

ALNAP

A woman in a pink and blue patterned dress is speaking into a microphone outdoors. She is making a peace sign with her right hand. In the foreground, another woman in a red floral shirt is looking towards the speaker. The background is filled with lush green foliage and trees.

**FROM TICK BOX TO
TURNING POINT:
GETTING
ACCOUNTABILITY
RIGHT FOR
IMPROVED
HUMANITARIAN
ACTION**



JENNIFER DOHERTY

ALNAP is a global network of NGOs, UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/ Crescent Movement, donors, academics and consultants dedicated to learning how to improve response to humanitarian crises.

www.alnap.org

About the author

This study was written by Jennifer Doherty, Research Fellow at ALNAP.

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Chittagong Hill Tracts, Khagrachari, Bangladesh. In a community feedback session, a woman is expressing her concern. Photographer: SIRCAR, Rufas Rafi

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Molly Maple

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Inkwell Communications & Design Studio

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Executive summary

The humanitarian system has been talking for decades about the need to be more accountable to people affected by crisis. Yet despite the efforts of some invested organisations and individuals, there has been limited progress in terms of positive outcomes reported by communities and the most marginalised individuals within them. Instead of being conceived as fundamental to the ways of working for the humanitarian system, in recent years, accountability to affected people (AAP) has become a technical area that is increasingly technocratic and siloed from the broader humanitarian endeavour. There is growing frustration from both people affected by crisis and from humanitarian practitioners over the lack of tangible progress from many years of discussion and initiatives.

There is, however, now a key window of opportunity to help make the necessary shifts a reality. The system is experiencing renewed interest in and commitment to accountability from multiple levels – from individual frontline staff up to the Emergency Relief Coordinator – and there is a nascent but growing evidence base that engaging in effective AAP increases humanitarian performance on a range of measures, including improved relevance of assistance and increased dignity for crisis-affected communities. A shared goal to improve accountability is emerging, but questions remain around how to get there. Tangible changes for communities will not be achieved unless AAP is owned by the broader humanitarian system, embedded into its operational architecture, and rooted in its culture. These structural changes require strong leadership-level engagement from both donors and operational agencies. If leaders are serious about making progress on accountability, they will need to focus their efforts on the specific challenges that have been holding progress back.

This paper identifies key challenges and essential issues that need to be addressed to create positive change for people affected by crisis. It draws on a synthesis of different types of evidence, including focus groups discussions with and survey data from people affected by crisis; a literature review; small round-table discussions with humanitarian decision-makers; and key informant interviews with policymakers and practitioners across the sector.

The paper offers humanitarian leaders within donor organisations and operational agencies 12 key recommendations; areas that they should invest in as they grapple with accountability as one of the key sticking points holding the humanitarian system back from making progress for crisis-affected people. [Table 1](#) summarises the challenges, essential issues for engagement, and key recommendations for practical change, which are presented in turn within this paper alongside tangible examples and resources to support those changes. The paper concludes by identifying key evidence and learning gaps to which agencies could contribute by documenting and sharing their learning, as they take steps to more firmly centre their work around the perspectives of people affected by crisis.

