering virtually every aspect of social and economic activity.2

One of the shortcomings and third party verification

Third party verification is often considered the most reliable approach, as it provides an independent, objective and impartial assessment of compliance with the standard in question.3

The idea behind most standards is that they offer a way to systematise approaches to doing things, and through this ensure higher levels of efficiency, consistency and quality in people, processes, products or services. Interoperability and certification systems around the world today.

In recent years, new standards and verification systems attempting to link social and environmental goals have emerged, such as poverty reduction, environmental sustainability, industrial and commercial practices. Examples include the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Fairtrade and others. Like other sectors, values-based standards systems have gradually moved towards consolidating and harmonising standards, and developing a more coherent approach to certification and labelling. Increasingly, those responsible for these values-based systems have also sought to reinforce the credibility of their standards and certification labels, and demonstrate results and impact on their stated goals. For example, ISEAL, an umbrella organisation of many social and environmental standards and certification schemes, has developed rigorous codes of good practice around developing credible standards, evidence-based verification processes, and results and impact measurement.4

How standards and third party verification are used in the humanitarian sector

The humanitarian sector has not been immune from the global trend towards standardisation. A mapping exercise done by the Joint Standards Initiative project (JSI), the precursor to the CHS, listed at least 70 different standards in the sector.5 Many of these standards have been around for some time, while others were developed to respond to specific technical needs, such as setting out a common approach to livestock management in emergency situations, for example. Others, such as financial reporting and auditing requirements, are the result of donor-driven concepts of accountability.

For the most part, there has been little coherence or interoperability between these standards, making it difficult for aid workers and organisations to interpret and prioritise the multiple demands on them in a way that shows they are applying good
practices or meeting multiple externally driven requirements. This lack of coherence has also made it difficult to communicate clearly to crisis-affected communities and other stakeholders what they can expect from organisations providing assistance.

One of the shortcomings of many of the standards initiatives in the humanitarian sector has been the lack of robust monitoring, reporting and verification systems to help track and assess how standards are being used, and with what results. Assessing the use of standards is often not an explicit part of evaluation processes – which tend to focus on ex-post project and programme level outputs and outcomes – and experiences with third party verification are limited.

One concern is that third party verification of compliance with standards can perversely make organisations more risk-averse, bureaucratic and less agile in meeting urgent needs.

The result is the lack of a comprehensive analysis and evidence base to establish the role standards and third party verification play in aid effectiveness, and the added value they bring to it. There are exceptions of course, most notably, HAP and People In Aid’s respective standards and certification processes (now consolidated under the CHS Alliance), which have strong verification mechanisms and have evaluated their impact, but this aspect is rarely integrated directly or explicitly with the design of most standards initiatives.7

This explains some of the motivations behind the development of the CHS. In many ways, the CHS is the product of a natural process of evolution in the sector, with clear parallels to developments in other sectors. The CHS builds on much of the positive learning from HAP, People In Aid, the Sphere Project and other initiatives, and addresses many of the gaps which have hitherto limited the potential of these standards as a tool to improve quality, effectiveness and accountability. It provides a coherent, harmonised global framework that is compatible with existing standards and quality assurance processes used by organisations. The CHS was specifically designed to be measureable and verifiable, using a standardised, objective methodology and in line with OECD/DAC evaluation criteria. These features help address the issues of interoperability of different organisations working in different crisis contexts, as well as contributing to the building of an evidence base of comparable data upon which it is being used (as will be discussed later in this chapter).

Critics argue that in many cases the standard and its accompanying verification process can be too rigorous, acting as an impediment preventing new actors from joining, and a barrier to innovation.

Nevertheless, there is the perception amongst a small number of stakeholders that third party verification (and by extension, certification) of standards is not the most appropriate approach to promoting aid effectiveness. Rather than embracing the CHS and third party verification as an opportunity to bring more coherence and consistency to humanitarian actions, some see it as a threat. One concern is that third party verification of compliance with standards can perversely make organisations more risk-averse, bureaucratic and less agile in meeting urgent needs in challenging crisis situations. The argument is that organisations will tend to focus more on meeting external audit requirements, rather than meeting their mission and objectives. Others argue that standards and third party verification can work at crossed purposes with organisational learning, and that the sector needs to be more flexible, adaptable and innovative, in order to respond effectively to specific crisis contexts. Third party verification and certification, according to these critics, is not the best tool to support this goal in part because it reinforces a more rigorous system that prioritises compliance over learning.8

As an example, an ALNAP study on innovation suggests that the current humanitarian system tends to emphasise conformity and compliance, whether imposed by donors, internal organisational culture or the crisis context, at the expense of risk-taking and innovation. It says learning is “inhibited by a growing culture of compliance and the rigid contractual nature of aid relationships, both of which push agencies to deliver according to pre-defined goals, methods and targets.”9

Similar arguments have been made about other NGO standards and verification systems. Some critics suggest that a rigid set of compliance requirements is often simply a regulatory system in disguise, where certification becomes either a legal operational requirement, or is part of de facto sector-wide self-regulation to ensure quality, and limit access and participation to only those who meet the requirements.10 Critics argue that in many cases the standard and its accompanying verification process can be too rigorous, acting as an impediment preventing new actors from joining, and a barrier to innovation. There is particular concern that standards approaches can, perversely, be used to limit the work of non-profit and civil society organisations.11

On the other hand, others suggest that some standards are too vague and limited in scope, and the assessment process too subjective to offer a good analysis of whether or not an organisation merits the confidence of its stakeholders. An example is the Better Business Bureau’s Wise Giving Alliance charity-rating system, which has been criticised as overly simplistic and inherently biased by creating conflicts of interest between the assessing body (BBB) and its clients.12 Other examples include

7/ The SCHR Certification Review project assessed in detail several different standards, verification and certification systems, and found that HAP’s and People In Aid’s approaches were amongst the most rigorous. See www.schr.info/certification for more information and reports.
8/ Stakeholders consulted as part of the SCHR Certification Review project raised many of these concerns, which were carefully considered in the project’s final findings and recommendations. See www.schr.info/certification for additional information and background documents on the stakeholder consultations.
9/ Ramalingam, B., Scriven, K. & Foley, C. (2009). Innovations in international humanitarian action. p.11. That said, the study acknowledges, “...Tools to improve learning and accountability have been among the most strongly supported process innovations. These include standards such as People In Aid (Human Resource processes), Sphere (minimum standards for delivery in five key sectors) and HAP-International (beneficiary accountability)” (p.33).
10/ Examples include the healthcare sector, where healthcare facilities and professionals are licensed and certified in order to practice. See for example the World Bank Toolkit for Accreditation Programmes at: http://sitesources.worldbank.org/HEALTHNUTRITIONANDPOPULATION/Resources/AccreditationToolkit.pdf
12/ See for example, recent criticism of the BBB Wise Giving Alliance at: http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2012/12/27/better-business-bureau-charity- ratings-donations/1636957/
some environmental certification schemes – labelled ‘green washing’ by activist groups – that simply allow corporations to perpetuate business practices deemed unethical or unsustainable. Some commentators worry that a proliferation of certification labels reduces the overall impact and credibility of all schemes.

Addressing the sceptics

The problem with many of these critiques is that they fail to acknowledge the reality that organisations face increasing pressure to demonstrate accountability and performance. Verification- and certification-like processes already exist for many humanitarian and development NGOs in many countries, such as Australia, Cambodia, Pakistan, the Philippines and the United States, to name a few. The regulatory requirements for charities and NGOs, along with donor funding requirements, mean that external scrutiny and verification in one form or another is (forgive the pun) “standard operating procedure” for the vast majority of organisations carrying out humanitarian or development programmes.

The inexorable trend towards more rigorous, evidence-based reporting of performance and accountability, particularly among non-profits and NGOs, is in part due to the collective failures of the sector to show it can self-regulate, learn from its mistakes, and continuously improve quality, accountability and effectiveness. As an example of these increasing demands, the US Congress recently passed legislation that any organisation receiving USAID funding must report on its results, including the degree of satisfaction among the beneficiaries of its programming.

Similarly, the NGO ratings organisation Charity Navigator has followed suit and now requires organisations to systematically report on their results, accountability and transparency as part of their external review process. Another example is the increasing requirement of many funding and partnership agreements to demonstrate that gender, age and ability are considered in programme design, which has led to greater awareness of the importance of these issues – although wide-scale and consistent application of gender analysis in programmes is still lacking in the sector.

The evidence

The other major flaw in arguments against external verification of standards is that they are simply not supported by the available evidence. Suggestions that external verification impedes learning and continuous improvement, or could draw resources away from improving quality or effectiveness, are simplistic. Indeed, ALNAP’s study on utilisation of evaluation

13/ See for example, the Greenwashing Index, at: http://www.greenwashingindex.com/
15/ This information is based on reviews and interviews of key stakeholders and users of NGO regulatory frameworks and voluntary certification systems in several countries, including Australia, Ethiopia, Pakistan, the Philippines, the UK and the USA carried out by the SCHR Certification Review project. More information is available at: www.schr.info/certification.
16/ See https://keystoneaccountability.wordpress.com/2015/01/14/tim-to-the-rescue-legislating-accountability/
17/ See https://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=content.view&cpid=1526#VVC2Fxzd1Y6
There is no credible data to show that external verification of the use of standards has a net negative effect on any sector.

Of the dozens of studies reviewed for this chapter, the majority conclude that organisations working towards meeting a standard overwhelmingly report benefits from participating in an external verification process. Experiences with verification and certification across several sectors, including the humanitarian sector, support the thesis that a carefully designed external verification system is an important tool to promote greater, more consistent approaches to quality assurance, accountability and effectiveness. In fact, there is no credible data to show that external verification of the use of standards has a net negative effect on any sector.

While many researchers question some aspects of a standards and verification process, the criticisms are, more often than not, around poor design and application of the standards and verification system, and not necessarily the value of external verification per se. That said, it is also clear that there is a need for much more research around the long-term impact of standards and verification systems, making it difficult at this time to definitively state that verification of compliance with standards has a directly attributable positive or negative impact on issues like quality and effectiveness.

Nevertheless, three recent major studies offer some convincing evidence that third party verification and certification can have positive impacts, including contributions to organisational learning, improved quality assurance processes, and internal business practices. The first two studies focused on the added value for businesses that are certified as complying with ISO 9001 standard, one of the world’s best-known quality assurance standards. A United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) study of 600 businesses in over a dozen Asian countries found that there are “clear empirical economic benefits to the effective implementation and accredited certification of quality management systems” for certified organisations. Indeed, 98% of the businesses surveyed reported that certification represented a good return on investment, and a clear majority claimed that “surveillance audits support continuous improvement.”

These findings are consistent with a 2012 report from the International Accreditation Forum (IAF), which surveyed over 4000 respondents from businesses in 41 countries – the majority representing small to medium-sized business with fewer than 250 employees (a similar size to many NGOs) – on their experiences with certification processes. Four out of five reported that certification processes added value to their business, with nearly half reporting improved business practices as the main outcomes of external verification. Compliance with regulatory requirements was only a motivating factor for 13% of the businesses undertaking certification, although almost 80% reported that the process itself helped them meet external requirements.

The third study, more in line with the dynamics of the humanitarian sector, took a critical look at the impact of values-based social

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20/ A full bibliography of all the articles reviewed would be impractical, but are available on request from the author.
22/ Op cit. p.43.
24/ International Accreditation Forum (2013).
Lessons from the humanitarian sector

However, rather than looking outside the sector for evidence of the added value of third party verification, a more compelling case can be made from the outcomes of research and extensive consultations with multiple stakeholders on their needs and expectations regarding standards and verification.29 Of particular interest are the views of organisations that have actually undertaken a third party verification and/or certification process. The results of this research strongly supports the claim that external verification against a common standard has a positive effect on participating organisations, and indirectly influences behaviour more widely in the sector.30

The trend showed that the number of non-compliance issues identified decreased over time, at least in the case of those criteria under the organisation’s control, suggesting that learning and change process had taken place.31 The study acknowledged certification “was not the only driver of change in terms of improvements in program quality and impact, but that the process did have a positive impact on the organizational priority and pace to make these improvements.”32

Other examples can be drawn from NGO certification-type processes at the national level. For example, hundreds of US-based NGOs participate in InterAction’s member self-assessment and certification process.33 While not directly comparable to an external certification scheme, the process provides a structured, comprehensive framework to assess organisations against InterAction’s Private Voluntary Organization (PVO) standard. Interestingly, InterAction piloted a third party verification and certification system for members involved in child sponsorship programmes. An internal review noted that the learning element from the verification and audit process “trumped any benefit that may result from public knowledge of their third party certification.”34 It also noted that accountability for compliance with a standard “cannot and must not be the end in itself. Rather, having standards and subscribing to a more rigorous compliance system must be part of a systemic commitment to transparency and to an on-going, regular institutional

Four out of five reported that certification processes added value to their business.
self-examination of the systems, policies and procedures needed for each agency to provide appropriate, consistent and effective service delivery.\(^{40}\)

Similar reviews and interviews with dozens of NGOs and governments participating in other certification schemes at the national or international level showed comparable results. While there were issues around the design, affordability and complexity of verification and certification processes, most organisations reported that, on the whole, verification and certification added value in terms of systematically improving their internal processes and more consistently considering accountability and effectiveness in their work.\(^{41}\)

The learning element from the verification and audit process “trumped any benefit that may result from public knowledge of their third party certification.”

Third party verification of the CHS and the link to aid quality, effectiveness and accountability

Based on the available evidence, there is no reason why external verification of compliance with the CHS will a priori act as an impediment to the kind of organisational learning and improvements needed to increase effectiveness and accountability in humanitarian actions. In fact, the opposite is more likely: a strong verification system increases the likelihood that organisations will develop and sustain a more systematic approach to quality assurance, learning and performance issues, with corresponding positive effects on aid effectiveness.

A unique and exciting feature of the CHS is that it provides a more comprehensive and holistic way to view accountability, one that has been hitherto lacking in the sector. Accountability to affected people, as promoted by HAP over the past decade, remains the centrepiece of the CHS, and rightly so. But the CHS also provides a much needed bridge linking issues of accountability to performance, and making sure the results of actions are relevant and appropriate for the people they are intended to assist. It also helps redefine donor-driven definitions of accountability around how and where money and resources are spent and, more importantly, whether or not aid efforts represent value for money in the eyes of affected communities. This logic underpins each of the Nine Commitments of the CHS, and as such, represents a step-change in how the sector thinks about the design, implementation, management and evaluation of aid programmes.\(^{42}\)

The following list outlines four key reasons how third party verification of the CHS can contribute to improved aid effectiveness and accountability by:

1. Providing a comprehensive framework to assess and verify performance and accountability

Too many commitments made in the aid sector are empty promises, with no real incentives, or mechanisms by which to demonstrate that those promises are being kept. The CHS provides a means of verifying whether or not organisations are serious about putting people at the centre of their humanitarian responses. Every CHS Commitment, with its quality criterion, accompanying key actions and organisational responsibilities, is designed in a way that promotes people-centred responses and practical actions to support them. The CHS asks organisations to demonstrate that they have made every reasonable effort to apply its criteria, justify when this has not been possible, and take actions to address any shortcomings in the future.\(^{43}\)

Third party verification is an ideal way to facilitate this. The CHS Verification Framework developed to accompany the CHS is a systematic way to assess and verify that organisations are implementing it. This includes verification protocols with consistent methodology to assess organisations against the CHS, identifying and responding to weaknesses, and incorporating learning into its current and future practices. Part of the assessment methodology includes ensuring the views of affected people about the quality of aid and the relationship with aid providers are considered whenever possible, since they are key to reinforcing the central themes of aid quality, effectiveness and accountability.\(^{44}\)

While the protocols themselves are a rigorous, systematic approach to assessing an organisation, the process itself is sufficiently flexible to adapt to different contexts, organisational capacities and working methods. The emphasis is on whether the concepts behind the CHS Commitments and quality criteria are adhered to and whether the organisation fulfils its commitment to good practices and continuous improvement.

