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Why technocratic understandings of humanitarian accountability undermine local communities

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ABSTRACT

Current trends in humanitarian accountability are unpacked through the examination of an accountability system put in place after the 2010 monsoon floods in Pakistan. Humanitarian accountability, when narrowly understood as a technical and procedural tool, can undermine local self-advocacy efforts, silence community dissent and suppress broader equity claims. Reframing humanitarian accountability as a political and ethical project can inspire innovation, support frontline aid workers, and ignite the radical revisioning of the humanitarian contract itself.

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Introduction

Humanitarian accountability is increasingly understood as a set of procedural tools and systems. Narrow and technocratic understandings of accountability can inadvertently depoliticise the humanitarian space and undermine community self-advocacy efforts and local visions for change. Humanitarian organisations and the communities they seek to uphold will be better served if accountability is understood as a political and ethical project, not only a technical and procedural one. A preferential emphasis on the latter risks reducing the ideals of accountability to yet another checkbox in the burgeoning “toolkit” of humanitarian aid.

To illustrate these assertions, an accountability system implemented in the aftermath of the Pakistan 2010 monsoon floods is reviewed. The central feature of this system was a feedback mechanism, which sought to connect recipients of aid directly with the humanitarian organisation operating in their communities. Analysis of the feedback received via this system indicates that most complaints sought to challenge the technocratic and procedural certainties of the organisation in favour of local knowledge claims and broader demands for equity. Through various components of the accountability system, community members asserted their voice, contesting how their interests were imagined and constrained by the humanitarian organisation, refusing demands for legibility to operationalise humanitarian programming. Resulting steps taken by the organisation to alleviate community concerns only went so far as to correcting procedural aberrations, ignoring more deeply held egalitarian considerations, an engagement of which could have led to further multiplier gains.

The paper advocates for humanitarian accountability as a site of potentiality and innovation. It argues that innovation through accountability can be achieved by an active engagement of recipient communities based on principles of deep listening and action to radically inform and revise humanitarian projects, as opposed to the reduction of feedback to mere complaints regarding procedural missteps. Outcomes of humanitarian interventions are influenced by the operational decisions made by frontline workers. These decisions are inherently social, steeped in ethical considerations and

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contextual knowledge (Campbell and Clarke 2019). Rather than placing faith within organisational procedures alone, the paper argues that the potential for learning also lies within the “unofficial” actions taken by frontline workers in response to community concerns.

Growing grey literature details the benefits of accountability mechanisms, such as listening to and communicating with aid recipients, enhancing community trust, and improving program quality (Baños Smith 2009; Anderson, Brown, and Jean 2012; Chapelier and Shah 2013). Madianou et al. (2016) found that feedback received through an accountability system following Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines rarely fed back to disaster-affected communities but was presented to donors as “evidence” of impact and best-practices. They also note that the narrow interpretation of accountability by humanitarian actors does little to challenge prevailing power asymmetries. Bonino and Warner (2014) show that humanitarian organisations unevenly understand accountability as complaints and feedback, where the former is considered actionable and the latter as generalised suggestions. Ong, Flores, and Combinido (2015) identify how accountability mechanisms tend to only count complaints on existing programs rather than the process of beneficiary selection itself that remains a central concern for most affected communities. Buchanan-Smith, Ong, and Routley (2015) note that despite the widely used definition of accountability as the means through which power is used responsibly, accountability is not so readily translatable beyond the English language. In fact, they point out, that the perceptions of humanitarian agencies and the perceptions of local communities about the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms tend to differ substantially. Despite the steady uptake of accountability mechanisms, peer-reviewed literature remains limited on the matter.

The paper builds on the literature on humanitarian accountability by demonstrating that accountability, when divorced from notions of responsibility, can take on a transactional nature. Bolstered by accompanying ideas of results-based management and performance management, non-relational frames of accountability discourage humanitarians from embodying the true burdens of the messy relationships that foreground any humanitarian context. We need not distance humanitarian organisations from conversations on transformative and systems-level change, as well as from ideas of relational governance that place communities at the heart of power-sharing and organisational learning (see, e.g. OXFAM 2020, 8). Accountability, even if instituted as a simple feedback mechanism, can be a step towards recalibrating organisational orientations of technical expertise towards that of learning (of which failure is a key part), as well as reconciling with recipient communities who often experience humanitarian operations as violence. Additionally, accountability also provides evidence for supporting (disruptive) and flexible decision-making by frontline humanitarian workers (see, Obrecht 2020 on the importance of flexibility). One can assert that the above framings of accountability are unrealistic, given the time-sensitivity and complexity of humanitarian operations. However, the entire domain of humanitarian assistance as an urgent, moral and ethical life-saving mission is in itself an idealised normative claim. Who makes the decision to accept one normative claim over the other, and what is the criterion for doing so?