Table 1. Summary of challenges, issues for engagement and key recommendations

Core challenges	Essential issues for engagement	Key recommendations for progress
<p>Embedded skills, structures and incentives perpetuate a supply-driven system</p>	<p>Soft skills and social analysis can support better understanding of and connection with communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donor and agency leadership should invest more in the time, skills, approaches and partnerships that support deeper social and contextual understanding of communities and marginalised groups within them • Operational agencies should recognise the role of frontline staff, volunteers and local partners in gathering ad hoc community feedback through their daily interactions, and develop processes to include these inputs in programme decision-making
	<p>Adaptive programming and flexible cultures can enable responsive accountability and the closure of feedback loops</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanitarian leaders should adopt adaptive management and programming approaches that focus on achieving outcomes identified by communities rather than sticking rigidly to proposal activities and outputs • Donors should support more flexible, outcome-orientated approaches to grant management for local and international agencies, to enable the latter's use of adaptive programming that is people-responsive
<p>Shifts in the external context threaten the system's accountability</p>	<p>Effective engagement with longer-term partners and accountability structures can help meet community priorities during protracted crises and displacement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operational agencies should form better links with those addressing longer-term services – including development actors, local government institutions and local civil society – to facilitate joint programming and information sharing • Humanitarian leaders should support their organisational and staff engagement with challenging issues of politics and advocacy, to influence local duty-bearers and host governments to help secure the rights of people affected by crisis
	<p>Accountability can play a positive role in prioritisation decisions to maximise the use of scarce resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donors and operational agencies should consider how to more effectively and ethically engage the voices of crisis-affected people in making prioritisation decisions to maximise the utility of scarce resources and avoid exacerbating community tensions • Humanitarians should consider how to balance their measures of need and vulnerability with community perspectives of what is necessary, fair and legitimate in targeting decisions

Unequal power restricts accountability	<p>Improved incentives for accountability are important in the absence of community power to sanction humanitarian actors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanitarian leadership should help embed a culture of accountability as paramount within their organisations by demonstrably taking complaints and suggestions seriously and being open to external scrutiny Operational agencies should explore strategies for engaging with the empowerment of people affected by crisis by reducing the conception of aid as a gift and considering how approaches to misconduct could better interact with local accountability entities that are trusted by crisis-affected individuals
	<p>Progress on localisation and decolonisation has implications for accountability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanitarian leadership should encourage self-reflection and action within their organisations, with the goal of recognising and tackling entrenched attitudes that limit respect for people affected by crisis as knowledge holders and active agents with capacity in their own contexts Donors and operational agencies should enable a stronger role for local actors in supporting accountability to affected people, including providing funding for and learning from local approaches and innovations

There is a current window of opportunity to improve AAP, afforded by high-level attention and growing evidence of its importance for effective humanitarian action. That opportunity will not be maximised unless humanitarian leaders tackle the challenges outlined in this paper and make the necessary changes to systems, processes and mindsets required to enable meaningful accountability to people affected by crisis.

Acronyms

AAP	accountability to affected populations
AIDMI	All India Disaster Mitigation Institute
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
CDAC	Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities
COVID-19	novel coronavirus 2019
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard
DEC	Disasters Emergency Committee
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ERC	Emergency Relief Coordinator
GTS	Ground Truth Solutions
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
HDP	humanitarian–development–peace
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
ISS/EUR	International Institute of Social Studies Erasmus University
JIAF	Joint and Intersectoral Analysis Framework
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PHAP	International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection
PSEAH	prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SOHS	<i>The State of the Humanitarian System</i> (report)

SS4CE	Social Science for Community Engagement
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID/BHA	United States Agency for International Development/Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance
WFP	World Food Programme

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1. Introduction

🗣️ I don't think that we can influence decisions about aid because we are only *beneficiaries [sic]*, and the international organisations are the ones that decide this matter. 🗣️

Aid recipient, Yemen, 2021

🗣️ When we complain to them about something, it takes up to six months to receive the response, people get tired of waiting, so they just don't give any complaint and feedback. 🗣️

Aid recipient, Bangladesh, 2021

People affected by crisis have expressed increasing frustration that after years of humanitarian actors speaking about people-centred approaches and increasingly providing avenues for feedback, they have seen few effects of their inputs and little in the way of tangible progress on meaningful participation and accountability. The quotes at the opening of this section represent that disappointing reality for many people affected by crisis, as expressed by aid recipients in focus group discussions for ALNAP's most recent State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) report (ALNAP, 2022a). Tokenistic engagement without resultant action is leading to disillusionment and distrust of humanitarian actors and processes. Across the system, some crisis-affected people have become disengaged from staff and services or have sought alternative routes to be heard by the system that they felt was ignoring them (Lough et al., 2021; ALNAP, 2022a). For example, communities have signed open letters, attended sit-ins and led demonstrations against agencies (Aijazi, 2022; National Network of Local Philanthropy Development, n.d.).