The CHS Verification Framework, Verification Scheme and other accompanying tools have been developed by the CHS Alliance. See http://chsalliance.org/what-we-do/verification for more information.

\(^{40}\)/ Op cit, p.15

\(^{41}\)/ See the SCHR Certification Review project findings at: www.schr.info/certification.

\(^{42}\)/ For more information on the development and content of the standard see: www.corehumanitarianstandard.org

\(^{43}\)/ See the introductory sections of the standard itself, and accompanying Guidance Notes and Indicators for more background on how the standard should be interpreted and applied. Both documents available at: www.corehumanitarianstandard.org

\(^{44}\)/ The CHS Verification Framework, Verification Scheme and other accompanying tools have been developed by the CHS Alliance. See http://chsalliance.org/what-we-do/verification for more information.
These verification protocols have already been tested in several contexts with different types of organisations, with excellent results. The experience so far reinforces the conclusion that external verification is accessible, affordable, and adds value to the organisation in terms of understanding where its strengths are and where it needs to improve its effectiveness and accountability. It also shows that it is possible to assess large and small, national and international NGOs against the same requirements. In effect, this helps level the playing field in a system inherently biased against local and national actors by applying the same standard to all.

The Core Humanitarian Standard addresses a large share of the 267 recommendations included in the 7 ALNAP Global Forum briefing papers, especially those related to “meeting the priorities and respecting the dignity of crisis-affected people”, and those related to “ensuring that humanitarian action is consistent with longer term political, economic and social processes”. Source: CHS Alliance analysis. Details available at http://goo.gl/yik4NL

Figure 8.2: ALNAP Global Forum recommendations covered by the CHS (for each Briefing Paper):

1. Good humanitarian action reaches everyone in need
2. Good humanitarian action meets the priorities and respects the dignity of crisis-affected people
3. Good humanitarian action is consistent with longer term political, economic and social processes
4. Good humanitarian action is led by the state and builds on local response capabilities wherever possible
5. Good humanitarian action is apolitical and adheres to international law and the humanitarian principles
6. Good humanitarian action makes the best possible use of resources
7. Good humanitarian action uses the best knowledge, skills and tools to achieve an effective and timely response

It provides an organisation with a clear, objective diagnostic of where improvements are needed, and an action plan to address, track and benchmark progress against them over time.

2. Building a stronger foundation for continuous learning and improvement, and benchmarking good practice

The CHS is built around the idea of continuous improvement, recognising that humanitarian action is a complex undertaking, and many situations make it difficult to consistently or perfectly meet any standard or good practice. Nevertheless, working in challenging contexts should not exempt any organisation, no matter what role it plays (funder, implementer, coordinating body, partner, etc.), from demonstrating with evidence that it is committed to improving the way it works. One advantage of third party verification is that it is a powerful tool for benchmarking good practices and promoting continuous learning and improvement.

Most evaluation processes are one-off exercises with a limited focus on project or programme outputs and outcomes, providing only a partial picture of an organisation’s capacity, accountability and performance. In contrast, third party verification implies a regular, ongoing and independent assessment of the organisation’s capacities and performance over time. Assessing and verifying an organisation against a comprehensive standard like the CHS allows for a more holistic overview of an organisation’s systems, processes and practices. It provides an organisation with a clear, objective diagnostic of where improvements are needed, and an action plan to address, track and benchmark progress against them over time. It also helps organisations see how improving (or failing to improve) in certain areas affects performance in others, and apply these insights to encourage wider organisational learning and improvement. The process validates internal efforts to improve and provides external assurances that there has been measureable progress in applying the CHS. This becomes an incentive to make positive, sustained changes to an organisation’s ways of working.

45/ See http://chsalliance.org/what-we-do/verification for more information on how the Verification Framework was developed and field tested.
46/ Despite the widespread use of OECD/DAC evaluation criteria, the objectives, design and methodology of many evaluations are often quite variable, and dependent on the commissioning agency, the competencies of the evaluators, and the evaluation approach selected. As such, the evaluations are often very limited in scope, and the results not easily comparable across organisations, crisis contexts or programming areas. In contrast, the CHS integrates the OECD/DAC criteria, but offers a greater level of precision on how criteria such as “effectiveness” can be assessed.
Beyond the immediate advantages to individual organisations, third party verification over time provides a useful database of comparable information on how each of the CHS Commitments, quality criteria, key actions and organisational responsibilities are understood and applied by different organisations. While each organisation’s data remains confidential (unless it wishes to share the information for the purposes of transparency), the overall trends and patterns of CHS implementation can be consolidated and shared widely, to help organisations benchmark themselves against others, and to track overall progress in the sector. It will undoubtedly help the sector as a whole in building a convincing evidence base on how well we are doing at putting people at the centre of our actions. An additional benefit is that this information will be extremely useful when revising and improving the standard over time.

3. Strengthening quality assurance and risk management processes in the sector

If the experience in other industries is anything to go by, third party verification of the CHS should help strengthen quality assurance and risk management mechanisms throughout the sector. Organisations undergoing third party verification tend to invest resources in their internal quality assurance processes to ensure more consistency in quality and performance, but also as a risk management tool to reduce the possibilities of major failures. The end result is that in many mature sectors, robust quality assurance processes are the norm, not the exception.

The humanitarian sector is no different. As noted above, the verification system for the CHS is designed to be flexible. The process does not simply look for evidence of compliance, but also considers whether an organisation’s processes are in the spirit of the CHS, and aligned with its goal of delivering better quality and more effective and accountable responses. The focus is on assessing the strength of internal quality-control mechanisms and assessing potential areas where there is a risk that the CHS Commitments may not be met. Verification allows organisations to pinpoint areas where more work may be required to ensure more consistent application of the CHS.

The experience in other sectors suggests that this can lead to organisations operating more effectively and efficiently, not just in terms of internal processes, but also in their relationships with key stakeholders and the outcomes of their work. As more and more organisations undergo external verification, the cumulative effect is likely to be better quality assurance processes for the sector in general. Since the CHS is designed to improve performance and accountability to deliver timely, appropriate and relevant interventions, widespread adoption and implementation of the standard should inevitably drive improvements in aid effectiveness throughout the sector itself.

4. Rebuilding trust and confidence in organisations

Another important benefit of third party verification is that it can help restore trust and confidence in organisations engaged in humanitarian actions. Organisations that have undergone third party verification or gained certification often report that staff feel a great sense of accomplishment and pride that comes with meeting a benchmark and having their efforts externally recognised and validated. Just as financial or management audits provide a degree of assurance that good management practices are met, verification of the CHS provides external stakeholders with objective assurances that the organisation is professional and committed to the principles and values behind the CHS. Communicating this externally to supporters and other stakeholders is a means of building trust and confidence in the organisation.

More importantly, over time, as affected communities and local authorities become more aware of the CHS, they will have a clearer idea what they can expect from aid organisations. Third party verification could in future help people determine which organisations are more likely to provide relevant, appropriate and effective responses in an ethical, respectful manner. As more organisations engage in third party verification, this will become an incentive to others to demonstrate that they too are credible, professional and working towards full and consistent application of the CHS.

This is consistent with some of the points made in the Listening Project’s Time to Listen report.  

The report argues that ‘proceduralisation’ makes the current system biased toward bureaucratic systems and processes, rather than genuine people-centred approaches: “People in recipient societies also want the predictability and consistency that procedures can provide. What they want does not differ from what most donors and operational agencies also want — namely, standardized processes for ensuring that outsiders and insiders, in each context, can effectively engage together to promote peace and development.”

Conclusions and recommendations

The fundamental contribution of the CHS is that it redresses the accountability deficit in the sector, by making sure applying and measuring the standard is explicitly linked to the quality of outcomes for communities affected by crises. However, unless this is accompanied by strong verification mechanisms, there is a risk that the CHS will become yet another empty declaration of good intentions. The WHS faces the same risks: the Summit outcomes will be largely hollow promises if they are not accompanied by a comprehensive framework to measure, verify and report on how we are individually and collectively improving the quality, effectiveness and accountability of aid efforts.

As this chapter has argued, the CHS and its accompanying verification mechanisms are precisely the kind of framework needed to translate the aims of the WHS into practical action on effectiveness and accountability. Third party verification is not an impediment to the continuous learning and improvement advocated by the CHS, but instead a powerful tool to ensure that it can help organisations better equip themselves to understand where improvements are needed, and work more consistently towards meeting the

Another important benefit of third party verification is that it can help restore trust and confidence in organisations engaged in humanitarian actions.

48/ Op cit. p.82
quality and accountability commitments contained in the CHS. By demonstrating that organisations are competent, professional and working towards an agreed standard and good practices, it can help rebuild the trust and confidence of all stakeholders – and refocus attention on fulfilling our collective commitment and responsibility to provide more effective and accountable responses for people affected by crises. A number of stakeholders have directly or indirectly referenced the CHS in their recommendations to WHS, making it a useful framework for translating the key aims of the Summit into practical actions.

Here are three concrete recommendations to the WHS on how the CHS can be used to move the aid effectiveness and accountability agenda forward:

1. **Use the CHS as a framework to guide capacity-strengthening strategies.**

   Significant resources have been invested in strengthening the capacity of humanitarian actors over the past few decades. However, the lack of a common and coherent approach to designing and measuring these actions means that it is hard to show the results of those efforts. Through its Nine Commitments and Quality Criteria, the CHS describes the key characteristics of a principled, accountable and effective organisation. This makes it a useful framework to ensure that capacity-strengthening activities are orientated around ensuring organisations have the capacities to meet these aims. **The WHS outcomes could support this by specifically recommending all actors use the CHS to support a more coherent and common approach to capacity-strengthening strategies.**

2. **Use the CHS as a common reporting framework for humanitarian aid effectiveness.**

   A key challenge identified in the WHS consultations is the inadequate evidence available to indicate the progress we are making towards greater aid effectiveness and accountability. The diversity of approaches by individual organisations, institutional donors and others to monitor and evaluate results makes it a challenge to demonstrate our collective impact. The CHS offers an excellent foundation to track our collective progress towards meeting the WHS goals. Its design is purposely aligned to meet OECD/DAC evaluation criteria, but goes a step further by offering more tangible, concrete examples of what relevant, appropriate, connected and effective assistance means and how it can be demonstrated. Developing a common reporting framework around the CHS, and encouraging all stakeholders (including governments, donors, UN agencies, NGOs, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and others) to report on their contribution to the CHS would allow us to track our collective progress against the aims of improving aid effectiveness and accountability. **The WHS outcomes could support this by calling on all actors to align their reporting with the CHS as a means of showing collective impact.**

3. **Promote widespread third party verification of the CHS by all actors.**

   There is significant interest and commitment from NGOs to use third party verification against the CHS to assess their capacity, performance and accountability. But not enough actors submit to a similar degree of external scrutiny to demonstrate how they contribute to aid effectiveness. This is particularly the case of institutional and government donors and UN agencies. The CHS can be used to correct this imbalance. Encouraging all actors to support and engage with third party verification would provide evidence on how they contribute to putting communities affected by crises at the heart of their humanitarian actions. **The WHS outcomes can support this by calling on all actors to use third party verification against the CHS as a means of showing that their commitments to aid effectiveness and accountability are reflected in their practices.**

   Acting on these three recommendations would show we are serious about demonstrating our capacity, accountability and performance, with robust evidence that shows people affected by crises are always at the centre of our actions.

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49/ See for example the briefing papers synthesising the recommendations from regional and global consultations for the WHS prepared by ALNAP for a global consultation. Available at: http://www.alnap.org/what-we-do/effectiveness/global-forum
How can we curb corruption in humanitarian operations?

Corruption undermines the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian operations. Promoting integrity measures, including setting up transparency and accountability systems, not only helps to identify corruption cases, but also helps to address corruption risks and reduce the pressures, opportunities and rationalisations that drive humanitarian aid staff and other stakeholders to engage in corrupt practices.

When most people think of corruption, they imagine financial fraud, bribery and extortion, perpetrated by greedy public officials, often in collusion with venal contractors. Surely these kinds of practices would not be found in the provision of humanitarian assistance, where actions motivated by the humanitarian imperative are delivered by committed humanitarian staff? And yet the noble intentions that underpin humanitarian aid programmes do not always protect them from corruption.

Nicolas Séris and Roslyn Hees of Transparency International consider how to improve transparency and accountability in the humanitarian aid sector.

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Since 1997, Roslyn Hees has served as a manager and as a volunteer Senior Advisor with Transparency International’s Secretariat (TI-S). Following two years as Director of the TI-S Africa and Middle East Department, she worked as a volunteer for TI-S on a variety of activities, including fundraising and programme evaluation. In 2005 she was asked to lead (as a volunteer) a new TI initiative in addressing corruption issues in humanitarian aid, which led to the publication in 2010 of the TI Handbook of Good Practices in Preventing Corruption in Humanitarian Operations (updated in 2014) as well as subsequent companion TI Pocket Guides. Currently she is principal advisor to TI’s Humanitarian Aid Integrity Network, which combines global, national and grass-roots research and advocacy, and to a joint initiative with the International Federation of Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) to develop training and e-learning materials based on the TI Handbook.

The authors wish to thank Paul Harvey and Brian Lander for providing invaluable comments on the draft versions of this chapter. The views and opinions expressed in this chapter are however solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the CHS Alliance, Transparency International or those of the peer reviewers. Details of all reviewers can be found on the inside back cover of this report.
Surely these kinds of practices would not be found in the provision of humanitarian assistance, where actions motivated by the humanitarian imperative are delivered by committed humanitarian staff?

Transparency International (TI) defines corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.”2 In the case of humanitarian assistance, resources have been entrusted to organisations – including national and local governments, inter-governmental organisations, NGOs and local communities – specifically for alleviating the suffering of people affected by crises and restoring their dignity. The power inherent in these resources can be abused for a variety of reasons: for financial gain or political influence, to enhance personal or organisational reputation, or to meet family, social or business obligations.

Bribery and extortion distort programme decision-making processes and increase the cost of goods and services. The impact of this kind of financial corruption is most often manifested in the diminished quantity or quality of aid resources reaching the targeted beneficiaries.3 However, some abuses of power, which we define as ‘non-financial corruption’, will not be reflected in financial accounts and other formal documentation. These include: the hiring of less qualified staff through nepotism and cronyism; bias or political interference in the targeting or registration of beneficiaries or distribution of relief resources that results in the exclusion of the most vulnerable; the extortion of sexual favours in return for aid; or the coercion and intimidation of staff to turn a blind eye to or participate in corruption. These abuses reduce the quality of humanitarian aid programmes and undermine the humanitarian mission. Non-financial corruption is less amenable to administrative controls and requires different strategies for its detection, remedy and prevention.

It is important to note that corruption does not only benefit individuals. TI uses the term ‘private gain’ in contrast to the concept of ‘the public good’: power can be abused to benefit a person, a family or community, ethnic, regional or religious groupings, political parties and organisations, corporations, professional or social associations, warlords or militia. In some countries, corruption has become so embedded in the power dynamics and the fabric of society that it has become the norm, considered the only way to get things done.

This article will examine the reasons why humanitarian operations are vulnerable to corruption and highlight the main risks humanitarian organisations encounter in their operations. We will also review operational policies, regulations and other measures that can mitigate identified corruption risks. Finally, we will make a number of recommendations on strategies that have the potential to reduce corruption and enhance the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian operations.

Why are humanitarian operations vulnerable to corruption risks?

At the macro level, it is estimated that the cost of corruption equals more than 5% of global GDP and that over US$1 trillion is paid in bribes each year,4 which are wasted resources. Unfortunately, we do not have sufficient research data to be able to estimate the specific impact of corruption in humanitarian aid. The evidence we have is largely anecdotal and cannot be extrapolated. The lack of quantitative data regarding the amount of humanitarian aid lost to corruption is problematic as it undermines the drive to advocate for enhanced anti-corruption measures.