The author of the paper served as a resource person for humanitarian accountability during the 2010 monsoon floods in Pakistan. He assisted organisations with formulating, testing and scaling their accountability systems, trained their staff, and conducted consultations with communities in response to some of the feedback they conveyed through these systems. In this way, the paper also draws from the author’s immersion and embeddedness within the accountability discourse following the floods. Organisational names are kept confidential. The paper is not written as criticism towards any specific organisation but is an intervention in the wider discourse on humanitarian accountability and the challenges implicit in its operationalisation.

The paper is timely, given the active uptake of accountability in the past five or so years. Overlaps between accountability, community engagement and participatory development are noticeable. Krause (2014) believes that overlap in these discourses exist due to the growing competition between development and humanitarian organisations who are increasingly competing with each other for funding and jurisdiction. However, the demand for humanitarian accountability is not

only an outcome of humanitarianism's limitations but also the result of its growth and success (Madianou et al. 2016).

The story of humanitarian accountability

While one can reasonably deduce that the discourse on humanitarian accountability is as old as the existence of humanitarian networks themselves, the story of accountability is usually traced to two historical turning points: the New Public Management (NPM) directives of the 1980s and the Rwandan genocide in 1994, which catalysed the formulation of humanitarian standards.

New public management

Faced with austerity measures to curtail state-led social service provision, the 1980s saw the proliferation of NPM technologies, which advocated for the effective management and use of public funds. NPM represents a desire to apply techniques from the private sector to public services, fuelled by growing scepticism towards extensive, centralised governments and the rise of neoliberal orthodoxy and market-led reform. This ushered in an era of the “three Ms”: *markets, managers and measurement*. NPM discourses (in their various shades) caught on rapidly, both within donor countries as well as their recipients. So much so, that by the 1990s, most governments across the world had embarked on some kind of public sector reform. Opinions on the proliferation of NPM remain divided: some argue that it was part and parcel of an imperial neoliberal project (Haque 2004), while others have argued that the uptake of NPM technologies was less a matter of coercion from multilateral financial institutions and bilateral donors or neoliberal authoritarianism, but the continuation of a well-established strategy of reform (Turner 2002). Regardless of opinion, today, NPM technologies form the core organisational principles of many governments across the world.

Humanitarian organisations, either by virtue of direct attachment to national governments or through funding streams, were also brought under the purview of NPM technologies. For example, in 1988, the Swedish parliament decided that its government agencies must be governed by performance management standards. This directive carried over to the Swedish government's development and humanitarian wing: Sida. This point onwards, Sida was mandated to have “clear objectives” and “follow-up performance indicators” in its various country strategies (Holmgren and Svensson 2004). Overall, these pressures have led to the incentivisation of short-term wins as opposed to deep structural change, and a preference for quick, clear, and achievable results. Arguably, this has led to a wider separation between “development” and “humanitarian” organisations at least officially, which increasingly occupy positions along an axis, from minimalist (saving lives) to enabling peace and development approaches (Aijazi 2014a, 2014b). These distinctions are purposefully put in place to limit accountability, shielding humanitarian organisations from any criticism. Management technologies such as the log-frame support these artificial separations. Krause (2014) argues that the log-frame essentially demotes citizens to beneficiaries, changing how humanitarian organisations imagine their success. This is facilitated by a limiting “regime of accountability for specific results on the level of the intervention” as opposed to broader societal change (12).