This disappointment has implications for people affected by crisis who are not receiving respectful and responsive assistance, but the increasing trust deficit as a result of inaction or abuse of power also restricts the ability of agencies to operate effectively and do their job safely (Aly 2019). This creates an imperative for the humanitarian system to grapple meaningfully with the issue of accountability to (crisis-) affected people (AAP)¹ and find out what it really takes to achieve the commitment to put people affected by crisis at its centre. This commitment is, however, well-worn and years of limited progress can seem insurmountable, especially when the barriers to effective accountability have typically been tackled with technical solutions and increasingly professionalised, but siloed, accountability functions instead of engaging with decision-makers on issues of structure, culture and political blockages.

Renewed high-level commentary on the lack of progress on AAP, alongside improved evidence on the link between good AAP and performance outcomes, provides an important window of opportunity to make progress on this longstanding sticking point for the humanitarian system. For tangible change to occur, however, attention needs to be focused on addressing the correct barriers to change. Periodically, different thematic subjects gain traction and attention at the humanitarian system level, driven by external pressures – such as sexual abuse scandals revealed in the international press – or personal missions by senior officials in the humanitarian system. Such attention can lead to new commitments, initiatives, policies and pilots dedicated to making progress on that issue with the hope of meaningful change. The humanitarian system is currently seeing one such spotlight landing on AAP, created by the double-pronged pressure of increasingly vocal calls from communities and the commitments coming from senior-level humanitarian coordination. These include statements from the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) (Chaoui, 2023) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principals on the centrality of AAP to the humanitarian endeavour (IASC, 2022a), and the creation of the new OCHA Flagship Initiative to pilot new locally driven coordination structures (OCHA, n.d.).

There is, however, some scepticism over whether such attention will lead to tangible change for communities (Alexander, 2023) and some voices are calling for more direct engagement with the challenging political barriers to AAP rather than more technical fixes (Sattler, 2023). To avoid missed opportunities resulting in further disillusionment in the accountability agenda, the system needs to identify key concrete areas upon which to focus its attention. Humanitarian leaders will need to drive change on complex issues of structure, politics and power to bring accountability out of its technocratic silo.

... the audience for this paper is decision-makers who have the power to shift the incentives, structures, resources, policy and mindsets that underpin an accountable humanitarian system.

This paper synthesises evidence – drawing on a survey and focus group discussions with people affected by crisis conducted for the 2022 SOHS report (ALNAP, 2022a); a literature review of the history of and recent progress on AAP; key informant interviews with over 20 humanitarian actors; and small round-table discussions with humanitarian decision-makers – to identify the key issues that humanitarian leaders need to address if they are serious about making progress on this longstanding sticking point. It also provides recommendations for progress and tangible examples of promising practice, even on seemingly intractable challenges.

The intended audience for this paper is not specialist AAP advisors and practitioners with a strong interest in the technicalities of implementing an accountable humanitarian response. Instead, the primary audience for this paper and its suggestions for progress is decision-makers in operational and donor agencies who have the power to shift the incentives, structures, resources, policy and mindsets that together underpin an accountable humanitarian system. As noted throughout the paper and discussed in more depth in [Section 3.3.2](#), local and national actors are essential players in a more accountable system, yet many of the suggestions in this

paper are directed more to international actors – as it is they who currently hold more decision-making power in the system and the potential to pass that to local actors with closer proximity to communities affected by crisis.

Following this introduction, [Section 2](#) provides an overview of progress made on AAP and summarises the evidence on how better AAP can tangibly improve humanitarian action. [Section 3](#) unpacks a set of three key challenge areas that have the potential to unlock the current inertia in the system on accountability (see [Table 2](#)). The first challenge area relates to shifting away from the existing supply-focused structure of the system to enable meaningful engagement with and response to communities. The second area explores the changes in priorities, partners and processes that are needed to meet the changing external context of humanitarian crises. The third challenge area considers the incentives and approaches that could help to more meaningfully shift the power of the system into the hands of people affected by crisis. [Section 3](#) also provides key recommendations for progress on each of these issues that humanitarians may find useful for more meaningfully tackling AAP, both within individual agencies and in system-wide initiatives (these are summarised in [Table 3](#)).