Operating in challenging environments

We do know that the challenging environments within which humanitarian aid is delivered make it vulnerable to corruption risks. Most international humanitarian operations take place in fragile states, with weak rule of law, inefficient or dysfunctional public institutions including oversight organisations, and low absorptive capacity. In such contexts, principles of transparency and accountability are unknown, poorly understood or only given lip service.5 Injecting large amounts of aid resources into resource-poor economies where people have urgent personal survival needs sets off desperate competition for those resources, exacerbates power imbalances, and increases opportunities and temptations for corruption. For example, post-earthquake aid to Haiti was estimated by 2013 to be between US$7.6 billion and US$9 billion (depending on its definition), compared to Haiti’s annual GDP of US$6.6 billion in 2010.6

These countries also suffer from high levels of pre-existing, endemic corruption. The top ten priority countries featured in OCHA’s 2015 Consolidated Appeal all received very low rankings in TI’s 2014 Corruption Perception Index, scoring less than 25 out of a possible 100.7 Where corruption is deeply embedded, government officials routinely demand bribes or ‘facilitation payments’ for performing normal public services, and suppliers expect to win contracts based on bribery or political interference, rather than on the basis of competitive price and quality.8

In addition, there is often a heavy reliance on political, social and economic patronage as a normal way of operating in emergency-affected countries. Traditional power structures that aid agencies may turn to for local knowledge and feedback may be dominated by particular regional, ethnic or clan networks that discriminate against women and minorities. Nepotism and cronyism may be

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6/ Iraq: 16; Syria: 20; Central African Republic: 24; South Sudan: 15; Afghanistan: 12; Democratic Republic of Congo: 22; Myanmar: 21; Somalia: 8; Sudan: 11; Yemen: 19.
Injecting large amounts of aid resources into resource-poor economies where people have urgent personal survival needs sets off desperate competition for those resources, exacerbates power imbalances, and increases opportunities and temptations for corruption.

seen as culturally and socially appropriate.\(^8\) It is difficult for external aid providers to navigate these unfamiliar waters to find the right balance between respect for local culture and their own values, standards and processes. As assessments of the Haiti 2010 earthquake response and early discussions on the Nepal 2015 earthquake response have indicated, there can also be tensions and trade-offs between the urgency of saving lives, working through corrupt or dysfunctional national and local institutions, organisational fiduciary responsibilities, and sustainable recovery and reconstruction.\(^9\)

Many humanitarian operations take place in highly insecure environments, limiting humanitarian space and putting staff at risk. This is exacerbated by the political instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid in conflict-affected or politically strategic contexts and by the involvement of international military forces in delivering aid.\(^10\) Civilian aid workers are no longer perceived as inherently benign and neutral. Violence against humanitarian aid operations has risen over the last decade, with an increasing number of major attacks: in 2013, the number of people killed, seriously injured or kidnapped spiked at 464.\(^11\)

The difficult context for humanitarian programmes has further internal impacts on aid agencies. A rapid scale-up of programmes and staff in a sudden-onset emergency and the pressure to disburse funds and demonstrate quick results stretches staff already stressed by the inevitable gap between needs and resources, and overloaded with multiple initiatives. In long-standing chronic or repeated emergencies, particularly conflict contexts, there is often a high level of staff burnout. Both situations lead to high staff turnover,\(^12\) with a resulting loss of local knowledge, institutional understanding or memory of the dynamics of a particular emergency, allowing mistakes and misunderstandings to be repeated.

What are the main risks of corruption in the humanitarian aid sector?

Risks related to programme support functions

Corruption risks affect finance, supply chain management and procurement, and the Human Resources (HR) support functions.

Financial corruption risks

Financial corruption risks comprise a set of threats including financial fraud and embezzlement, improper accounting, false or inflated invoices or receipts, manipulated audits, payroll and claims fraud, and bribery for local permits or access to public services. Finance-related risks are particularly high for agencies operating in a cash-only environment or for programmes involving cash transfers (conditional or unconditional) to beneficiaries where there is no possibility of delivering cash through bank agents or mobile banking. Acts of financial corruption are generally ‘inside jobs’ involving agency staff forging invoices, receipts or audit reports, or colluding with vendors to obtain inflated or distorted accounting documents or reports. In cash-for-work or cash-for-goods programming, lists of beneficiaries can be manipulated and payments made to ‘ghost’ beneficiaries.

Supply chain and procurement processes

Supply chain and procurement processes represent one of the highest risks of corruption for agencies implementing humanitarian operations. Aid resources are at risk of being diverted during transport and storage through the manipulation or ‘loss’ of inventory documents. Vehicles and other assets belonging to the agency (mobile and satellite phones, for instance) can be used by staff for personal or commercial activities. Fuel supply and vehicle repairs are prone to corruption through collusion between staff and suppliers. These are examples of relatively small corrupt practices that nevertheless can have a large cumulative impact on organisational budgets.

Procurement processes can be manipulated by agency staff at the specification, pre-qualification, bid evaluation, contract, award and implementation stages to favour specific contractors. ‘Phantom’ suppliers can be created to minimise competition in the bidding process or to mask personal connections and conflict of interest. Suppliers may collude with each other to inflate costs or bribe staff to accept sub-standard goods or services. Suppliers could also collude with agency staff to tender for unnecessary goods or equipment or to inflate the quantities required. Construction and reconstruction programmes are particularly vulnerable to corruption because of their high value and technical complexity, and the limited capacity for agency oversight.

HR support functions

Bias in recruitment, promotion or deployment, short-circuiting controls in emergencies or hidden conflicts of interest are common risks affecting the Human Resources function. Risks are particularly high during sudden-onset emergencies requiring a rapid scale-up of local staff to respond to urgent needs. Staff responsible for recruitment, promotion or deployment can favour relatives, members of their communities or political parties. Agencies can be subject to pressures to recruit and employ staff from certain regions, ethnic groups or political affiliations. In situations of conflict in particular, staff may also be exposed to physical or psychological threats in order to participate in or close their eyes to corrupt practices.

Risks are particularly high during sudden-onset emergencies requiring a rapid scale-up of local staff to respond to urgent needs.

8/ Maxwell, D. et al. (2008) op. cit. p.9
Risks related to implementation of the programme cycle

Corruption risks also affect the different steps in the implementation of the programme cycle from the needs assessment to the final evaluation.

During needs assessments, the identification of target populations or project locations can be biased or inflated to favour recipients of aid based on ethnic or political affiliations, or to attract resources to be diverted. Bribes can be demanded when requesting necessary permits and licences to access public services such as water, electricity or the internet. It can also happen along the supply chain (from the clearance of goods by the customs authorities to passing through different checkpoints to access the point of delivery). The selection of local partners and community relief committees can also be subject to manipulation by staff or local elites due to bribery, nepotism or cronyism.

Coordination mechanisms among the different humanitarian actors are often inefficient, particularly at the beginning of a response. This can lead to the risk of aid and services being duplicated, and so increase opportunities for corruption.

The targeting and selection of beneficiaries is a process that is particularly vulnerable to manipulation by including or excluding certain groups based on membership of a particular community, or political interests or affiliations. People may register several times (with or without staff collusion), claim entitlements for deceased or non-existent relatives (‘ghost’ beneficiaries) or sell their registration documents. Agency staff or local authorities can also request bribes or sexual favours to include people on a beneficiary list. During distributions, staff can modify the composition or size of entitlements, and rations can be diverted for sale on the private market. Programme monitoring and evaluation reports can also be distorted or falsified to attract more resources or to cover up for corruption.

Aid can also be forcefully diverted by armed groups or officials during and after distribution as a form of tax for war or protection. In highly insecure environments, remote management of aid operations can increase the risk of undetected corruption and reduce accountability to beneficiaries.

To combat corruption, a humanitarian organisation needs to create an internal culture of integrity.

The ‘fraud triangle’ below can illustrate the ‘fraud triangle’ below. Motive can include financial need or simple greed, social and economic pressures, or extortion and physical threats.

Drivers of corruption

Corruption is driven by a number of factors that can be illustrated by the ‘fraud triangle’ below.13 ‘Gatekeepers’ who control access to aid resources or beneficiaries (such as customs officials, police, local authorities, militias, traditional leaders, or locally contracted staff and volunteers) may not earn a living wage and thus rationalise supplementing their meagre incomes through bribes. Beneficiary communities may view these resources as ‘foreign money’ from rich donors, and thus feel little ownership of, fiduciary responsibility for, or effective control over use of the aid. Local leaders who do not feel sufficiently consulted on beneficiary needs and appropriate agency processes may view international aid programmes as misguided and wasteful, so justifying greater transparency as a prerequisite for communities to hold organisations providing humanitarian assistance to account.

Training on corruption risks and remedies

Transparency International-Norway and the International Federation of Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) have developed e-learning modules and instructor-led training (ILT) materials that will be publically and freely available to humanitarian actors to support training of staff to detect and prevent corruption in their operations.

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Desperate refugees, tired of waiting in lines, rush into a World Food Programme compound in the Dadaab refugee camp in northeastern Kenya. Tens of thousands of newly arrived Somalis have swelled the population of what was already the world’s largest refugee camp.
© ACT/Paul Jeffrey
Uwajibikaji Pamoja: a collective complaint and response mechanism\textsuperscript{17}

Uwajibikaji Pamoja (“Accountability Together” in Kiswahili) is an automated web-based Integrated Complaint Referral Mechanism. Implemented by TI-Kenya in partnership with over 40 state agencies and international and local organisations, the initiative enables members of the public and organisations to submit and refer complaints concerning aid and service delivery to the relevant public and private authorities at county level, through a toll-free SMS line, email or walk-in service. People with no access to a mobile phone or internet may visit the nearest office of a partner organisation participating in the intervention, or speak to frontline staff in the field to lodge their complaints. The walk-in option also allows people who cannot read or write to report their cases.

Internal controls and regulations alone are not sufficient to prevent and detect corruption. They should be combined with transparency and accountability initiatives to ensure communities can participate and provide feedback at all stages of the humanitarian intervention.

Tools to combat corruption

To combat corruption, a humanitarian organisation needs to create an internal culture of integrity, come to a full understanding of the environment in which it is operating, and reduce the opportunities and incentives for staff and other humanitarian stakeholders to engage in corrupt practices. The measures outlined below are set out in more detail in the TI Handbook for Preventing Corruption in Humanitarian Operations (updated in 2014), and are based on current good practices in the humanitarian and other sectors.\textsuperscript{15} Many of them also correspond to the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), which was also published in 2014.\textsuperscript{16}

- **Opportunity** addresses the risk calculation of the potential perpetrator of corruption. If, say, administrative controls are weakened due to pressure to deliver aid rapidly, if audits and programme monitoring are insufficient and superficial, or if reports of corruption are not promptly followed up, investigated and sanctions applied, the perception that corrupt practices will probably go unpunished makes them more likely to happen again.

To reduce the **pressure** to which humanitarian staff and other stakeholders can be exposed (a common ‘motive’), humanitarian organisations can define and implement ethical **values and behavioural standards** that help staff resist temptations to engage in corruption. In addition, **leadership signals** (including the ‘tone at the top’ and ‘walking the talk’) from organisational managers modelling ethical behaviour are critical. The organisation’s **code of conduct** can define clearly what constitutes corrupt behaviour and how it will be dealt with, spelling out the procedures for **investigation and sanctions**. Specific policies and guidelines can also be set up to prevent and report sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), covering all staff, volunteers and partners as well as beneficiaries and communities affected by crisis. Staff should be required to declare any potential **conflict of interest** and refrain from engaging in any recruitment or procurement processes when they have a connection to an applicant or bidder. A **gifts and hospitality policy** can outline the circumstances in which it is unacceptable for staff to receive gifts from a third party. Donors and implementing agencies are also encouraged to set up safe, user-friendly **whistle-blower mechanisms** through which staff can report corruption. An **ethics office** within the organisation can provide advice to staff and others on ethics and corruption cases. **Staff induction and training** as well as **emergency preparedness** processes can include analysis of corruption risks and appropriate remedies for them.

Rationalisations of corruption can be addressed not only by clear ethical standards for staff as set out above, but also by a deeper understanding of corruption **risks**: emanating from the external environment. While they may not be able to influence the external environment, humanitarian donors and agencies can assess the institutional and power dynamics in specific emergency contexts so as to better prepare themselves to identify, monitor and address the corruption risks they may face.

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15/ Aid recipients interviewed in the ‘Time to Listen’ study complained that: “There are aspects of international assistance that they see as ‘corrupting influences’ that appear to condone endemic local corruption or, in some cases, even feed it and worsen it. These include what people see as extravagant spending or needless waste by international aid agencies and their staff, the delivery of too much aid (too quickly), and the absence of serious or effective accountability in aid efforts.” Anderson, M. B. et al. (2012) ‘Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of Humanitarian Aid’. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects. pp.99-100.

16/ CHS Alliance / On the road to Istanbul: How can the World Humanitarian Summit make humanitarian response more effective?


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Addressing corruption reported via a hotline

Since 2010, TI Pakistan has been running a hotline to report fraud, wastage and abuse in a multi-billion dollar aid programme funded by USAID that channels grants through local governmental and non-governmental organisations, including to assist the victims of the 2010 floods. Particular emphasis is placed on corruption in procurement and HR. After investigations, several disciplinary actions were taken by the USAID Office of the Inspector General, including: the dismissal of ten local NGO staff for gross misconduct; the dismissal of 21 staff at a local NGO for corruption, and its debarment from future USAID grants; the dismissal of a USAID contractor due to fraud in procurement processes; and termination of the contracts of several USAID implementing partners (IPs) involved in fraudulent practices. Agricultural inputs and cash were also delivered to affected populations who had not been included in the distribution lists due to corruption.

Greater transparency in providing information to affected people concerning programme plans and budgets, targeting criteria and beneficiaries' rights and entitlements (CHS Commitment 4) is a prerequisite for communities to hold organisations providing humanitarian assistance to account. Transparency must be accompanied by active communication and accountability systems to engage and elicit feedback from beneficiaries, which can help improve the quality and effectiveness of programme services and foster increased local ownership of international aid programmes (CHS Commitment 3). Setting up context-adapted confidential complaint mechanisms for people to report any grievances regarding the aid provided (CHS Commitment 5), while ensuring a prompt response to complaints, can help agencies to identify corruption cases and also serve as an important deterrent. Although there have been improvements in recent years, most complaint mechanisms remain agency- and project-specific. These multiple and overlapping mechanisms are less effective than a collective approach to beneficiary feedback. The opportunity for corrupt behaviours and practices can more easily be countered by a humanitarian organisation's internal controls. Governmental and non-governmental humanitarian organisations can establish, publicise and ensure compliance of all staff and related parties to institutional values, policies, regulations and procedures that can mitigate corruption risks in their operations. Audits that go beyond 'the paper trail' and independent field-level monitoring and evaluation are particularly important for detecting and deterring corruption. Guidelines related to the separation of duties for financial, procurement, logistics and HR decision-making functions, as well as for areas of the programme cycle posing a high corruption risk (e.g. needs assessments, targeting, etc.), are essential safeguards to preserve integrity. Resource tracking systems, including regular budget and asset monitoring systems, can promote a culture of transparency and make it harder for corruption to take place.

Senior managers of humanitarian organisations are key in establishing a culture of integrity within their organisations, giving leadership signals and behaving as role models for their staff.

Conclusions and recommendations

Why, despite the good practices mentioned above, does corruption still occur in humanitarian operations? In this chapter, we have delved into a number of key challenges that impede the reduction of corruption in humanitarian operations.

The following recommendations seek to address these challenges and to enhance the integrity and effectiveness of humanitarian operations in the changing and challenging contexts where they take place.

1. Quantify the scale and impact of corruption in humanitarian operations. There is no comprehensive quantitative data regarding the scale or proportion of corruption in the humanitarian aid sector, and further research on this issue should be undertaken. The absence of quantitative data does not allow humanitarian aid organisations to quantify the amount of resources 'lost' to corruption, which weakens the rationale and incentives to invest time and resources in integrity initiatives. The establishment of credible baselines would also allow humanitarian organisations to assess the effectiveness of anti-corruption tools and practices and to measure progress over time.