The Rwandan genocide and humanitarian standards

The Rwandan genocide was a powerful reminder that humanitarian practice must be evaluated in its ability to safeguard and protect local communities. The scathing “Joint Evaluation on the International Response to the Genocide” recommended that agencies strengthen their systems to improve accountability to recipients of assistance. In the view of the report, this meant establishing mechanisms for consultation with people affected by humanitarian emergencies. The report argued that recipients of humanitarian assistance also require an independent organisation or network of

organisations to lobby on their behalf, and a person or body to hear their concerns regarding delivered assistance. These discussions eventually led to the formation of the *Humanitarian Accountability Partnership* (or HAP), which proposed that quality, accountability, and program results are inextricably linked. It is now widely believed that by improving agency accountability in a systemic way, program quality, impact, and outcomes can also be enhanced.

Over time, these discussions culminated in a concerted shift towards “do no harm principles” and humanitarian standards, such as those by People in Aid, the Sphere Project, and the Core Humanitarian Standards. Unfortunately, in their current iterations, and much different from the recommendations of the Joint Evaluation Report or the ethos put forth by HAP, humanitarian standards, much like NPM perspective also seem to favour the adoption of narrow evaluation mechanisms, codes of practice, and quality benchmarks. The overall effect remains somewhat similar: a growing separation between the technical components of accountability and its moral and ethical dimensions. Organisations such as the MSF have publicly voiced their opposition to humanitarian standards. Tong (2004), who worked for MSF at the time, asks: “[is it] really possible to link quality and accountability to technical standards?” (182). She continues “while it is possible to ensure a sufficient number of wells, but do the indicators reflect the fact that women are being raped on their way to get water?” (ibid).

Accountability as a set of short-term and rules-based behaviour, rather than a system of relations, ultimately undermines true organisational learning and can even hamper organisational survival. The following section takes these considerations further in light of a humanitarian accountability system instituted by an international organisation following the 2010 monsoon floods in Pakistan.



Selection lists maintained by an aid organisation. After the distribution of relief goods, each person on the list is required to sign (or deposit a thumbprint) confirming receipt of goods. Some recipients felt this was humiliating: “It is not that we are voting in the election, we are just getting a damn bag of rice and pulses!”¹ – photograph courtesy of the author.

Accountability in the wake of Pakistan monsoon floods

The monsoon floods

The 2010 Pakistan monsoon floods, at the time of their occurrence, were cited by the United Nations as the largest humanitarian crisis in living memory. The catastrophe affected 20 million people, submerging nearly one-fifth of the country. It is estimated that the number of people affected by this disaster exceeded those affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake combined. Individuals most severely affected included small farmers and unskilled labourers who are already the most vulnerable in the country, living below or just above the poverty line. It is estimated that some 3.1 billion USD of humanitarian assistance was channelled into Pakistan that year for relief and reconstruction efforts, activating and energising countless NGOs. To keep donors happy, many organisations set in place accountability systems, one of which is discussed below.

The accountability system

The accountability system examined for this paper had several components: monitoring visits conducted by the resident Monitoring and Evaluation Officer (M&E Officer), a feedback and complaint phone-line which connected community members directly to the M&E Officer, as well as the display of relevant Sphere standards in Urdu at various intervention sites such as a supported clinic or food distribution point. Along with the Sphere standards, the complaint phone number was also prominently displayed so that people receiving humanitarian assistance could phone or send a SMS to the M&E Officer if they noted that any of the standards were being violated.

The M&E Officer managing the phone line was tasked with recording the feedback and complaints in a database and then forwarding them to relevant departments within the organisation on a weekly basis. For example, a complaint or suggestion received regarding the lack of medicines in a health clinic would be forwarded to the manager responsible for the project, along with the Director of Program Quality. It would be then up to the department manager and the Director to decide on a relevant course of action. In most cases, once the feedback was forwarded, there was little follow up from the M&E Officer. Any discussions regarding how the feedback was handled or integrated into project design had little or no input from the M&E Officer.

Some complaints, due to their urgency or magnitude, could prompt immediate action from the M&E Officer, even before they are forwarded to various department leads. This often took the form of a rapid preliminary investigation, whereby the M&E Officer would visit the individual or party lodging the complaint and take steps to verify the nature and severity of the claim made. The type of complaints which typically triggered an investigation included reports of physical abuse by aid workers or instances of mass misappropriation of relief goods. Once the information received is reasonably verified, a written report is communicated to the Regional Manager in charge of operations in a specific region as well as the Director of Program Quality.