[Section 4](#) then suggests key areas where further evidence and sharing of learning could help the humanitarian system to keep progressing on these issues. It also underscores the need for ongoing organisational and system-wide initiatives to actively document and share learning – both on successes and challenges. Finally, [Section 5](#) concludes that although AAP has become a sticking point for the sector, high-level attention represents an important opportunity to make meaningful progress. This opportunity needs to be channelled towards addressing these tricky, but crucial, issues by building on existing areas of promise to help get accountability unstuck and moving at pace in the right direction.

Box 1. A note on terminology and scope

Rather than focusing specifically on the narrow feedback and response aspect of accountability, a broad conception of accountability to people affected by crisis is used in this paper. Engagement with crisis-affected people could range from one-way information sharing by agencies, to gathering and responding to feedback, to communities meaningfully taking the lead on decision-making in projects (although recognising that the latter currently happens more in theory than in practice). AAP discussions often focus on feedback and complaints mechanisms, but meaningful communication with diverse members of communities and two-way dialogue are also important mechanisms for supporting accountable practices and effective assistance. Indeed, all the interactions humanitarians have with communities are tied to accountability because they relate to the way the humanitarian system uses its power.

This broader conceptualisation may also be easier to engage with for those outside the typical AAP community as opposed to parsing out specific forms of engagement. Even key informants who have been immersed for years in accountability debates have been confused by the number of different initiatives that exist. Several referred to their associated acronyms – such as community

engagement (CE), community engagement and accountability (CEA), social science for community engagement (SS4CE), communicating with communities (CwC), risk communication and community engagement (RCCE), and so on – as the 'alphabet soup' of accountability. In this paper, one can assume that all of these different components are subsumed under a broader accountability umbrella.

[Community] can be a misleading term – implying a homogeneity belied by individuals that comprise the groups with which humanitarians engage.

Many of the above acronyms use 'community' in their formulation. This can be a misleading term – implying a homogeneity belied by individuals that comprise the groups with which humanitarians engage. Accountability discussions – particularly those centred on empowerment and access – need to take inclusion issues of gender, age, sexual preference, physical ability and the intersection of these different identities into account. To get AAP right, strong consideration of diversity and inclusion is essential, as is recognition of the diverse priorities and abilities of different individuals affected by crisis and the barriers to meaningful participation that they face.

An accountable system also seeks to ensure the prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (especially through the use of community knowledge and engagement to help identify risks and solutions); address sexual exploitation and abuses where they happen; and tackle issues of aid diversion and corruption as serious forms of misconduct by humanitarian actors. How organisations manage such instances has important implications for their accountability and the trust people affected by crisis have in the humanitarian system. Although some sections of the paper do engage explicitly with issues of misconduct and the prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment – particularly in terms of power, in [Section 3.3](#) – the paper as a whole does not offer a fully comprehensive discussion of these important and sensitive issues.

Accountability is also inextricably linked to other areas of concern to the humanitarian system. As [Section 3](#) of this paper demonstrates, consideration of accountability should not be divorced from discussions about the localisation of humanitarian action and the 'HDP nexus', which concerns the intersection between humanitarian, development and peace programming.

2. Limited progress – but growing opportunities to advance accountability to crisis-affected people

The system has been having concerted conversations about being more accountable to people affected by crisis since the late 1990s (Hilhorst et al., 2021). This focus emerged following the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, which highlighted failings of the response for crisis-affected people, leading to the initial humanitarian ombudsman pilots by the British Red Cross in 1997 and the creation of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) in 2003. These efforts evolved into the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) in 2014 as the main mechanism for self-regulation by humanitarian actors. Further system-level focus on the need for a ‘participation revolution’ in the sector subsequently emerged from the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 and successive Grand Bargain processes. Yet despite these different initiatives and commitments – and the increasing evidence that strong accountability processes have the potential to create a range of positive impacts – the various coordination-level activities and processes deployed have not resulted in meaningful outcomes for people affected by crisis. There is, however, now renewed interest at multiple levels of the humanitarian system that could help drive forward more meaningful change.