2. Establish an organisational culture of integrity. Senior managers of humanitarian organisations are key in establishing a culture of integrity.
within their organisations, giving leadership signals and behaving as role models for their staff. This is likely to limit a certain culture of impunity that still prevails, the temptation to cover up fraud and other forms of corruption, and to blame or prosecute whistle-blowers (as happened recently when a senior UN employee reported alleged sexual exploitation of children by French peacekeeping troops in the Central African Republic).21 Commitments to transparency, integrity and accountability should not only be embedded into organisations’ values and policies, but also built into staff inductions, training and performance appraisals, to ensure that all staff have a common understanding of the risks involved and to create incentives to report and address corruption.

3. Carry out corruption risk analyses as part of emergency preparedness.

Donors and aid implementing agencies should, as part of needs assessments and emergency preparedness, undertake agency- and context-specific mapping and analysis of their internal incentives and controls regarding corruption, as well as of the cultural norms, and the political, institutional, social, and power structures and dynamics in ongoing or potential crisis environments. These measures can better prepare them to deal with the internal and external corruption risks specific to a particular response, and design a more focused strategy to reduce them.


Although critical, internal controls and regulations to reduce motive, opportunity and rationalisation (i.e. the drivers of corruption mentioned earlier) alone are not sufficient to prevent and detect corruption. They should be combined with transparency and accountability initiatives to ensure communities can participate and provide feedback at all stages of the humanitarian intervention. Such initiatives can positively impact the quality of humanitarian aid20 and also expose and deter corruption by comparing official accounts with the reality on the ground.21 However, the reverse is also true. Several studies have shown that providing information and seeking feedback (voice) do not have the intended impacts unless they are accompanied by audits and field monitoring and evaluation; trigger prompt provider responses, including investigations and appropriate sanctions; and lead to the incorporation of lessons learned through accountability into future programme design and processes.22 The implementation of a comprehensive anti-corruption policy and strategy should be a donor criterion for agency funding eligibility.

5. Improve communication with affected communities through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

The increased penetration of mobile phones (and therefore SMS messaging, FM radio and internet access) is providing new opportunities to engage with communities via two-way communication channels. Community radio, in local languages, is a very efficient way to engage with communities. Innovative ICT solutions, such as sending early warning information directly to people’s mobile phones through bulk SMS and the use of social media, have helped improve people’s access to information in recent years. However, it is worth noting that the most vulnerable people still have no access to mobile phones and that illiteracy still prevents many from understanding information and engaging with aid providers. It is thus essential to continue holding direct consultations and informing people regarding their rights and entitlements through public forums and direct face-to-face dialogue.


Despite the increased investment in accountability systems for humanitarian operations, little has been done by the humanitarian community to engage communities in monitoring corruption risks. Nonetheless, community mobilisation against (and monitoring of) corruption has been successfully piloted outside the humanitarian sector, including in international development

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Are cash transfer programmes more or less prone to corruption than other aid programmes?

Although cash is more attractive to the potentially corrupt than any other form of aid because it is so immediate and easy to use, an analysis of the 2011 drought response conducted by TI-Kenya found that cash transfers and the use of bank agents or mobile technology can reduce the risks of corruption by reducing or eliminating procurement, transport, storage and distribution from the aid cycle, thus cutting out intermediary steps and agents.

7. Take advantage of new technologies to increase programme effectiveness.

Cash-transfer programmes using electronic technologies should be scaled up. The use of ‘smart cards’ bearing beneficiaries’ fingerprints, or chip cards protected by PIN numbers, combined with cash transferred to bank accounts and mobile banking systems, can limit the risk of ‘ghost’ beneficiaries and multiple registrations while also facilitating monitoring and controls. The use of biometric data for beneficiary registration can also reduce the risks of multiple or ‘ghost’ registrations. GPS systems can help in needs assessments or for tracking aid and reducing duplication of responses.

8. Adopt international collective standards for transparency and accountability.

Humanitarian organisations should be encouraged to comply with the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), and publish data on their programmes according to the IATI Activity Standard. Collective approaches around accountability to affected people and the adoption of recognised industry standards such as the CHS should be encouraged. The Commitments of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) on Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP), currently being put into operation and piloted by a multi-stakeholder task force, is also a promising initiative. Humanitarian organisations who have operationalised standards on transparency, integrity and accountability, and who are able to demonstrate progress on and compliance with the CHS indicators should have a comparative advantage when applying for grants.

9. Increase incentives to openly discuss risks and report corruption cases transparently.

There are a number of disincentives for humanitarian organisations to openly discuss risks and report corruption incidents. Although humanitarian aid organisations and donor agencies that have informal or formal fraud and anti-corruption strategies generally declare an official goal of ‘zero tolerance’ of corruption, this should not result in a refusal to acknowledge that corruption can happen despite an organisation’s best intentions and policies. This could have the effect of discouraging interventions in high-risk contexts. Aid providers should be encouraged to report corruption cases in a transparent manner, without the threat of grants being terminated by donors, as long as they can show they are seriously tackling the underlying problems.

Curbing corruption is a long-term effort that requires collective and multi-pronged strategies. For anti-corruption interventions to be given the necessary strategic importance and adequate resources, leaders of humanitarian organisations as well as donors and affected governments have a key role to play. Additional research, case studies and documented practices that demonstrate how enhancing transparency and accountability contributes to saving lives, alleviating suffering and maintaining human dignity will also provide the indispensable incentives for humanitarian actors to intensify their efforts to curb corruption risks in their work.


A woman pauses to rest while trekking across eastern Kenya near the Somali border. The Somali woman left her home a month earlier, fleeing drought and conflict, to head for the Dadaab refugee complex. © Paul Jeffrey
As humanitarians, can we ever be collectively accountable for our response? Since the introduction of Humanitarian Reform, and its reinforcement through the Transformative Agenda, collaborative humanitarian decision-making has been strengthened through the cluster approach and the development of Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs). Over the same period, we have seen the growth of organisations focused on accountability to affected populations (AAP), such as the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), and organisational adoption of accountability processes and principles such as the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) and the Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations (CAAP). However, humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies are primarily focused on building organisational cultures of accountability; concentrating on internal arrangements to ensure that the voice and participation of the communities they assist are incorporated in their programmes. Less attention is paid to collective accountability – the notion that common decision-making bodies should be more accountable as collectives to people affected by crises.

The accountability of clusters, HCTs and other groups of organisations coordinating their efforts is due a fundamental rethink, says Matthew Serventy.

Matthew Serventy
Humanitarian Action Coordinator

Matthew Serventy has been a cluster coordinator for Food Security for FAO and WFP in Sudan and Jordan (regional), for Shelter with UNHCR in Timor Leste, and for Logistics with WFP in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Ukraine. He has been an inter-cluster coordinator with OCHA in Kyrgyzstan, Philippines and Myanmar and he has attended more Humanitarian Country Team and cluster coordination meetings than he can count. For Danish Refugee Council, UNDP and OCHA Matthew developed and facilitated training for cluster coordinators, and he was the coordinator of the AAP/PSEA Task Team in 2014. During this time he investigated how collective accountability could be understood by clusters and HCTs.

The author wishes to thank Neil Buhne, David Ennis and Brian Lander for providing invaluable comments on the draft versions of this chapter. The views and opinions expressed in this chapter are however solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the CHS Alliance, or those of the peer reviewers. Details of all reviewers can be found on the inside back cover of this report.
Tensions are created for organisations and decision-making collectives by the extensive set of accountabilities they have in different ‘directions’: upwards to head office and donors, and sideways to cluster partners, organisations or government departments. This restricts space for accountability downwards to affected communities. However, collectives should, as a ‘rule of thumb’, expend as much time and effort on collective downward accountability as they do on upwards and sideways accountability. Accountability generally encounters a major obstacle in the many people and organisations that are unwilling to change the way they work. For example, two thirds of the feedback gathered during the Typhoon Haiyan response in the Philippines was critical of targeting criteria. Yet, a key reason why targeting continued was simply because “it’s the way we do it”. Thinking about accountability as a collective may provide actors with an opportunity to help each other to adjust the way they operate. This chapter explores collective accountability in three ways: taking account, which refers to participation and engagement; giving account, which relates to transparency and communication with communities (CWC); and responsibility, i.e. taking ownership of our collective decisions and accepting credit – and blame – where it is due. Giving and taking account by collectives should be relatively straightforward: we can adapt existing principles of organisational AAP to develop collective AAP processes. Collective responsibility, on the other hand, is more difficult to address, and a concept far more likely to be contested. But both of these aspects can be enhanced in our response through actions and activities specific to key humanitarian collectives.

To improve collective accountability, it makes sense to take small steps and develop them at the local collective level, and within the cluster and the HCT. Global-level collectives, notably the GlobalClusters, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the Emergency Directors Group (EDG) and donor groups such as the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative, all have important roles to play in supporting and informing collective accountability. Yet, while global support is required, the most frequent refrain of the time-pressed humanitarian is “but how do I do it?” This chapter examines how HCTs and clusters could approach it, and suggests some simple steps to strengthen the application of collective accountability.

Collective accountability involves firstly accepting and then taking ownership of the fact that in the humanitarian sphere, all actors are inextricably interlinked. If we are to work collectively towards a common cause, we need to collectively account for our common vision and method, and bear collective responsibility for our actions.

What is collective accountability?

Collective accountability is not simply a sum of the individual accountability efforts of partner organisations that make up the collective. Even if every member of a cluster or HCT has AAP processes in place, the collective decision-making can still be unaccountable. For instance, it is common that in inter-cluster, HCT or more general coordination forums, the voices of people affected by crises are entirely absent. Meanwhile, it is conceivable (though unlikely) that a cluster or an HCT could be collectively accountable, ensuring that affected people’s voices were heard and acted upon in overall strategies and planning, without individual members having their own internal accountability programmes. Collective accountability can be described by a set of specific accountabilities attributed to a particular collective – e.g. that a cluster must describe how it sets common targeting criteria, or that an HCT should listen to a common feedback mechanism for guidance. It should be grounded in an understanding that the collectives that define the overall humanitarian response may set a direction that differs from the specific responsibilities of the individuals or organisations involved. If one’s mandate is food, but there is an overriding protection crisis, protection should be allowed to guide the collective response – and vice-versa. In her case study of AAP in the Typhoon Haiyan response, Margie Buchanan-Smith describes this as asking: “Are we doing the right things?” instead of the standard question of: “Are we doing things right?”

Accountability generally encounters a major obstacle in the many people and organisations that are unwilling to change the way they work.

The structures that define humanitarian ‘business’ represent fundamental obstacles to collective AAP. A strong sectoral focus is reflected in the technical mandates of many organisations (e.g. WFP, MSF, etc.), and in particular by the silos of the cluster approach (e.g. Food, Health, Education, Protection, etc.). While these silos allow for a consolidation of expertise and improved coverage, the structures themselves may constrain how humanitarian actors operate: the Somali National NGO MURDO described clusters as having “the authority of format” – that cluster structures and their associated work processes seem fully formed and incapable of adaptation, and that national NGOs are simply forced to adopt them. Those inside an organisation are also constrained by the expectation that employees, particularly senior staff, will push their area of specialism, chase funding and provide agency visibility. Nigel Fisher, the Humanitarian Coordinator in Haiti described how three weeks after the 2010 earthquake, the people’s priorities were jobs, education and shelter, ahead of food. Imagine if a WFP head of office argued to donors that they should reduce WFP funding in favour of other sectors. (She) would be quickly removed from his/her post.

There are regular complaints made against the arrogance and paternalism of international humanitarian approaches, but this arrogance, in part at least, is systemic, or habitual rather than personal. In Myanmar, IDPs didn’t want lights in their toilets (provided based on an assumed risk of gender-based violence); they wanted them in their homes, for education and for employment, in order to be able to leave the camps. This didn’t happen, because it is ‘standard protective practice’ to provide lights in toilets, irrespective of the wishes of the people affected. Similarly, the cluster

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4/ Author’s conversation with DFID representative.
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’silo approach’ creates a danger of gaps between the sectors. In Kyrgyzstan in 2010 electricity supply was a key issue. Families required power for home-based incomes, education and food preparation, yet despite a single issue affecting multiple sectors, only INGOs with a multi-sector approach could support this expressed need, and no cluster oversaw it as an activity.

Humanitarians are realising that what works for coordination in one context may not be in another. To be collectively accountable, it is essential to examine the collective structures employed – in particular the role of government in collective decision-making. Ben Ramalingam and John Mitchell have suggested that humanitarian action can be grouped under four ‘C’ classifications: comprehensive, collaborative, constrained and consultative. The ‘comprehensive’ model is unfortunately the most common – where international organisations understand themselves as central to humanitarian decision-making, to the exclusion of national actors, including affected people. Tackling diverse emergencies using a single model of response is a recipe for further disaster, and clusters and HCTs must be ready to adapt their structures, and be more nuanced and creative in their understanding of, and their response to, emergencies. A strong connection to affected communities is key to this understanding.

Unfortunately, it is easy to find examples of failures of collective ‘responsibility’ at a global level: in March 2014, MSF investigated a “mysterious disease” in Guinea, and within two weeks had declared an “unprecedented” Ebola outbreak. Despite the international esteem in which MSF is held, its appeals to the global humanitarian community were ignored or discounted, and concerted global collective action was not undertaken until August, costing thousands of lives. In the Horn of Africa Famine in 2012, early warning systems clearly indicated thousands of lives would be lost, but yet again regional collectives failed to act. The IASC Real Time Evaluation stated that “the HCT’s misreading of the crisis led to insufficient urgency, an inappropriate strategy and a late response.” There is also the ‘CNN effect’ and/or geopolitical interests which focus attention on one emergency, while another is largely ignored.

The danger in collective responsibility is that when we are all responsible, we can individually avoid taking the blame or being part of the solution. Recommendations from Operational Peer Reviews (OPR) and Real Time or other evaluative processes are only useful to the extent that they are followed up. Experience from many countries shows that humanitarian organisations, HCTs, inter-cluster bodies and clusters will readily respond to suggestions they already agree with, but ignore or avoid suggestions that will be difficult, costly or outside their technical mandate. In terms of AAP at the country level, this could be tackled by developing a third-party platform – that is, a separate entity with independence to oversee accountability. An inter-agency AAP advisor heading up such a platform can be highly effective in ensuring collective accountability, but only where the HCT and inter-cluster forums commit to supporting them and implementing their recommendations.

While there have been failures, there have also been improvements in collective accountability. It is becoming more commonplace for HCTs to ‘give account’ by producing key documents in national languages, such as the Humanitarian Response Plan in Ukraine in 2015, or the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) in the Philippines in 2014. At a national level, while responding to conflict in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, the shelter cluster ‘took account’ by developing a common strategy based on protection considerations expressed by the community, and successfully resisted strenuous efforts by individual partners to provide a variety of shelter responses.

Caution must be used if collectives attempt to define their accountability in isolation. During the CHS review in Ethiopia in 2014, the team discovered that notions of mutual accountability were understood by national NGOs to mean that “communities (and local authorities) are partners in the relationship and have shared responsibilities.” This was in stark contrast to the Northern understanding that organisations are solely accountable to beneficiaries. Allowing for a community-driven, local understanding of collective accountability might challenge our preconceptions and require a different approach to accountability. Given that affected communities are actors in their own right, we must also question a system that allows our decision-making collectives to fail to provide what people say they need most.

In certain crises, there has been an expansion of the numbers of new actors joining clusters without being bound by, or even aware of, key humanitarian principles and standards. This provided the impetus for the development of the ‘Minimum commitments for participation in clusters’, which include readiness to participate in actions that specifically improve accountability to affected people, and a commitment to consistently engage in the cluster’s collective work. The Joint Standards Initiative (JSI) and its resultant CHS were reactions to “growing evidence from humanitarian crises over the past decade that voluntary approaches to self-regulation are not enough to ensure compliance.” These global-level efforts to provide a common understanding of accountability have not always trickled down to field-level collectives. While collective AAP is emerging in some forums, it’s still far from a reality, and top-down leadership doesn’t always provide the answer. So what is currently commonplace in collective accountability, what has been tried, and where could we potentially go with it?