Additionally, the M&E Officer also undertook field monitoring visits several times a week, where they would engage with community members and solicit their feedback and suggestions. These suggestions, along with any observations made, were also summarised in a report for forwarding to relevant parties.

Preliminary complaint analysis

The feedback and complaint database for one of the three operational regions of the humanitarian organisation was reviewed and analysed for October 2010. The month represents a time period of intense activity and adjustment as the organisation had just set up shop in the region a few weeks prior. This is also the first month of operation of the accountability system, as well as the

صحت و غذائیت کا پروگرام

بچوں کے تحفظ، صحت و غذائیت پروگرام کے مندرجہ ذیل معیار ہیں۔

- عملہ کو بچوں اور بڑوں کے ساتھ عزت اور خوش اخلاقی سے پیش آنا چاہیے۔ جنس، عمر، سماجی رتبے یا کسی اور وجہ کی بنیاد پر ان سے کوئی بھی امتیازی سلوک نہیں ہونا چاہیے۔ عملہ کو اختیار نہیں کہ وہ زبانی یا جسمانی رویے سے کسی کے ساتھ برا سلوک کرے۔
- عملہ کو اختیار ہے کہ مریضوں یا ان کے رشتہ داروں کی جانب سے نامناسب سلوک پر ان کے طبی معائنے سے انکار کر دے۔
- تمام عملہ پابند ہے کہ وہ کام کے مقررہ اوقات کی پابندی کرے۔
- عملہ کو یہ حق حاصل نہیں کہ وہ مریضوں یا ان کے رشتہ داروں سے علاج، فوڈ سپلیمنٹ کی فراہمی، یا کسی اور طبی سہولت کے بدلے پیسے یا کوئی اور ذاتی مراعات مانگے۔
- عملہ کام کے دوران کوئی غیر قانونی اشیاء اپنے پاس نہ رکھے گا اور نہ ہی کسی نشہ آور شے کا استعمال کرے گا۔
- مریضوں یا ان کی بیماری سے متعلق معلومات ان کی مرضی کے بغیر دوسرے افراد تک نہیں پہنچائی جائیں گی۔
- موجود وسائل جیسے فرنیچر وغیرہ کو ذاتی استعمال یا کسی اور استعمال کے لیے منتقل کرنا منع ہے۔

ہمارے پروگرام سے فائدہ اٹھانے والے تمام افراد کو یہ حق حاصل ہے کہ اگر ان کے حقوق اٹھیں نہیں مل رہے تو وہ ہمیں اپنی شکایت سے آگاہ کر سکتے ہیں

آپ کیلئے ہماری خدمات اور پروگرام کو بہتر بنانے کے لیے اپنی تجاویز اور شکایات سے اس فون نمبر پر آگاہ کریں

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آپ کی فراہم کردہ تمام معلومات صیغہ راز میں رکھی جائیں گی۔

An accountability poster listing relevant Sphere standards in Urdu displayed at a health and nutrition facility for children. The phone number of the complaint line is listed towards the end with the instruction that the number can be dialled as needed during weekdays, between 9 am to 5 pm – photograph courtesy of the author.

busiest. It is important to note that the launch of the accountability system coincided with a time period of growing community unrest, including demonstrations at various project sites, letters of anger and frustration written by community members to the organisation's regional and head offices, and sit-ins outside the gates of the organisation's sub-regional offices closer to community locations.

The purpose of this preliminary analysis is not to provide a definitive and comprehensive breakdown of the complaints received, but rather to highlight some emerging trends that have a bearing on the paper's arguments. A total of 54 calls were entered into the database that month. The M&E Officer reminded that the actual number of calls was approximately two times more, but only those that were considered "genuine" were recorded. There is no set criterion for what constitutes a genuine call, but the M&E Officer was of the view that many calls had no bearing on accountability and were from curious bystanders or were generalised pleas for assistance.

The phone line was accessed primarily by men – only three callers that month were recorded to be women. This is in line with local trends of mobile phone ownership. According to the M&E Officer, based on his research, most households share a mobile phone, with men commanding control of the resource. Also, the optics of calling a seemingly random number were such that women were unlikely to call in.