Agency activities and processes – but limited progress for people affected by crisis

Accountability to people affected by crisis has come a long way in terms of awareness, activities and processes from where it was in the late 1990s. Agencies now increasingly have community engagement staff and mechanisms in place for collecting feedback from communities as a minimum standard. At the collective level, there has been an increase in response-wide accountability frameworks and country-level working groups on accountability. The latest available figures indicate that 57% of Humanitarian Country Teams have a response-wide accountability framework for affected people and 66% have a country-level working group on AAP or community engagement (IASC, 2022b).²

Despite these activities, operational agencies have often focused too much on putting in standard feedback mechanisms as a tick-box exercise without engaging more meaningfully with whether communities feel comfortable using them or how to respond to feedback when they do (ALNAP, 2022a). System-wide initiatives, such as the IASC Task Force 2 on AAP and the Grand Bargain Participation Revolution

workstream, have focused largely on coordination-level processes, which interviewees, as well as the extant secondary research, indicate are too disconnected from community-level outcomes (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2023). The lack of practical organisational progress is evident in recent interagency evaluations of key responses (IASC, 2022c; DEC, 2023) and in the latest CHS 2022 Humanitarian Accountability Report, which reports that individual humanitarian agencies find the specific commitments on AAP among the hardest to implement (CHS Alliance, 2022).³ People affected by crisis themselves also report a lack of effective communication with them by humanitarian agencies,⁴ and growing frustration with a lack of ability to influence humanitarian responses.⁵

Increased evidence of impact and high-level interest could draw AAP out of a technocratic silo

Over recent years, AAP has increasingly risked becoming a victim of its own success at carving out a space in the humanitarian system – a space that has increasingly become a *niche*. The efforts to establish accountability as a practice and to professionalise AAP processes⁶ have improved the understanding of ‘how to do’ AAP, while at the same time boxing it into a technocratic silo that sits apart from the systems, processes and working culture of the rest of the humanitarian system. It is often discussed as one of several cross-cutting issues – such as gender and inclusion – that have their own technical units rather than being embedded in ways of working across structures and mindsets. As one interviewee put it, ‘In trying to improve it, we make it more complex than it needs to be. We’re not really pushing back on the system as a whole but doing little shifts and training.’ Rather than accountability flowing through the DNA of the system as a core consideration of everyone working within it, accountability has become a function mainly conducted by specialised units and staff. As one accountability advisor reflected, ‘We have fought for the integrity of the narrative to keep a space for AAP. But it will be our death if we now don’t look at it in an integrated manner.’⁷

There is, however, an opportunity to amplify the role of AAP in the system, afforded by growing evidence and leadership-level interest. There is nascent but expanding evidence that effective communication, participation and feedback processes have the potential to produce positive outcomes from the perspectives of communities. Recent research suggests that these gains are varied, supporting both intrinsic and instrumental reasons for implementing strong accountability processes with communities (see [Box 2](#)). There is also growing interest from individuals and initiatives that may have the power to push for necessary changes.

 **We have fought for the integrity of the narrative to keep a space for AAP. But it will be our death if we now don’t look at it in an integrated manner.** 

AAP advisor, key informant interview, 2023

Box 2: Increased evidence of the impact of effective AAP on dignity and humanitarian performance

There are still few studies that explore the impact of humanitarian accountability, but the evidence base that demonstrates both its intrinsic and instrumental value is increasing (Featherstone, 2013; ALNAP, 2018; ALNAP, 2022a).