Collective accountability and the Transformative Agenda

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The Transformative Agenda (TA) has moved humanitarian vision and operation from individual project planning to developing common strategic and operational approaches. The variety of common approaches within
the TA has actually strengthened collective accountability. The inter-agency assessments – either Multi-sector Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA) or Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) – provide a collective understanding of the emergency, which creates the basis for the decision-making and agenda-setting of the Strategic Response Plan (SRP). Despite improvements in collective assessments there remains a tendency to ‘silo’ the response from day one, by treating all questions as sector-specific. Why not begin instead with open-ended questions to respondents, such as: “What are your top priorities?” In the absence of this broader view, actors will tend to focus only on issues in their own sector, at the exclusion of other priorities and considerations. Very often their priorities may not be the same as those of the communities they are serving. For example, the MIRA in Typhoon Haiyan highlighted mass communication as a key need without it being reflected in the SRP. This is a fundamental collective responsibility – HCTs and clusters must respond to issues raised by inter-sector assessments, even when they raise issues no single cluster or agency wants to address. The gap between listening and taking collective action persists in many responses, though there are ongoing efforts to reduce this, such as the ‘perception surveys’\(^\text{15}\) of the Ebola response, aimed at calibrating other priorities and considerations. Very often their priorities may not be the same as those of the communities they are serving. For example, the MIRA in Typhoon Haiyan highlighted mass communication as a key need without it being reflected in the SRP. This is a fundamental collective responsibility – HCTs and clusters must respond to issues raised by inter-sector assessments, even when they raise issues no single cluster or agency wants to address. The gap between listening and taking collective action persists in many responses, though there are ongoing efforts to reduce this, such as the ‘perception surveys’\(^\text{15}\) of the Ebola response, aimed at calibrating other monitoring efforts.

The TA has also seen development of common monitoring tools, such as the Periodic Monitoring Report (PMR).\(^\text{16}\) Good monitoring and indicators are essential elements of an accountable response, and the PMR is an attempt to bring monitoring more closely in line with objectives laid out in the SRP. The development by OCHA of the Indicator Registry,\(^\text{17}\) a library of sample indicators developed by the clusters (including AAP indicators), has provided potential ways to establish links from assessment through to monitoring. But do we need to monitor the TA has actually strengthened collective accountability? The inter-agency assessments – either Multi-sector Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA) or Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) – provide a collective understanding of the emergency, which creates the basis for the decision-making and agenda-setting of the Strategic Response Plan (SRP). Despite improvements in collective assessments there remains a tendency to ‘silo’ the response from day one, by treating all questions as sector-specific. Why not begin instead with open-ended questions to respondents, such as: “What are your top priorities?” In the absence of this broader view, actors will tend to focus only on issues in their own sector, at the exclusion of other priorities and considerations. Very often their priorities may not be the same as those of the communities they are serving. For example, the MIRA in Typhoon Haiyan highlighted mass communication as a key need without it being reflected in the SRP. This is a fundamental collective responsibility – HCTs and clusters must respond to issues raised by inter-sector assessments, even when they raise issues no single cluster or agency wants to address. The gap between listening and taking collective action persists in many responses, though there are ongoing efforts to reduce this, such as the ‘perception surveys’\(^\text{15}\) of the Ebola response, aimed at calibrating other monitoring efforts.

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13/ Ibid. p.39.


differently as a collective? Could we ask the community what their indicators of effective response would be? The Good Enough Guide\(^\text{18}\) describes using school attendance rates as a measure of water availability (going to school or collecting water being opposing choices for young family members in a particular context). Measuring context-specific indicators is the best way to identify and respond to context-specific problems.

Finally, the TA has encouraged the collective evaluation processes of the Operational Peer Review (OPR) and IAHE. These processes explicitly include AAP and collective responsibilities in their guidelines, and include guidance on improving AAP efforts. The EDG can ensure discussions with communities are part of any OPR, and can request that clusters and HCTs develop explicit collective planning on AAP. The EDGs have the ability to collectively and individually reward accountable and collaborative behaviour, and hold representatives accountable for their share of responsibility for collective results. There is little or no evidence to date, beyond making recommendations, of the EDGs sanctioning an underperforming HCT or enforcing AAP efforts. This is another example of where a third-party body can assist, engaging with the community on behalf of the collective and following up on recommendations.

The in-country ‘leadership team’

A key concern for establishing collective accountability is the make-up and nature of HCTs. Humanitarian organisations lack formal obligations to the Humanitarian Coordinator, and many NGOs are not represented on HCTs at all. Without effective representation we cannot expect a great deal of shared responsibility to be taken by those on the ‘outside’ of the HCT. OCHA has argued that the ‘Empowered Leadership’ envisioned through the TA requires “not only the right people in the right place, but also an environment that enables leaders.”\(^\text{19}\) What’s needed is a leadership team which has a stronger sense of their collective accountability to people affected by crises rather than a focus on their internal accountability to HQ or the Executive Board. This would require institutional support for HCT members to take decisions that support the collective, over and above priorities of individual organisations.

Donors can further encourage collective accountability by removing funding processes that encourage competition between HCT members (the competition for funds in the Haiyan Response initial CERF allocation, for example, was described by one HCT member as a “bloodbath”). Short-term inflexible funding models do not allow for collective accountability. The most logical and cost-effective planning in many settings would be delivered by multi-year planning and investment cycles. These would allow for changes in projects based on feedback from communities affected by crises. HCTs are also generally dominated


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by UN agencies, whether ‘operational’ or not, making decisions on priorities, partners and funding, without any external evaluation. HCTs also suffer from a lack of consistent representation from national governments, and HCT planning is not always in line with that of government, even where nations have significant capacity to respond.

These factors make the HCT potentially one of the hardest nuts to crack in terms of collective accountability: how can an unrepresentative, competitive, unequally empowered group with poorly defined decision-making processes be held collectively accountable for its decisions and actions? Nonetheless, there are opportunities and good practices that can set the stage for more collective ownership of accountability at this level.

Taking account – listening to the population

1. Participation in the HCT could take the form of national NGOs, or consortia where they exist, being invited to attend HCT meetings.
2. Key HCT decisions can be ‘field-tested’ through discussions with communities and their leaders.
3. Reviews and advice from common service feedback mechanisms (such as illustrated by the example of Pamata Kita) can become standard HCT agenda items to ensure a response remains relevant to affected people. Donors can give preference to inter-agency or inter-sector projects developed in consultation with communities, and the HCT can publicly state that this is a prioritisation criteria.

Giving account – explaining what we are doing

1. The HCT should provide details of the SRP to affected communities to outline what shape the response will take (including any limitations it will have) to help manage their expectations. Very few SRPs are available in the language of the country, unless it happens to be French, Spanish or English. Very rarely are SRPs shared widely with community leaders or local government, often because they may not agree with the analysis or priorities. As a minimum, HCTs should translate executive summaries, or produce newsletters or similar to keep affected communities up-to-date.

2. Transparent documentation of how decisions are taken, including minutes and proceedings of meetings, should be generally available.
3. The HCT should ensure the establishment of an inter-agency feedback and complaints mechanism, integrate AAP into assessments, strategies, monitoring and evaluations, and report back to the EDG on AAP actions taken.

Responsibility

HCTs are expected to function despite having to deal with the variety of agendas (i.e. political, ‘development versus humanitarian’, human rights and security), mandates and interpersonal limits under which its members operate. OCHA’s Humanitarian Leadership Strengthening Unit (HLSU) argues that the HCT “should be seen, should be treated, and should behave as a team of leaders who share responsibility for achieving collective results.” Despite this advice, HCTs still rarely consider themselves so much answerable to the community, or the national government, as to their respective bosses. HCTs will not be able to be collectively accountable without cultural change in member organisations that frees up HCTs to make decisions based on evidence and facts, rather than opinions and agency mandates. HCTs must also be ready to adapt the SRP when flawed analysis is found. The membership of HCTs should be examined – for instance, why should small UN agencies be represented, while far larger operational NGOs are not invited? Membership should be based on organisational capacity and size, with the ten largest organisations getting a seat at the table. The HCT structure and processes must be likewise re-examined, with decision-making processes clearly defined, and priorities based on evidence gathered through multiple means. The unfortunate reality is that feedback from affected communities does not necessarily equate to the HCT guiding substantial changes in programming, but rather to organisations providing redress to individuals, or making small adjustments to processes.

Many will need to reframe their mandate to include collective responsibility for emergency responses, and re-educate their senior leaders to embrace collective responsibility. Some processes already exist: pooled funds ensure collaborative action and donors could provide further incentives to HCTs for behaving collectively by including collective AAP requirements in bilateral agreements. In order to establish a culture of accountability in the response, the HC and the HCT could advocate with donors to support projects with explicit AAP aspects or goals. The EDG has allowed for the EDG to review the performance of HCTs, as well as for HCTs to self-monitor through OPRs. HCTs could develop collective accountability workplans as a matter of course, and be reviewed against them.

Collective accountability and the clusters

It does not seem that individual organisational accountability automatically leads to a sense of collective cluster accountability. Despite most INGOs and some UN agencies having internal accountability departments, these rarely result in the development of common AAP approaches, except where organisations are already working collectively in consortia or similar. Furthermore, the organisational AAP processes are rarely reflected upon in cluster meetings, nor do they inform a more general sense of collective accountability. To start a collective notion of accountability, the clusters can ‘self-assess’, monitor, learn and report on AAP. OCHA can encourage cluster coordinators to play a leading role in the development of inter-agency and collective accountability.

This will not happen automatically, and cluster coordinators and OCHA staff need the training and skills to include collective accountability in their work. The Global Food Security Cluster Coordinator has highlighted that cluster coordinators’

What’s needed is a leadership team which has a stronger sense of their collective accountability to people affected by crises rather than a focus on their internal accountability to HQ or the Executive Board.

Majdi Abduharaman (right) and Abraham Thom repair the hand pump on a well in Bor, a city in South Sudan’s Jonglei State that has been the scene of fierce fighting in recent months between the country’s military and anti-government rebels.
© ACT/Paul Jeffrey
Clusters could take time to come to agreement on what AAP standards they agree to follow as individual organisations. They could agree on a common language on what it takes to be accountable collectively, and identify areas where AAP commitments such as those found in the CHS could be translated into collective action. The inter-cluster forum can provide coherence for how clusters work with AAP, providing agreed guidelines, and helping to incorporate AAP into country strategy, targeting criteria and other overarching documents. An inter-cluster collective accountability advisor could lead such a process, both guiding clusters on how to approach collective AAP, and following up on commitments made. There are arguments, particularly within OCHA, that inter-agency AAP advisors are not required because AAP should be built into everyone’s working practice already. The reality is that it is not. Without an individual or group committed to developing and guiding collective accountability practice, it is unlikely to flourish.

Donors could have a role in encouraging clusters to develop community information plans, and supporting these financially. They should encourage clusters to expend as much reporting time and energy on affected communities as they do on donors themselves. Donors could encourage flexible programming that is quickly adaptable to changes in the context, or in rapid response to the views of beneficiaries. They could also be more flexible themselves, by providing small sums for small collective endeavours and encouraging new ideas, or providing greater support to pooled funding mechanisms, which are less likely to be siloed.

**Giving account – explaining what we are doing**

1. Clusters, and in particular the inter-cluster group, can communicate the results of needs assessments and evaluations to affected communities, even when the message is negative. They can provide community messaging on common technical standards, principles of delivery and codes of conduct, rights of recipients, beneficiary criteria and the limits to the international aid role. The inter-cluster forum should form its own common communications and feedback strategies, using and supporting processes in the same mould as Pamata Kita.

2. The inter-cluster forum can keep people affected by crises informed of what they are entitled to and what the humanitarian community is planning. In Kyrgyzstan, the inter-cluster group produced one-page newsletters, featuring answers to the most common questions asked of each cluster.

3. Beneficiaries commonly complain about targeting criteria, which impose artificial distinctions upon communities. In the Philippines, the Pamata Kita project highlighted that shelter targeting decisions were creating social divisions, in particular making smaller households ineligible for transitional shelter support. Since those who miss out don’t have any specific implementer to complain to, the cluster as a whole should take responsibility for explaining targeting decisions to them.


Despite this, the clusters and the inter-cluster group represent perhaps the best opportunity to implement collective accountable practice. They are more representative than the HCT, have a broader range of skillsets and experiences to draw on, and are arguably a little more adventurous.

Responsibility

Clusters generally consider themselves accountable to their members, while the members (i.e. the humanitarian organisations) are accountable to the beneficiaries. All clusters work like this. For example, the shelter cluster states that “accountability ... lies with cluster members, not the cluster team members themselves.” This seems sensible – obvious, even – until we start to unpack the notion. Decisions are made collectively in the cluster, on household targeting, geographic distribution and local technical standards, and even on issues such as ‘do no harm’ or how to manage access. Given that all cluster members are then expected to abide by these collective decisions, should it be the responsibility of the members alone to be accountable for decisions they might not have entirely agreed with? If you were to ask one NGO or UN agency in a cluster if they would hold themselves responsible for the actions of another NGO, they would most likely strongly reject the notion. Yet if we consider how the collective works at an operational level, some level of responsibility must be assumed. For example, when humanitarian actors meet and divide a country response up geographically, sharing out different districts, each member of the cluster is tacitly ‘approving’ the other organisations to fulfil their role effectively and appropriately. So when things go wrong, they must bear some of the responsibility to take this up within the cluster, and step in to assist if required.

How to manage this joint responsibility has been a constant issue for clusters, and one which has never been satisfactorily resolved, even considering the ‘Minimum commitments’ mentioned above.

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Maybe a new language of collective accountability will be required to enable a collective uptake.

First steps towards collective accountability – from global to local

1. **Senior leadership is critical** – collective accountability needs to start at the top:
   - The IASC AAP/PSEA task team should develop standards on collective accountability, based on existing approaches such as the CHS.
   - The EDG needs to enforce these standards and follow up on recommendations from EDG missions and OPRs.
   - One Emergency Director should become a global leader for AAP.
   - Donors need to demand planning based on community engagement.
   - OCHA HLSU should develop training and guidance to allow HCs to lead the HCT into being a collectively accountable body.
   - Global clusters need to develop and provide guidance on collective accountability.

2. **A shift in thinking is required** – the response must establish a collective accountability mindset:
   - The inter-cluster forum should develop, adopt and monitor country-specific minimum collective accountability and quality standards.
   - The HCT should establish a third-party accountability platform, headed by an accountability advisor, and commit to following its guidance.
   - All clusters, in cooperation with IMOs, should adopt indicators that monitor how affected communities perceive the relevance, timeliness and effectiveness of their actions, and use them to adapt their action.
   - Donors, organisations and all collective forums need to reconsider their approach to coordination and cooperation – they must put aside their preconceptions and technical biases, and make the voice of the population their guiding principle.

So where to from here?

There is no doubt that humanitarian action is becoming more coordinated, even as the numbers and types of actors grow. HAP, Sphere, and now the CHS are aligning, although a common language has taken a long time to develop, just as the AAP approach has been slow to achieve broad uptake. Maybe a new language of collective accountability will be required to enable a collective uptake. We assume that collective accountability leads to greater collective effectiveness, but this hypothesis has not yet been tested with the rigour needed in the few examples we have to choose from. As we continue to better understand collective AAP, we may develop a different set of accountabilities.

Collective accountability cannot use a ‘cookie cutter’ approach – different cultures and different emergency situations require markedly different accountability approaches. These contextualised approaches could possibly be developed by HCTs and clusters alone, but are far more likely to be developed by ensuring the establishment of an independent third-party platform, or at least an individual responsible for collective accountability. The role of national government in ensuring international accountability is ignored in too many contexts. HCT and cluster structures must actively pursue ways to meaningfully include national partners, including government, national NGOs and, of course, affected people.