The majority of calls were invitations to conduct needs assessments in the caller's village to begin operations (70% of calls). The standard reply, as instructed by the Regional Manager, to these callers was that the organisation is stretched beyond capacity and cannot extend their operations at the given time but will forward these locations to various program managers for their consideration should more funding be made available. These responses, left the following pressing questions unanswered: *What made the organisation choose one locality over the other in a context of widespread need and devastation? How were decisions to support one life over the other made?*²

According to the M&E Officer, many callers hung-up, very upset, wondering the same questions: "Why are you operating at this locality, when our village is far more destitute than several of the areas where you are currently working? There doesn't seem to be any genuine understanding of need; on what criteria are villages selected?"³

Even though several different types of interventions were underway, all of the calls pertained to the distribution of supplies: food (80% of calls) or other essential items (20%). Some specific concerns included:

- Denial of food or other essential items despite being on the distribution list (the three women callers that month reported this).
- Parents and their adult children treated as one household simply because they lived under one roof, even though they maintained separate kitchens, eating, and spending schedules.
- Unexplained removal of individuals from selection lists, and distribution items designated for them given to other parties. Calls of this nature were often from community leaders and activists who were concerned with systematic abuse of power.
- Community members pointed out obvious omissions of vulnerable people from their villages: "Your team missed so and so, but he is blind and has 12 children. Nobody is more deserving than him. Or, she is a widow with no living family, how can you omit her?"⁴
- Designated food items were missing from distribution packages.
- The distribution was co-opted by notables from the village who diverted a large number of distributions to their family members despite not being needful.
- Some community members complained of harassment by powerful households in their respective villages for lodging a complaint with the M&E Officer.
- A few callers noted the low quality of food items being distributed and suggested diversifying the type of assistance being meted out.
- At least one instance of serious abuse of power and physical coercion by the organisation's distribution team was reported that month. Due to its nature, the complaint triggered immediate action by the M&E Officer (detailed below).

Humanitarian violence

The M&E Officer received several calls regarding an ongoing food distribution. Callers complained that they had been denied their allocated food packages without reason. One agitated caller burst into tears as he described how the women from his village were beaten when they refused to leave the premises of the distribution point to protest their removal from the lists. The M&E Officer requested the caller to gather any community members who were willing to speak with them in person.

The M&E Officer visited the village the following day.⁵ He was taken to a large ground. This was the village *Eidgah*, where communal prayers are offered during the two annual religious festivals of

Eid. The Imam⁶ of the village mosque was also present. There were approximately 30 men and 20 women gathered. Amongst them were those who were supposed to receive food packages but did not. Of the 240 households estimated to be in the village, some 60 had been selected for food aid by the organisation.

Upon arrival, the M&E Officer made a distinction between a “community member” and a “beneficiary.” According to the guidelines received from the Head Office in Islamabad, a beneficiary is that community member who has been selected by the aid organisation as a recipient of assistance. While all beneficiaries are community members, *not all* community members are beneficiaries. The M&E Officer clarified that *the organisation is accountable only to its beneficiaries, and not to the community at large*. Despite this guarded precedent, the meeting was highly charged and emotive. Several attendees were quietly sobbing or trembling with rage at the humiliation they had experienced the day before. After another reminder to the villagers, that *only* members of “beneficiary households” are allowed to speak, the following account was narrated:

The night before, humanitarian staff attempted to distribute tokens⁷ to as many beneficiaries as they could locate. The staff stayed back till 1 am, until they decided to head back and distribute any remaining tokens on the morning of the distribution. On that day, people lined up outside the venue, and those not on the list were dispersed. Tokens were handed over to remaining beneficiaries waiting in line. The distribution was being facilitated by the humanitarian staff as well as some influential people from the village. The humanitarian staff referred to them as “community focal persons” and clarified that they had helped the organisation make initial inroads into the community.

As the distribution began, beneficiaries were gradually ushered into a warehouse where they exchanged their tokens for food packages. However, just some 20 min into the distribution, the village focal persons began confiscating the tokens of those waiting in line. They were told that this was being done to expedite the process. Moments later, the confiscated tokens were handed to people reportedly not on the list but present in the vicinity. These were supposedly relatively well-off villagers who enjoyed close patronage of the so-called focal persons. The humanitarian staff did not check their identification and handed them food packages; no questions were asked. Some beneficiaries also shared that the village focal persons were seen selling some of the confiscated tokens as well as items designated for distribution. One beneficiary stated wryly; “The very givers of assistance are also the takers of assistance.”