Moral- and human-rights-based arguments in favour of AAP consider its purpose to be *intrinsic* – offering opportunities for accountability is simply the right thing to do for people affected by crisis. Indeed, ALNAP's recent SOHS survey found that those who were consulted on the aid they received and those who could provide feedback were, respectively, 2.4 and 2.9 times more likely to say they were treated with dignity than those who were not engaged (ALNAP, 2022a). Yet effective AAP also has positive effects on other humanitarian performance measures, adding strength to a more instrumentalist argument for investing in AAP. The same SOHS report found that people who were consulted prior to receiving aid were more likely to say it was relevant, sufficient and of good quality.⁸ These findings provide support to a previous, more qualitative, study on the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms on various similar outcomes of assistance, including sustainability (Featherstone, 2013). These effects are also likely to be reinforcing – people who feel they are being treated with dignity and who trust that they are being listened to may also improve the operational environment for humanitarian actors to provide assistance (Aly, 2019).

Tellingly, however, the 2022 SOHS report also found that these positive associations only stand when engagement is done *well*. Where respondents reported only 'partial' satisfaction with AAP processes, the results were worse than no engagement at all, suggesting that tokenistic efforts are not good enough and could, on the contrary, be detrimental to the experiences of crisis-affected people (ALNAP, 2022a). This underscores the need for agencies to go beyond the bare minimum standards for accountable programming, such as installing a suggestion box, and to think in a more nuanced way about how to understand and respond to the priorities of people affected by crisis.

... people who feel they are being treated with dignity and listened to may also improve the operational environment for humanitarian actors.

These positive findings around both dignity and the system's more standard performance measures are both important. Intrinsic arguments for accountability are useful for keeping a focus on communities and what *they* value, which may be different from the objectives the international humanitarian system sets for itself. The new evidence supporting links between accountability and the effectiveness of the system, however, is useful for gaining broad buy-in from humanitarian colleagues who may value delivering tangible goods and services above softer engagement activities. As illustrated by the long-running resistance to shifting from in-kind goods to cash-based assistance, clear evidence of effectiveness and efficiency has pushed the system – and donors

in particular – to change policy and practice (Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2022). Increasing evidence on the impact of accountability processes on traditional measures of humanitarian performance helps to demonstrate that, far from being an ‘optional add on’ or ‘nice to have’, effective accountability processes have the potential to tangibly improve the effectiveness of aid.

A growing focus on AAP is evident in several high-level initiatives. Recognising that the Grand Bargain commitments to a ‘participation revolution’ produced little in the way of revolutionary outcomes for communities, the latest iteration of the Grand Bargain framework has decoupled accountability and participation from a joint commitment to localisation, where it risked getting subsumed under that other weighty topic. The appointment of a senior ambassador to support improvements in the participation of affected people (IASC, 2023a) also signals increased prioritisation of AAP concerns and an opportunity for high-level influence and diplomacy on the issue. Meanwhile, the IASC Task Force 2 has begun to undertake more strategic engagement with key decision-makers, seeking to understand the AAP support desired by leaders in country coordination roles and to engage donors in discussions about AAP funding based on commissioned research (Featherstone, 2023).

Other recent initiatives are attempting to bring communities more directly into the design of humanitarian governance and communication structures. For example, the ongoing revision of the CHS, recognising that the original commitments were developed largely from the perspective of the international system, has sought to involve a large number of local organisations and crisis-affected communities in defining the standard to which the system holds itself (CHS Alliance, 2023). Meanwhile, the new OCHA Flagship Initiative – a four-country pilot to redesign the structures of the humanitarian system based on local requirements – offers the *potential* for community participation to create a coordination structure that works for them.

These later attempts show an increasing recognition that one of the biggest challenges for collective AAP efforts is their focus on bringing the voices of people affected by crisis *into* an entrenched system designed by international actors, rather than building that system *around* the people it is meant to serve. There has been limited questioning of the structures that uphold traditional ways of working for the humanitarian system. Whether these new initiatives can help shift that balance, however, will depend on how meaningfully people affected by crisis are engaged in the design and, crucially, how well their inputs are acted upon in terms of the resources and the level of political will needed to tackle core structural challenges.