Can we really work together? We already are in many ways, as the HCTs and clusters in certain countries have taken various steps toward collective accountability.

Developing standards for delivery by cluster, inter-agency feedback mechanisms... these are the little steps that are easy to take and set us on the road. Some common approaches, such as inter-agency monitoring, may need rebranding as accountability in order to demonstrate that this is nothing new to humanitarian action. With these small steps we build on existing knowledge and practice, so that each step gradually becomes standard procedure. Perhaps the key requirement of collective accountability will be a kind of humility, an ability to put aside competition and agency positioning and genuinely seek collaborative outcomes.

Developing standards for delivery by cluster, inter-agency feedback mechanisms... these are the little steps that are easy to take and set us on the road.
People Management: the shape of things to come

Jonathan Potter looks at the role of HR and people management in delivering high-quality, accountable and effective humanitarian action through the CHS – now and in the future.

Created in 1995, People In Aid merged earlier this year with HAP International to become the CHS Alliance. One of the Alliance’s key tasks is to “support the sector in ensuring organisations and staff work effectively in delivering quality and accountable programmes” under the guidance of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS).1 The CHS helps optimise organisational and individual performance in humanitarian and development action. People In Aid’s work, advocacy and influence over the years has resulted in the emphasis given to Human Resources (HR) and people management2 issues throughout the CHS and this, in turn, forms an important part of the mandate of the CHS Alliance: to “lead improvements in people management”.

Over the past 20 years, People In Aid’s focus on HR and people management has led to positive changes in the humanitarian and development sector. Amongst other things, HR teams are

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2/ Roughly speaking, HR covers the policies and practices which organisations need to have, while people management is what managers need to know and do, with and for their staff.
The fact that operational effectiveness is so inextricably linked to competent, well-managed staff persuaded People In Aid to give up its own Code in favour of the new single standard for the sector, the CHS.

Linking people management with quality, accountability and effectiveness

When the Emergency Capacity-Building Project and People In Aid released their report on Surge Capacity in 2007, there was one big idea: “Agencies need to adopt a whole-organisation approach to surge capacity. If this does not happen, their capacity to respond will be compromised.” This approach was implemented by trustee boards in Europe, the US, the UN and elsewhere.

Such an approach requires – in advance – simultaneous financial, operational and workforce planning. This comprehensive workforce planning, shaped by organisational strategy, ensures the right number of staff with the right skills are in the right place at the right time to deliver short- and long-term organisational objectives. It supports efficient and timely programme delivery, mitigates risk, ensures efficient use of resources, and motivates and engages staff (e.g. by offering clearly defined career paths).

A less joined-up approach is a risk to operational effectiveness. While the People In Aid Code has had a long and successful life, and evidence of its impact is noticeable in a great many organisations working in the sector, organisations using a separate code (usually owned by HR) will end up with a less joined-up approach to people management. The fact that operational effectiveness is so inextricably linked to competent, well-managed staff persuaded People In Aid to give up its own Code in favour of the new single standard for the sector, the CHS.

Competent and well-managed staff are at the heart of an accountable and effective organisation. Staff raise and manage funds, coordinate activities, interact with affected communities, report to donors, come up with innovative ways to deliver aid, and represent the face of the organisation. They make things happen at all levels and at every stage of the programme cycle. It is therefore self-evident that an organisation needs to support and manage its own staff appropriately and responsibly, or else the effectiveness and accountability of the organisation itself will suffer. Motivation and performance can decline, and staff turnover increase, owing to any number of factors: e.g. poor management of teams and individuals; leaders not being true to organisational values; inadequate reward for work done; recruitment processes failing.
to spot sexual predators; employers failing in their duty of care to staff, and limited opportunities for self-development, to name but a few.

We cannot allow poor HR or people management to undermine quality or accountability in humanitarian response, and the CHS strongly promotes people management as an essential ingredient of organisational effectiveness. CHS Commitment 8 is all about this, while workforce planning, staff behaviours, training and other HR-related topics are recurring themes throughout the CHS.

The ‘Key Actions’ in the CHS are defined as: “What staff engaged in humanitarian action should do to deliver high-quality programmes consistently and to be accountable to those they seek to assist.” This acknowledges that staff are central to the successful application of the CHS and prompts senior management to put a major focus on their own personnel, and on how they can be supported to comply with the CHS Commitments. In other words, the CHS is a whole-organisation approach which results in quality, accountability and effectiveness.

Organisations need to be ready for today and preparing for the future. But who are tomorrow’s staff? What should they be able to do? And how can the organisation make sure they do it?

Who are tomorrow’s staff?

The International Civil Society Centre and others expect that the national and international NGOs of the future will have to be ‘of the community’ and not ‘for the community’: they predict humanitarian workforces that are increasingly similar in profile to the communities they assist. Expatriates will continue to bring unique value of course, particularly because of their

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The International Civil Society Centre and others expect that the national and interna
knowledge of organisational systems, access to funding, perceived neutrality and impartiality, and experience with different approaches in different contexts. The advantages of local employees include context-specific knowledge and skills, acceptance by local communities, and lower cost. Further strengthening the capacity of local organisations and communities as first-responders is a task required of all organisations, as reflected in the first ’expected result’ of DFID’s latest humanitarian fund, which envisions: “Improving the knowledge and understanding of national staff of civil society organisations and their counterparts so they can be better prepared for emergencies and better able to deliver an effective response when disasters strike.”

If more humanitarian and development workers are to be drawn from the local population in future, organisations need to be agile enough to adjust their staff-related practices and values to this reality:

- INGOs may decide not to operate directly in the field; instead carrying out advocacy and fundraising while leaving national and local NGOs to employ staff and deliver programmes (i.e. becoming catalysts of response rather than service deliverers). To this end, there is considerable work underway in the sector to strengthen partnerships, develop national talent and leaders’ and, with donors, look at direct funding.

- ‘Connection’ will be a key word for the future. A result of People In Aid’s requirement for its certified members to conduct staff engagement surveys has been that national and field staff realised they worked for and with a head office, and that it cared about their opinion. Organisational culture, values, policies and processes are often diluted as they pass down the chain from HQ through regional and country offices, and eventually to programme offices and refugee camps. How will organisations ‘connect’ to employees who work in their own communities?

- Workers already have a variety of employment relationships which they and their organisation must agree on (e.g. fixed-term contracts, consultancy, volunteering, etc.). This list will expand to include freelance, agency and entrepreneurial relationships for example.

**Figure 11.1: Core humanitarian competencies identified by People in Aid in 2011**

| Here are some of the core humanitarian competencies identified by People In Aid in 2011: |
| Applying humanitarian standards and principles |
| Ensuring programme quality and impact |
| Working accountably |
| Making decisions |
| Listening and creating dialogue |
| Working with others |
| Minimising risk to communities, partners and stakeholders |
| Managing personal safety and security |
| Adapting and coping |
| Maintaining professionalism |
| Self-awareness |
| Motivating and influencing others |
| Critical judgement |

The framework was the result of a process managed by ActionAid on behalf of the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies in 2011, which was facilitated by People In Aid. Core Humanitarian Competencies Framework, http://www.peopleinaid.org/pool/files/CBHA_Core_Humanitarian_Competencies_Framework_2012_col_WEB%5B1%5D.pdf.

- ‘Poaching’ of staff continues to be a challenge, particularly for national NGOs but also for local government (see box on the previous page).

**What should tomorrow’s staff be able to do?**

Whether expatriate or local, staff need the right skills and behaviours, and the future requires a focus on new ones. Assessing required technical skills (e.g. medical, logistical, WASH, etc.) is a matter for each individual organisation and its programmes, but there are core requirements for individual aid workers (see box below).

- *Communication:* as the sector (re-) discovers the importance of its daily interaction with the people it aims to work with, effectively communicating with and providing information to people affected by a natural disaster or a man-made crisis will become two hugely important elements of humanitarian response.

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7/ To use a UK example, there are two programmes from the START Network called ‘Developing Talent’ and ‘Shifting the Power’. See: http://www.start-network.org/how/start-build/#.VWnu-89VhHw. [Accessed: 28 June 2015].
9/ ‘Poaching’ means one organisation proactively approaching and recruiting another organisation’s staff.
11/ Critical judgement
12/ Mamadou Ndiaye of OFADEC and Dr. Ahmad Faizal Perdaus of Mercy Malaysia.
13/ Figure 11.1: Core humanitarian competencies identified by People In Aid in 2011
15/ To this end, there is considerable work underway in the sector to strengthen partnerships, develop national talent and leaders’ and, with donors, look at direct funding.
16/ Workers already have a variety of employment relationships which they and their organisation must agree on (e.g. fixed-term contracts, consultancy, volunteering, etc.). This list will expand to include freelance, agency and entrepreneurial relationships for example.
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23/ ‘Poaching’ means one organisation proactively approaching and recruiting another organisation’s staff.
Whether expatriate or local, staff need the right skills and behaviours, and the future requires a focus on new ones.

- **Matrix working**: with the continuous push for humanitarian organisations to effectively collaborate through clusters with partners, national authorities and communities affected by crises, staff see their reporting lines and accountability commitments multiply. Reporting lines will increasingly grow laterally, bringing day-to-day humanitarian work closer to matrix management. The Roffey Park Institute has identified four ‘individual enablers’ supporting this way of working: (to) express personal conviction and ownership of project goals; harness sources of personal power and influence; demonstrate authenticity and integrity; and build connections, collaborate and network.

- **Technology and virtual working**: new technology speeds up response times, allows for meetings to take place virtually and across time zones, and also requires processes to be managed quicker. In a recent survey of managers, 61% of respondents agreed that “digital technologies and social media are changing the way I do things in my organisation”; and 66% of respondents agreed that “my organisation needs to recruit or develop new leadership capabilities to take advantage of digital technologies.” Working with and managing teams that are geographically dispersed will require not only increased emotional intelligence and an ability to inspire trust, but also more self-management skills to keep organisations functional. Also likely to feature in a revised list are: resilience, or ‘grit’; ideas from CHS Commitment 9 such as ethical or environmentally-friendly practices; understanding what value an organisation adds to a response; and leadership practices such as the ability to influence without authority.

‘Poaching’ of staff continues to be a challenge, particularly for national NGOs but also for local government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency-based</th>
<th>Talent-based</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Instability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff Needs Planning</td>
<td>Tolerance for uncertainty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operational</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Training/Mentoring</td>
<td>Coaching/ Counselling/Design Thinking/Facilitation</td>
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<tr>
<td>To ensure replication of knowledge</td>
<td>Goal</td>
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<tr>
<td>The right person in the right job/position</td>
<td>Leitmotiv</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Talents in the service of a common goal</td>
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The competencies approach to staff can cramp innovation if it defines too strictly what is expected of employees. A talent-based approach is an alternative, focusing more on staff’s career path, successful team-building and using talent effectively to achieve organisation-wide goals. A talent-based approach does however require innovative HR and a higher tolerance for risk.

**How can the organisation support staff?**

Organisations have, for some time, been giving a lot of thought to equal treatment (for example, how to close the gap between expatriates and national staff in terms of their employment opportunities or salary packages). The CHS itself looks further ahead in regard to staff treatment, suggesting organisations should “assess, where relevant, how far internal processes and support for staff meet the actions and organisational responsibilities set out within the CHS.” An organisation should indeed aim to treat both staff and beneficiaries with the same high operational and organisational standards. What could this look like? Policies and practices relating to sexual exploitation and abuse in the office do not differ from whether expatriate or local, staff need the right skills and behaviours, and the future requires a focus on new ones.

16/ “Effective matrix working goes beyond considerations of structure and embraces culture, leadership, organisational values, strategy and psychology. As Ford and Randolph explain, a matrix organisation is: “any organization that employs a multiple command system that includes not only a multiple command structure but also related support mechanisms and an associated organizational culture and behaviour pattern.”, Ford, R. C., & Randolph, W. A. (1992). Cross-functional structures: A review and integration of matrix organization and project management. Journal of Management, 18(2), 267-294.


any PSEA programme work delivered in affected communities. Programmes on women’s empowerment are carried out by female staff who are themselves empowered through, for example, training or reasonable promotion prospects. Work to preserve the safety and dignity of affected people is also reflected in the duty of care, well-being and security plans offered to organisational staff. Feedback mechanisms are paralleled by staff engagement activities or grievance procedures. In short, employers should look at all Nine Commitments in the CHS, change the wording to apply to their staff and see whether they meet the standard.

Conclusions

It’s safe to assume all staff and volunteers who work with and for communities affected by crisis, disaster and poverty want three things. First, that their employer is effective and accountable in its work with communities. Second, that they have a satisfactory relationship with their organisation (e.g. they are managed well; can choose the working pattern which suits them; want to invest their skills and energy to stay there; feel appreciated and are learning new skills, etc.). Third, that their leaders make the first two points happen. A commentator on the Typhoon Haiyan response in the Philippines remarked: “The experience of agencies that appear to have been more successful than others in embedding a culture of accountability within their practices shows that it is the commitment of their leaders to the cause, rather than the specific tools they chose to implement it, that makes it stick.”

Organisations that want to be accountable and effective can work with the CHS. This will encourage them to embrace and recognise the central importance of good people management, and to apply it. Organisations need to acknowledge changing realities as they plan for the future, working to predict and accommodate the needs of future staff and to ensure culture, policies, processes and systems will welcome and support them. The sector will be truly ready for the future when organisations are able to offer quality and accountability to communities through “competent and well-managed staff”, who in turn benefit from similar levels of quality and accountability provided by their employers.

In short, employers should look at all Nine Commitments in the CHS, change the wording to apply to their staff and see whether they meet the standard.

Recommendations:

1. **Break down the barrier between HR and Operations**: CEOs and senior operational colleagues should work with the HR function to understand fully why and how the CHS links people management with operational work.

2. **Start planning for your future workforce**: organisations need to plan for the day when their staff are drawn predominantly from the communities with which they work.

3. **Apply the standards you promote for affected communities to your staff**: organisations should consider applying the Key Actions and Organisational Responsibilities of the CHS to their staff.

21/ Evidence for some of these examples can be found in the report from the joint evaluation by ALNAP, HAP, People in Aid and Sphere. See: http://www.peopleinaid.org/news/161.aspx (Accessed: 28 June 2015).
22/ CHS Commitment 4 might, for example, read as: “Staff know their rights and entitlements, and have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them”.
24/ See CHS Commitment 8.
Informed decision making: including the voice of affected communities in the process.

Technology is driving unprecedented opportunities to directly hear what people affected by crises need and to design or adapt programmes based on what matters to them most, as Jessica Alexander explains.

Data: why does information matter?

Informed decision-making relies on analysis of data related not only to needs, but also capacities and the contextual landscape in which humanitarian operations are carried out. This analysis is critical to launching and maintaining responsive humanitarian action that is accountable for how services are delivered and used. Decision-makers use data to inform humanitarian operations in multiple ways, as outlined in Table 1 on the next page. The use of data and the evidence it generates can guide improvements to humanitarian programming as well as indicate whether or not work is worthwhile and effective.

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The author wishes to thank Francesca Bonino and Nick van Praag for providing invaluable comments on the draft versions of this chapter. The views and opinions expressed in this chapter are however solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the CHS Alliance, or those of the peer reviewers. Details of all reviewers can be found on the inside back cover of this report.

Table 1: Kinds of data that inform humanitarian operations.

| Pre-crisis: What capacities already exist? | Understanding what exists before a crisis and how this can be built upon, includes information such as census data, livelihood patterns or capacities and vulnerabilities. |
| Early warning: Is there a need for humanitarian response? | Early warning information is based on indicators to describe the situation and compare it with accepted crisis thresholds, to show that the qualifying conditions for a current or predicted crisis situation have been met. |
| Scale, key priority sectors, and locations: How much humanitarian assistance is needed? | Assessment data can determine not only the needs but also capacities that exist on the ground as well as the contextual realities that define a humanitarian crisis. This data collection should be regularly updated to reflect the evolving nature of a humanitarian crisis. |
| Monitoring: Are we meeting the main objectives and should adjustments be made? | Monitoring data, especially programme monitoring and system monitoring, provides insights into how effectively the humanitarian community (either on an individual agency level or as a collective) is reaching its goals. |
| Tracking performance over time and across emergencies: Is the system as a whole improving from one crisis to the next? | Understanding what has worked and not worked in response to a particular crisis comes from information produced by evaluation data and analysis. Evaluations can answer questions around causation as well. |

Informed decision making relies on analysis of data related not only to needs, but also capacities and the contextual landscape in which humanitarian operations are carried out.