When agitated beneficiaries protested to the humanitarian staff, they were met with violence. No one was spared – not even women and the elderly. Both men and women reported being beaten with wooden sticks on their heads, shoulders and backs. A woman showed the M&E Officer a gash on her head resulting from the beating. Beneficiaries were also hosed down with high-pressure water directed at their faces and eyes. Some also reported having sand and gravel blown into their eyes by those guarding the entrance of the distribution point. An elderly man stated that he was unable to see for the entire day after this incident. In addition to being assaulted, humanitarian staff and their local allies also directed racial slurs and derogatory language at those protesting their removal from the distribution list.

Technocratic approaches to accountability can depoliticise the humanitarian space

There has been plentiful documentation of preferential and discriminatory treatment of disaster survivors pointing to the skewed nature of aid distribution. In Pakistan and other countries, an important factor contributing to this is the persistence of traditional land leasing arrangements that give landlords unsurmountable power. Often, they are connected to or represent political parties, and maintain close ties to provincial governments and the police. They are often approached by humanitarian staff to facilitate their entry into the community, and therefore possess free reign to favour their own political constituents during aid distribution. In contrast, local communities are also dynamic political actors capable of transformative interventions, even in the wake of major disasters

and the relief efforts that ensue in their wake. In fact, disaster survivors strategically manoeuvre the post-disaster arena to safeguard their interests (e.g. see, Aijazi and Panjwani 2015).

The earlier described handling of feedback received through the accountability system lends to the argument that these were indeed technocratic responses (such as insisting on the distinction between a “beneficiary” and a “community member”). And, that these responses compromise the ability of local communities to mobilise and advocate for themselves, therefore, depoliticising the humanitarian space. The reference to politics here refers to everyday negotiations, gestures, and aspirations that enable individuals and communities to advocate for themselves, in contrast to the kind of politics (with the capital P) more commonly evoked in the literature on disasters and politics.

The accountability system presented in the paper adopted a problem-solving approach aimed at reducing (not necessarily resolving) the anger and frustration within communities. By relying on simplistic cause and effect, it chose not to tackle the structural and root causes grounding the reported concerns but favoured a simple problem-solving logic aimed at increasing confidence in the humanitarian system and resolving the immediate misstep at hand via operational rehaul. In this way, humanitarian organisations are able to protect themselves, deflecting any criticism directed at them for not resolving root causes of inequity or even furthering them, and at the same time implying that they are indeed ethical and accountable organisations wholly devoted to their beneficiaries. Let’s return to the example in the previous section. Upon receiving the report from the M&E Officer, the Head Office proposed a complete reassessment of the village and new beneficiary lists were prepared. This was based on the premise that the previous assessment took place at a time when the poor and vulnerable were still residing in displacement camps, and only more well-to-do residents were present in the village (their homes were noted to be in geographies better protected from overflowing waters). This was accompanied by a re-selection of “village focal points” this time not from the village elites but from within the beneficiaries themselves. Finally, a more neutral distribution point was selected (a school), as the warehouse previously used was owned by the landowning elites. After these steps, food packages were re-distributed, and an extra round of distribution was scheduled for the village to compensate for the incident.

The reported event took place just before the annual Muslim holiday of *Eid*. Organisational staff was incentivised to work overtime to make these steps possible before operations ceased for the holidays. While the frontline staff was busy facilitating food aid, the Head Office in Islamabad prepared its own externally facing report detailing the incident and its resolution. This was intended for its International Head Office (located in the United States) and its many donors. The report was written with the intent to showcase the integrity of the organisation and the robustness and effectiveness of its accountability systems. The organisation’s Pakistan Office was subsequently given an award for its performance on accountability, and the report itself was cited in all funding proposals moving forward as a testament of the organisation’s ability to utilise and dispense funds accountably. No references were made to the structural issue of land ownership which made such abuse of power possible, the collusion of aid workers with local elites, or the growing informal market in the region where both aid workers and village elites sold food aid items designated for distribution. It should also be noted that the accountability system did not keep track of or engage with the numerous protests and community-led demonstrations that were occurring in opposition to aid organisations throughout the operational region. These protests usually targeted humanitarian corruption and raised concerns about the unfair distribution of relief goods. Similarly, letters and notes written by community members to the organisation’s country or regional offices were also not referred to or incorporated into the accountability workplan. Only those modes of complaint or feedback that were received through the “official” accountability system were considered.