Data collected as a result of discussions and other interactions with affected communities is an increasingly important source of information and should be a parameter to consider when planning and making decisions. Evidence, although still scant, has suggested that including these perspectives is important not only from an ethical standpoint, but also because it can improve the quality, relevance and effectiveness of a given response. Improvements have been made with regard to collecting information from affected people, yet the humanitarian community still struggles to do this well on a regular, structured basis and use the information to inform and influence decisions.

What kind of data currently exists and where are we falling short?

Traditionally, information is collected during needs assessments and during regular exercises to monitor programme indicators. Improvements have been made in the past 15 years not only in the collection of this data but also its use. Examples of progress include OCHA-led needs assessments and monitoring exercises such as the MIRA or humanitarian dashboards. These processes largely rely on the consolidation of individual programme data, which agencies have become more sophisticated in collecting and using.

That said, gaps still remain with regard to the quality of information collected, its dissemination and use, and the inclusion of affected people in the process. For example, ALNAP notes that evaluations “tend to rely almost exclusively on qualitative methods and on purposive sampling to identify interviewees, while often failing to include beneficiary groups among those consulted.” Numerous factors explain this reality: access difficulties; short operational cycles; limited staff capacity; time constraints; the rapidly changing nature of emergencies making data quickly obsolete; high levels of risk aversion; and the fear that data or information could expose shortcomings in a response. Even where regular data is collected, the lack of standardised, consistent methods makes it difficult to compare results and understand changes over time.

Typically, data is collected in a haphazard, ad hoc fashion, with members of the humanitarian community often challenged to decide what information should be gathered. Agency-specific programme- or project-level data may be collected, but indicators and formats tend to be inconsistent. This makes it difficult to aggregate...

Gaps still remain with regard to the quality of information collected, its dissemination and use, and the inclusion of affected people in the process.

5/ Note, numerous terms are used to describe the actions needed to be taken to ensure the responsible use of power such as accountability to affected people, communicating with communities and engagement of crisis-affected people. ALNAP’s 2014 background paper to their annual meeting in Addis Ababa clarifies these and other terms and their relation to levels of engagement with affected people. See: http://www.alnap.org/resource/12859.aspx. [Accessed: 25 June 2015].
data across agencies and sectors, sometimes resulting in findings that are contradictory or not sufficiently detailed or reliable to be used for decision-making.\textsuperscript{10} Furthermore, these inconsistencies mean that the credibility of data can become diluted and the results discredited if they don’t align with agency agendas. Where consistent data is collected, humanitarians are often so focused on managing the response that resources aren’t devoted to analysing and using it to enhance decision-making.

In addition, the majority of evaluations still take place towards the close of operations, when the opportunity to make corrections when they matter has passed. Rarely are ‘lessons learned’ carried over from one humanitarian context to the next and lessons from past experience are rarely put into current practice.\textsuperscript{11}

The humanitarian sector is weak at informing communities about what was done with the information they provided.

Although ALNAP’s \textit{State of the Humanitarian System} tracks how the humanitarian system has performed every two years, and some meta-evaluations aggregate information from several evaluations to identify trends in particular sectors, most humanitarian evaluations are one-offs and do not compare emergencies over time.\textsuperscript{12} Finally, the sector lacks incentives for follow-up on poor performance, in particular when it comes to collective action, an area where clear responsibilities and accountabilities are difficult to allocate.

The inclusion of affected people as a source of data is most often the result of extractive collection processes\textsuperscript{13} that regularly fail to address or discuss the issues that are most important to people.\textsuperscript{14} The humanitarian sector is weak at informing communities about what was done with the information they provided and how it influenced activities (or not, as the case may be). The \textit{State of the Humanitarian System 2015} echoes findings from its previous edition, as well as the 2013 edition of the \textit{Humanitarian Accountability Report}, noting that people are rarely consulted on project design and little action is taken (in terms of addressing specific problems or redesigning programmes) based on information coming from affected people.\textsuperscript{15} For the moment, as ALNAP notes, the humanitarian community cannot yet claim to systematically consult potential aid recipients at the assessment, monitoring and evaluation phases of the typical project cycle.\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, evaluations that include users’ rating of the performance of the programmes that are targeting them are the exception rather than the rule. As an illustration of this point, while attempting to gather data for this chapter, it was very difficult to find systematic quantitative information about how communities rate the effectiveness of the humanitarian responses assisting them. Recent initiatives which have solicited input from affected people – such as surveys conducted for the \textit{State of the Humanitarian System 2015} and the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) global consultation process, or OCHAs Humanitarian Effectiveness Survey – are typically one-off exercises. Although such surveys have value in as much as they can highlight issues that need addressing or even motivate the sector to act, they cannot be a substitute for the routine monitoring of and response to how communities and people rate the relevance, targeting and effectiveness of humanitarian action.

Opportunities and improvements

Today’s data-rich world provides numerous opportunities to not only collect and use data but also access perceptual data from affected people. Understanding what each of these sources will provide, and how they complement and triangulate each other, can transform the face of a response, as the following examples illustrate.

Information technology

Advances in information technology (IT) have the potential to greatly improve the ability of humanitarians to collect and analyse data, and ensure that it is used.\textsuperscript{17} Hand-held devices, for example, are being used with greater frequency to collect information from affected people, meaning that it can be uploaded and analysed in real time. In 2014, during heightened violence in the Central African Republic, use of the LMMS Android-based platform brought numerous benefits, including greater timeliness, improved targeting and faster dissemination of results.\textsuperscript{18} In Somalia, the Danish Refugee Council successfully used an SMS-based platform to solicit feedback from affected people in remote areas.\textsuperscript{19} In Sierra Leone during the 2015 Ebola response, mobile phone data analysis was used to track the spread of the disease. When combined with healthcare facility maps prepared by volunteers, aid workers had access to valuable, actionable information to plan their response. Remote telephone polling of needs and perceptions of humanitarian assistance has also been conducted through technologies such as interactive voice response technology and SMS. As the \textit{State of the Humanitarian System 2015} notes, limitations associated with the use of this technology can constrain the representativeness in samples as well as the contexts in which they can be used.\textsuperscript{20} However, these technologies are worth adopting because they make the analysis, treatment and consolidation of data associated with humanitarian programmes much quicker and more effective.

Social media

Affected people are increasingly able to voice their needs, issues and concerns through direct use of social media tools, including as a reaction to how humanitarian aid resources are used. People actively use these channels to articulate their expectations, mobilise community support and expose the limitations of humanitarian assistance.

Finally, the sector lacks incentives for follow-up on poor performance, in particular when it comes to collective action, an area where clear responsibilities and accountabilities are difficult to allocate.

15/ The State of the Humanitarian System (2015), ALNAP.
19/ For more information, see: http://drcbeneficiaryfeedback.blogspot.ch/. [Accessed 25 June 2015].
20/ The State of the Humanitarian System (2015), ALNAP.
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Reports coming from Twitter during the 2010 cholera outbreak following the earthquake in Haiti were both fast and accurate, as the information correlated well with official government statistics, as well as being quicker to collect.21 More recently, an analysis of more than 440,000 tweets posted during the first 48 hours of the Typhoon Haiyan response found that about 44% related to needs and donations, and 15% of the tweets were potentially relevant to humanitarian clusters.22

Social media gives affected people a way to bring their views and priorities to the attention of the wider public as well as humanitarians, but the latter need to adapt the approach they take and skills they allocate to monitoring crises to make the most of it.

Regular feedback from affected people

As described by Nick van Praag in chapter 4, Ground Truth Solutions collects data from affected people on a range of topics: from service delivery and outcomes to the relationship between aid providers and affected people, and the latter’s sense of their ability to make a difference in their own lives. By using short questionnaires and feeding the analysis back to strategic decision-makers on a regular basis, humanitarian staff on the ground are able to track perceptions and shift programme direction appropriately. During the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, Ground Truth Solutions conducted four separate ‘light-touch’ surveys (of citizens, frontline workers, people in quarantine and those who experienced decontamination) covering a range of issues related to the response. The findings were analysed, triangulated, then distilled into simple visual reports with clear recommendations.23

Existing and preferred communication channels

Radio has been effective, not only to disseminate information about the response, but also to collect feedback and information from affected people. While some agencies have set up hotlines, these are often complemented by radio programmes which invite listeners to phone in and discuss concerns. Examples of this are Radyo Abante in the Philippines24 as well as BBC Media Action25 during the Ebola response. In the Nepal response, the Common Feedback Project is being piloted to aggregate data from a diverse array of feedback channels (e.g. interpersonal communications, helpdesks and suggestion boxes, SMS and mobile feedback, radio, social media, etc.) based on what is most appropriate and available in different locations to provide guidance on key issues and trends.26 Groups like Words of Relief27 facilitate translation of these communications, so that linguistic barriers do not impede the speed and use of these exchanges.

The way forward

Many have argued that there is a need to better embed information gathering and use within the culture, processes and structure of humanitarian organisations.28 As Lars Peter Nissen advocates in chapter 3, the humanitarian sector needs an appropriate mix of reliable evidence and experience when making decisions. The advances described

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With the recent passing of US legislation, ignoring the voice of communities when planning, monitoring and reviewing programmes may soon no longer be an option.

There are exciting opportunities to provide decision-makers with a broader range of timely and relevant sources to inform their actions, the impact of which can then be measured against a subsequent round of data. Building on existing processes and experiences, such as agency feedback mechanisms, real-time reviews or participatory approaches, and using an approach that allows for collective use of results, a more people-centered approach could yield significant improvements.

With the recent passing of US legislation mandating the collection of feedback for any funded humanitarian programme, and the WHS pushing for both increased effectiveness and accountability to affected communities, ignoring the voice of communities when planning, monitoring and reviewing programmes may soon no longer be an option.

In order to move this agenda forward, some simple suggestions could be adopted:

1. **Leverage readily available and commonly used technology:**
   The use of smartphones, tablets, mobile apps and social media is ubiquitous in the professional and personal lives of humanitarians. While aid organisations long for a ‘silver bullet’ type innovation to answer their data needs, many continue to manage beneficiary lists in Excel tables, relying on printouts at distribution sites or conducting surveys on paper forms. Everyday, easy-to-use, ready-made tools that can save time and money (while making data analysis faster and more powerful) already exist or can be easily adapted.

2. **Agree on a set of generic indicators for perception data from affected communities:**
   In order for efforts to include the opinions of affected communities, what questions they are asked, and how they are formulated needs careful consideration. A core set of questions that apply across emergencies (to measure common features such as timeliness, relevance and effectiveness) could be combined with more specific questions for each response. The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) Guidance Notes and Indicators offer a starting point for such an exercise. These can generate comparable data, and be promoted as a tool to support decision making.

3. **Aggregate perception data from affected communities at the collective level:**
   ‘Satisfaction’ type questions should be promoted in policy instruments, standards and donor requirements. This data should: 1) be collected at regular intervals throughout the Humanitarian Programme Cycle; 2) be disaggregated, for example by age and gender; 3) be fed back to communities for clarification; and 4) result in visible change for those who have been consulted. The analysis of this data should feature on the agenda of coordination mechanisms (e.g. cluster meetings, HCTs, etc.) and feed into decision-making processes.

With the range of opportunities and incentives driving greater use of data, the time is ripe for a shift towards embedding information into humanitarian response.

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The Rwanda genocide triggered major transformations in humanitarian response, which led to significant progress in the areas of accountability, standards, staff duty of care, coordination, timeliness, information, logistics and effectiveness. As a result, the dignity of communities and the rights of aid recipients have become more central to the humanitarian response. While congratulations for these achievements are in order, now is not the time to sit back. What has been achieved pales in comparison to the rapidly increasing challenges the humanitarian sector faces: the multiple and complex crises of today; the high numbers of IDPs and protracted refugee situations; the increasingly insecure conditions of aid; increasingly ‘fragile’ contexts; the rise of terrorist-related violence; and the growing frequency of disasters triggered by natural hazards. All of these demand still greater efforts to make humanitarian response more effective.

In December 2014, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), the Sphere Project, People In Aid and Groupe URD launched the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS). In June 2015, People In Aid and HAP merged to form the CHS Alliance, an organisation with over 200 members, which aims to facilitate high-quality, accountable assistance to people affected by disaster, conflict or poverty through the use of the CHS as a common quality framework.

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The CHS was designed to reflect the evolution of the aid landscape: affected communities have taken a more prominent role in service delivery; there are more capable service providers locally and regionally; and national governments are taking more responsibility for the coordination and provision of aid, especially in contexts of natural disaster. Rapidly changing technology is making it possible to scale up low-cost innovations in many areas of service delivery and accountability, facilitating the delivery of aid tailored to specific contexts and people, for example through the provision of cash relief. And finally, more attention has been devoted to Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and other activities that are weaving together humanitarian aid and development like never before.

These issues will be central to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, and this report has put forward different perspectives, approaches and concrete suggestions that can help improve both accountability and effectiveness. As the contributors to this report have so eloquently illustrated, there are still major improvements to be made with regard to the accountability of humanitarian response. In particular, it was suggested that accountability must be strengthened beyond the narrow confines of direct distribution of aid. I call this ‘taking accountability to the next level’. Key aspects of this ‘next level’ are: acting on the key (political) concerns of affected people; rethinking the implications of accountability for the governance of aid; reforming agencies towards more internal and mutual accountability; and considering accountability at the level of the humanitarian system, rather than the individual agency level alone.

There is no discussion about the ethical case for accountability: affected populations are the primary stakeholders, and at the core of aid stands the principle of humanity – the imperative to relieve the suffering of affected people. They are the raison d’être, on whose behalf agencies raise money and operate. However, as Nick van Praag points out in chapter 4, accountability is about much more than just ‘good manners’. Accountability goes hand in hand with an approach based on the humanitarian principles. Indeed, without transparency and listening, no one can credibly claim to truly respect the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality or independence. When the link between accountability and effectiveness of aid was posed at the opening ceremony of the CHS Alliance, one of the panel members declared: “This relation is obvious, when we only look at the enormous wastes encountered in programmes that did not meet people’s needs or failed to take into account risks and threats to succeed…”

This concluding chapter reviews the accountability and effectiveness issues presented in this report on two levels. Firstly, it looks at them at the project or programme level. Secondly, how can we take accountability practice to the level where it leads to change in the humanitarian system itself, its governance and the collective humanitarian response.

Accountability goes hand in hand with an approach based on the humanitarian principles. Indeed, without transparency and listening, no one can credibly claim to truly respect the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality or independence.
Accountability includes being held to account and this ought to mean that sometimes people get disciplined or poor agency practice is named and shamed.

Nonetheless, significant change can be seen: recipient councils, participatory programming and feedback score cards have become common aspects of programmes. A major change is that we increasingly see flexible service delivery that does not provide a fixed package, but enables people to set their own priorities. Cash relief, in particular, is coming up as increasingly seen as central to more accountable practice.

Making more effective use of technology and communication

New technologies and means of communication have opened up huge opportunities and already started to change the aid landscape: the use of electronic payment systems (e.g. mobile phones, ATMs, pre-paid cards, etc.) has made providing cash (when appropriate) simpler, more efficient and more effective; Geographic Information System (GIS) applications allow us to effectively map damages and facilitate disaster response; and big data can be used for early warning of food security or health issues, and improve targeting, registration and monitoring of disaster-affected populations.

With the rise of social media, aid actors no longer have a monopoly on information or control of the way in which needs are identified. With the rise of social media, aid actors no longer have a monopoly on information or control of the way in which needs are identified. Ways to respond meaningfully to unsolicited feedback, where affected populations find their own channels to express critical opinions about aid, need to be found. More should be done to systematically use this feedback, and mainstream tools that can help in this endeavour.

One example as described by Nick van Praag in chapter 4 is the use of recurring surveys to obtain feedback from affected communities on an ongoing basis, rather than through one-off data gathering. Transforming this potential will be a key challenge of the innovation agenda, as the sector works out how to make sense of and use the increasing amount of data and information available.

Connecting humanitarian and development processes

Linking relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD) is often a key priority, yet for a long time humanitarian aid has been criticised for not effectively linking with and even undermining development. There are many institutional obstacles, and the more relief activities move towards development, the more messy and political they tend to become. In contexts of natural disaster, and prolonged crises within contexts of institutional and state fragility, agencies increasingly frame their programmes in a resilience paradigm, focusing on the ability of households and communities to address shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces vulnerability.

It is acknowledged that relief, rehabilitation and development cannot be seen as a linear process whereby a brief period of relief is followed by reconstruction and then development, each phase supported by a specific methodology. LRRD requires a flexible approach, where agencies can quickly adjust their modalities to changing conditions, doing what must be done and taking advantage of opportunities to enhance more structural development. There is much to be gained to make humanitarian aid as developmental as possible in a given situation. There are situations where aid can only concentrate on saving lives. Yet, in each situation, agencies should aim to make as much use as possible of existing capacities, resources and markets so as to protect or enhance development conditions and – at the very least – minimise disturbance for local development processes.
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Fostering coherent accountability throughout the organisation

Where agencies have improved their accountability in field operations, they may still want to conduct an internal review to make sure they have developed a coherent accountability system in terms of policies, organisation and management. Are policies, decision-making procedures, standards and operational processes organised transparently? How does the organisation make sure that lessons learned become lessons applied? Proven methods for doing this include internal and peer reviews. There is also mounting evidence that external verification helps agencies to develop coherent accountability processes.

Making accountability more than a ritual

Taking a whole-organisation approach to accountability can also ensure that accountability becomes more than a ritual. Accountability should be about more than just transparency and soliciting feedback. Much can be gained by advancing participatory programming and taking ownership for actions and non-actions, and accepting credit and blame. It is important to critically monitor the working of accountability in practice (what to do with unwelcome feedback when listening; is communication and transparency well-received; are adjustments on the basis of feedback more than just tokenistic?). Establishing accountability mechanisms is an important step but not a guarantee of effective aid for the most vulnerable people, as accountability relations like every other social relationship are shaped by power and inequality.

Taking accountability to the next level

Some people speak of a humanitarian system, but this evokes an image of control and design that is far removed from the unpredictability of environments in which organisations operate and the complexity of the aid system itself. Humanitarian aid can better be imagined as an arena where a large variety of different actors negotiate the relations, politics and practices of aid, including the meaning of effectiveness and accountability. Service providers include the government, a range of local institutions, large international agencies, donors and a plethora of private and diaspora initiatives. Aid is also shaped by the people affected by crises, host communities, local institutions, the media, political actors and other stakeholders.

7/ See chapter 3.
8/ See chapter 8.
9/ See chapter 10.
The different chapters of this report agree that major opportunities and lessons for the future are found in advancing accountability beyond the level of projects and direct service delivery.

Taking accountability to the next level refers, in my view, to three key questions:

- How can humanitarian actors respond to people’s needs beyond the services they have to offer?
- How can agencies, inter-agency structures and donors enhance system-wide accountability?
- What does accountability mean for the governance of aid?

There are a number of key themes in this report which point the way forward:

**Moving from patronising forms of accountability towards co-governance of aid**

Most of the literature on the accountability of aid agencies to crisis-affected communities takes the aid agency as the point of departure. Accountability then appears to be something that agencies grant to the local population, which tends to make the language of accountability quite patronising. So what does ‘real’ accountability mean for the governance of aid?

There has been a shift away from considering people solely as vulnerable recipients and towards recognising and seeking to enhance their resilience, as well as making people and communities the starting point. Likewise, post-crisis restoration of infrastructure and services is increasingly framed as community-driven, with communities as much as possible in the driving seat. This change is also illustrated by the fact that the CHS is written from the point of view of crisis-affected communities.

Notwithstanding these developments, discussions on accountability often slip back into more patronising ways of thinking and changing this will demand more than just a shift in language: it will require rethinking the nature of accountability to people affected by crises. While agencies define all other accountability relationships as mutual, the primary accountability relationship to affected communities is often conceptualised as a one-way street: that is, focusing on the rights of people to quality services. Citizen voice and rights are key in defining accountability. However, in the relationship between state and society, citizens have rights and responsibilities. Crisis response should more effectively build on people’s capacities, existing solidarity mechanisms in communities, and the responsibilities of local elites, institutions and state agents. External aid should not duplicate or undermine local responses, and may call upon local forces to shoulder their share of the responsibility. In other words, accountability relations between aid agencies and crisis-affected people should be reciprocal.

Secondly, a real accountability revolution requires the rethinking of the governance of service providers. In chapter 11, Jonathan Potter forecasts a future in which national and international NGOs are not for the community but of the community. As long as humanitarian agencies are self-governed, they determine the level of accountability they ‘give’. A key question is therefore that of co-governance systems. How can relevant constituencies have an actual say in policy setting and the delivery of aid? How can they enforce accountability, including applying sanctions when performance is not up to agreed standards? And how could such...
approaches be made compatible with the principle of independence, especially in relation to the state. One of the options could be to move from feedback mechanisms to local level audit processes.  

Thinking about ‘sideways’ accountability: the relation between aid providers

Matthew Serventy (chapter 10) examined the important issue of how inter-agency structures such as the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and clusters can become more accountable. But how about inter-agency accountability? The ultimate objective of each agency is to improve the lives of affected people, which provides a moral incentive to take up responsibility for the response as a whole. There is also an effectiveness and legitimacy incentive for sideways accountability: affected communities often don’t distinguish between different aid providers, and problems with one agency can easily tarnish the credibility of the entire sector, jeopardising the effectiveness and legitimacy of the whole response. Finally, there is a learning incentive in sideways accountability, as there is immense potential in peer reviews and other inter-agency forms of monitoring to find benchmarks and good practices that can be used to improve agencies’ service delivery.

In recent years, humanitarian agencies have become highly aware of the importance of sideways accountability and invested more systematically in joint learning initiatives such as peer reviews, seminars to exchange and share information, inter-agency community feedback, response mechanisms, and so on. Developments in coordination, such as the introduction of the cluster approach, can also be seen to enhance sideways accountability, including to local authorities. There have however also been setbacks: since the 2005 Indian Ocean Tsunami evaluation, there have not been any joint evaluations.  

Humanitarian aid is a competitive field and agencies (NGOs as much as UN agencies) can at times engage in ‘turf wars’ or prioritise their own programmes to local level audit processes.  

This report highlights several areas that require inter-agency accountability measures to respond to challenges that affect humanitarian effectiveness. One such issue is the fight against corruption and abuse of aid. Another relates to political complications and finding principled ways to deal with these. Finally, we can ask whether the presence of a large number of international agencies is always appropriate and effective.

International aid is expensive, distorts local economies, undermines local institutions and is not sustainable.

Localising service delivery: moving international agencies to an auxiliary and facilitating role

Balancing the role of international agencies with national service providers is a crucial issue. International aid is expensive, distorts local economies, undermines local institutions and is not sustainable. Nevertheless, there will also be crises that outstrip local capacities and require an international response capacity. The question therefore is how to render the international presence as minimal as possible. The UN and INGOs have strong discourses on subsidiarity (international organisations only step in when local resources are lacking) and partnership. There are indeed an increasing number of INGOs that operate through local partners. Nonetheless, the Global Humanitarian Assistance report finds that only 0.2% of total international humanitarian assistance went directly to local and national NGOs, and just 3.1% to the governments of affected states.  

In the case of natural disasters, the Hyogo Framework for Action and now the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction place a premium on the roles and responsibilities of national actors. In the case of conflict, national governments continue to have responsibilities to the population and must abide by International Humanitarian Law.

There are reasons for caution too. The purpose of humanitarian aid to save lives and restore dignity must always be the central consideration, and national governments and service providers can stand in the way of this. In conflict situations this is often obvious, yet natural disasters also happen on account of bad governance and often coincide with conflict.

Localising service delivery means that international organisations will – much more than they do today – play an auxiliary role in enabling and facilitating national governmental and non-governmental service delivery. The aim should be to assist in rendering national service delivery effective and accountable. It will truly be a change in aid culture when national service delivery becomes the norm, and international service delivery needs to be justified (for example, what makes the situation so special that direct international service delivery is required? Why are national service capacities not ready to take over and what can be done to make this happen?).

Fine-tuning accountability systems to people and institutions

A classical distinction between humanitarian assistance and development aid is that development is more geared towards strengthening institutions and works through state authorities and NGOs, whereas humanitarian assistance focuses more on individuals and households in need. Their respective accountability systems are likewise different: following the Paris and Accra declarations, new models of partnerships have been developed where donors and partner countries aim to hold one another mutually accountable for development results. Humanitarian agencies, on the other hand, seek more direct relations with the people they are assisting, and have accountability systems to actively seek feedback from service recipients.

These differences have grown over time, but aren’t necessarily any longer appropriate or relevant to today’s realities. Communities affected by poverty or crises do not see the distinction between crisis response and development, since they are intertwined in many ways, as development and humanitarian communities alike acknowledge. With the Busan ‘New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States’ of 2011,
It is important to have well motivated staff under fair and just working conditions. The obstacles they encounter as they go as they find creative ways of dealing with the provision of aid. Implementing staff are than anyone what the problems are with on a daily basis, and they often know better implementing staff work with communities work directly with affected communities. Potter in chapter 11, it is equally important of attention, but according to Jonathan role of implementing staff

Transforming internal accountability: the crucial role of implementing staff

Accountability to affected people gets a lot of attention, but according to Jonathan Potter in chapter 11, it is equally important for agencies to listen to the people who work directly with affected communities. Implementing staff work with communities on a daily basis, and they often know better than anyone what the problems are with the provision of aid. Implementing staff are also responsible for many of the innovations that come out of humanitarian assistance, as they find creative ways of dealing with the obstacles they encounter as they go about their work.

Humanitarian agencies have invested a great deal in improving human resource systems. The CHS incorporates a number of explicit and implicit references to the importance of employing competent staff under fair and just working conditions. It is important to have well motivated staff and to respect workers’ rights.

A point for discussion is whether agencies have enough space to listen to the stories of aid workers. Chapter 3 dealt with the tension that often exists between ‘gandalfs’ (experience-driven humanitarians) and ‘geeks’ (evidence-driven humanitarians). Agencies should aim to accommodate both. Staff are used to accounting for their actions: they report what they have done and achieved on a regular basis and in standardised ways. However, accountability should be about more than reporting on finances and numbers. The word ‘account’ refers as much to a story as to a report. Accountability can thus be read as ‘report-ability’ as well as ‘tell-a-story-about-ability’, and we need to ensure that staff and affected populations can tell their stories and experiences and be taken seriously. Has aid become too bureaucratised to listen to and act on the stories of implementing staff? There is a strong preference for relying on externally derived knowledge and evidence, and this may be at the expense of building on the good judgment of affected communities and the people who work with them on a day-to-day basis. It is important to create unrestricted ‘upward’ flows of information (i.e. from the field) in organisations and make internal accountability more mutual. It pays off to listen to implementing staff in order to pick up early warning signals when problems occur, and learn from everyday innovations to make programmes more effective and accountable to affected people.

Taking a systemic approach: understanding the importance of advocacy and diplomacy

Aid agencies want to support affected people to build livelihoods and access services in order to lead a healthy life with dignity. Aid programmes are usually temporary and minor contributions to this ambition. Sometimes, there is simply an immediate imperative to save lives, but in other more protracted situations, vulnerable people want aid actors to assist in structurally improving their life prospects by addressing oppressive politics and supporting systemic changes in their institutional and physical environment. James Darcy’s warning from the 2013 edition of this report is still relevant: “We have to be careful not to see accountability in narrow programmatic terms; and in isolation from the nexus of other (sometimes more fundamental) accountability relationships of which it forms part.”

Advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy begin with understanding the frameworks that governments have committed to, and enabling staff members to use these in their daily diplomacy and negotiations with authorities. International Humanitarian Law, national law and international human rights treaties provide a strong basis to call upon international and national actors to better protect civilians and ensure assistance is provided, with respect for constituents’ voice and rights.

A systemic approach requires that aid agencies carefully analyse the (political) context and strategise to enhance the accountability of national governments, and international political accountability for the protection of civilians and the provision of funding. It also requires that agencies monitor potential negative effects of their engagements in the medium and longer term. A particular challenge is to address the shrinking space for civil society in a number of crisis-affected countries. Again, this issue points to the need for principled engagement with states: not using principles as an excuse for disengagement but anchoring engagement in these principles and International Humanitarian Law.

In cases where local citizens have more room for manoeuvre, agencies can also assist local communities to enhance their advocacy skills. Some agencies choose not to provide direct services to crisis-affected people, but instead train local communities and accompany them as they negotiate quality service provision with local authorities, NGOs and other service providers for themselves.

Conclusion

Accountability is important. Apart from the ethical imperative to be accountable, good accountability relations also enable principled and safe service delivery and they condition effectiveness of aid.

Service delivery to crisis-affected people has become more accountable in the last 20 years. There are still gaps between what agencies have committed to do and what they actually do, between the systems in place and how they work in practice, and between lessons learned and lessons
Somali children who fled drought and war at home walk joyfully through their new home neighbourhood on the outskirts of the Dadaab refugee camp in northeastern Kenya.

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applied. The chapters of this report provide valuable pointers and reminders on:

- improving accountability in service delivery underpinned by humanitarian principles;
- using technology effectively;
- internalising accountability instead of ritualising it;
- linking relief to development;
- and seeking coherence in accountability relations through all levels of the organisation.

These issues can be summarised by the idiom that agencies have to “walk the talk”.

This is not a straightforward operation of adding on accountability measures. It implies that agencies have to adopt working processes that are sensitive to feedback, have a strong antenna for contextual change and the politics of aid, continuously monitor their work including the effect of measures to improve accountability, and have the power and courage to adapt the course of their actions where necessary.

The second part of the chapter dealt with issues that can take accountability to the next level. Accountability to affected populations in service delivery is within the immediate sphere of influence of agencies. The major challenges and opportunities to address, in the view of many contributors to this report, exist on a level beyond that of single-agency projects.

Bringing accountability to the next level will transform the character of service delivery in response to crises and poverty. Accountability relations and the promotion of aid effectiveness involve a complex system of donors, national governments, service providers and communities. If aid programmes are to become more effective and adjustable to contexts and respond to people’s priority needs, changes are required by all these different actors. Humanitarian agencies will be taken far outside of their comfort zone, being held to account more systematically and developing a proactive culture that maximises principled engagement with affected people and other stakeholders. Humanitarian donors will change who they fund and how. Aid workers will do their jobs in a different way: relating to local and national authorities and the people they are trying to help will be central in their job descriptions. Moving out of the comfort zone in which too much of today’s humanitarian action takes place and enduring some discomfort in the process of change is needed in order to deliver more genuinely accountable humanitarian action.

The major challenges and opportunities to address, in the view of many contributors to this report, exist on a level beyond that of single-agency projects.
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“It is the people, not our mandate, that must provide the rationale for what we do and how we do it. If we are going to achieve results for the people, we must begin with leadership from the countries, the communities and the people we serve. This means our agenda [...] is fully informed by the concerns of the people we serve and with whom we partner. This has rightly taken centre stage during the [World Humanitarian] Summit because being people-centred ultimately means recognising the primary role of local communities in preparedness and response.”

Ertharin Cousin
Executive Director of the World Food Programme
Closing remarks at the World Humanitarian Summit Pacific Regional Consultation in Auckland, New Zealand