The Distribution Manager and his staff responsible for the botched distribution, who were all from the operational region, were subsequently removed and posted elsewhere to minimise the

possibilities of future collusion. Initially, the thinking was that distribution staff should be hired from the very region in which operations are to take place to facilitate community mobilisation. However, following the incident, the organisation changed its stance, citing collusion with communities as a possible impediment for the fair distribution of goods, and made it a rule to bring in staff from elsewhere. No stance was taken on the very structures of inequitable power relations (feudalism and land ownership for example), in fact, questions of land ownership and tenancy were categorically labelled as “development concerns” outside the purview of the humanitarian ambit. The localisation of culpability to its frontline workers can also be interpreted as another step at protecting the organisation’s more senior staff and reduced the systemic issue of abuse of power to a localised ethical failure, operational missteps, and an organisational policy error. In the context of Hurricane Katrina, Simmons and Casper (2012) point out that efforts to prioritise the pursuit of culpability over critique in power analyses, risk perpetuating structural violence.

The most glaring contradiction in the organisation’s efforts to present itself as an accountable actor is the continual distinction it maintains between a “beneficiary” and “community member”, and its stance of being accountable only to its beneficiaries, but not the wider community. What this effectively means is that the organisation is not responsible for any unintended consequences of its interventions. This is a problematic stance given the interlinked and messy nature of social interventionism and the obvious fact that beneficiaries are indeed embedded within their communities. The creation of the category of the “beneficiary” is not simply a convenient heuristic to help with identification and record-keeping, but an interested creation to once again limit the scope and the ambit of humanitarian operations, and to protect humanitarian organisations from criticism and scrutiny.

Accountability as an ethical and political project can inspire innovation

The true potentiality of accountability lies in its ability to push for innovation. This can be realised within the realms of operations or program design, but also in the very relations of power that bind or separate humanitarian organisations from local communities. Accountability, if truly respected and enabled, can reconfigure the ethos of humanitarian organisations from that of expertise and technical capacity to that of humility and learning. Sure, many organisations have some sort of a commitment to accountability, knowledge management, and learning, but the linkages between them are often tenuous and superficial, and never intended to recast communities as truly being knowledgeable on their lives and circumstances, but more so as mere participants in the many unfolding humanitarian dramas. An orientation of learning is such where the technical expertise and savvy of aid workers are put on the backseat in favour of orientations of deep listening and power-sharing beyond participation, which can enable a true influence over agenda-setting, resource allocation, and re-defining the very measures of success or failure.

Robust implementations of accountability can also provide frontline humanitarians added decision-making and operational flexibility as not all accountability concerns can be pre-empted and planned for. This could also assist in correcting power imbalances within the organisational hierarchy, such as between “field staff” and “head office staff” and between expatriate and the local staff who make up the majority of frontline workers. Accountability to affected communities can *only* be sincerely pursued if more power and independence is awarded to frontline and local staff. In this way, there are also productive synergies between accountability and recent calls for decolonising humanitarian aid and dismantling institutional racism (see, e.g. Currión 2020).

Feedback received through accountability systems should be allowed to seep into the deepest recesses of organisational planning to impregnate the imagination of those tasked with assisting others in overcoming extenuating circumstances, such as those of disasters and conflict, but also endemic poverty, marginalisation, and discrimination, which are part and parcel of the very structures that accentuate the consequences of disasters and conflict. This stance can only be successful if the ambit of humanitarian accountability systems is also broadened to move beyond operational fixes, to accommodate robust conversations on social change and equity.

Arguably many humanitarians already occupy such a positionality and tirelessly work to advocate for communities within their institutions. But such a stance is far from the norm, and often humanitarians who are seen to be devoted to communities at the detriment of loyalty to the organisation are penalised. The M&E Officer featured in the paper, spoke of the initial backlash they received from their manager for highlighting the food distribution incident in question in a forum with other managers, and it was only once the international head office validated the organisational response that his work was looked at favourably.

A well-considered accountability system can provide humanitarians with the empirical proof needed to push for wider change and minimise artificial distinctions between humanitarian and development to better save and sustain life. In the organisation presented in this paper, several staff members themselves anonymously used the accountability line to report instances of organisational misconduct without having the pressure to disclose their identities for fears of repercussions. Complaints of this nature included reports on mismanagement of funds, systemic corruption, and harmful programmatic or project practices. While actions pursued in response to them were often minimalist, at least a line of communication prompting internal scrutiny was opened.

Do we—Can we—Always live up to our principles?

The paper does not provide specific guidance on how to design an accountability system. Acknowledging the emerging and dynamic nature of different humanitarian contexts, it advocates for the inculcation of a learning culture; a willingness to openly accept failures which not only lead to immediate remedial action but a deeper probe of the very decision-making and operational structures that constrain or enable humanitarian response. This includes considerations and pressures of timeliness and reach that influence the range of possibilities available to frontline aid workers.

Arguably, designing an accountability system that takes into consideration different forms of inequality that exacerbate humanitarian emergencies is likely to be time-consuming, and may pose challenges in providing relief or addressing the immediate needs of affected people. One might assert that having ambitious accountability standards can even hinder the “protection” work of humanitarian agencies. Such as for example, should food distributions in the aftermath of disasters and related accountability standards be aimed at providing food as rapidly as possible to a large number of affected people, or be aimed at addressing embedded social problems? Is there ever enough time to fully assess social structures before delivering food aid?

However, it is difficult to conceive of humanitarian assistance that is devoid of equity, fairness and structural change. The “protection” work of humanitarian organisations, particularly after natural disasters, is typically overstated (see, Magone et al. 2012, 219–235). This is especially true for complex country contexts such as that of Pakistan where humanitarian access has to be carefully negotiated with the government, taking several months before any interventions can be actually set up. It is also important to not lose sight of the fact that most provision of food and shelter in the early stages of a disaster is almost always handled by local people and organisations. The language of crisis, urgency and social triage, i.e. “doing the best job possible in the shortest amount of time with the resources available” is an underlying consideration of most, if not all, humanitarian operations. While this assertion is rooted within a certain pragmatism of getting the job done, in the words of Marie-Pierre Allié, former President of MSF France: “How can we judge whether a compromise is acceptable?” (Magone et al. 2012, 219–235).

Concluding remarks

Accountability to communities is a welcome turn in the pragmatic sensibilities of humanitarian organisations. Through accountability systems, local communities are encouraged to claim the validity of their social words within humanitarian decision-making. But these systems can also serve as a tool for reordering community dissent and silencing broader claims for social justice and equity. They can operate counter-productively by depoliticising the humanitarian space. By this, I mean

curtailing opportunities for self-advocacy, by relegating any such efforts to the realm of a narrow operational and problem-solving lens.

Understandably since most humanitarian resources are mobilised under chaotic circumstances, spending resources effectively dominates the discourse on humanitarian accountability. While these aspects of accountability have always been important, their overemphasis and uncritical pursuance can undermine the otherwise transformative potentials of accountability. Accountability when understood as a relational, ethical and political project as much as a tool for problem-solving, can catalyse innovation within the humanitarian space, reconfiguring prevailing notions of humanitarian expertise, and creating more hospitable relations between organisations and the communities they seek to serve. However, left unchallenged, prevailing norms of accountability can undermine community efforts of self-advocacy by placating community unrest through technocratic revision and repair strategies. This reduces community concerns to policy and operational glitches in need of minor correction as opposed to the radical revisioning of the humanitarian contract itself.

Notes

1. Conversation with a recipient in Rajanpur, South Punjab, October 2010.
2. There were no strict operational codes guiding these decisions, other than what emerged from a series of rapid needs assessment and the strategy of triage: prioritise those who can be accessed the quickest.
3. Remarks made by a caller to the M&E Officer, October 2010.
4. Notes entered by M&E Officer in the complaint database
5. The author of the paper also accompanied the M&E Officer during their visit.
6. Individual in charge of day to day administration of the mosque and appointed for leading daily prayers in congregation. The Imam is held in high esteem by local community members and is symbolic of prevailing Islamic beliefs and moral standards.
7. Tokens are used to identify beneficiaries on the day of the distribution.

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