... one of the biggest challenges is [the] focus on bringing the voices of people affected by crisis into a system designed by international actors, rather than building that system around the people it is meant to serve.

Growing leadership-level interest in accountability, coupled with increased evidence of its utility, creates an opportunity to tackle the challenges that have been holding progress on AAP back for decades. As outlined in this paper, those challenges are both technical and – increasingly – political, requiring leadership-level support to change. Failure to tackle these challenges risks exacerbating the sense of disillusion crisis-affected people are already experiencing with the system and the disillusionment of some practitioners in the AAP agenda after years of discussion but limited progress. To make the most of this opportunity, humanitarian leaders within donor organisations, operational agencies, and coordination structures will all need to grapple with the key issues that have become roadblocks to meaningful AAP. [Section 3](#) unpacks those issues and explores some promising solutions to address them.

3. Key barriers and recommendations for progressing meaningful accountability

Renewed enthusiasm for getting accountability right presents an opportunity to bring AAP out of a technocratic silo and be meaningfully integrated into the way the humanitarian system operates. To make such a shift, humanitarians need to grapple with some of the key blockages to accountability and commit to the changes in systems, processes, resources and mindsets that are required to engage with and respond to people affected by crisis. ALNAP’s analysis reveals three key blockages holding the system back, each with two specific, essential issues that need concerted attention (see [Table 2](#)). Within each of these areas, there are pockets of promising progress, which leadership-level support could help to build upon by exploring some key suggested ways forward (see [Table 3](#)).

Table 2. Core challenges and essential issues to address

Core challenges	Essential issues for engagement
Embedded skills, structures and incentives perpetuate a supply-driven system	Soft skills and social analysis can support better understanding of and connection with communities
	Adaptive programming and flexible cultures can enable responsive accountability and the closure of feedback loops
Shifts in the external context threaten the system’s accountability	Effective engagement with longer-term partners and accountability structures can help meet community priorities during protracted crises and displacement
	Accountability can play a positive role in prioritisation decisions to maximise the use of scarce resources
Unequal power restricts accountability	Improved incentives for accountability are important in the absence of community power to sanction humanitarian actors
	Progress on localisation and decolonisation has implications for accountability

3.1. Embedded skills, structures and incentives perpetuate a supply-driven system

The structure of the international humanitarian system has become entrenched over time, which creates a problem for delivering assistance in an accountable way. The system was originally designed to deliver a set of basic-needs goods to crisis-affected communities as soon as possible, focusing mainly on decisions being made quickly by international actors; adhering to donor priorities; operating at scale; and prioritising skills in management, logistics and the basic-needs sectors, such as food security,

WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) and shelter. Yet, it has become increasingly clear that this supply-driven and technical approach to humanitarian delivery is not set up to respond to the requests coming from the community level of affected populations (Konyndyk, 2018; Saez et al., 2021).

Recent research and initiatives, however, usefully indicate some key changes that could – with more concerted investment – lead to a more demand-led system. To make that shift, organisations need to focus firstly on the right skillsets and approaches required to effectively engage with people affected by crisis, and secondly on creating the adaptive, flexible processes and systems required to be responsive to their changing needs. These changes can be incentivised by donors who place an increased emphasis on people-centred approaches and who support responsive processes and structures.

3.1.1. Soft skills and social analysis can support understanding of and connection with people affected by crisis

The set-up of a humanitarian system focused on ‘hard’ technical skills and implementing quickly at scale leaves little room for effective engagement with diverse communities and the individuals within them. Although many organisations now have specific community engagement or AAP staff, there is – as one practitioner put it – a ‘void’ in the skills required to implement accountability well. While there is a wealth of guidance on ‘how to do’ AAP, operational agencies have tended to put in place relatively simple and replicable structures for listening to communities.⁹ The most common of these is the ubiquitous ‘suggestions box’, often installed as a tick-box exercise without really considering what it would take for someone to feel comfortable using it, particularly those with different levels of marginalisation or vulnerability. As one aid practitioner put it: ‘You could have on paper a super accountable programme with suggestion boxes, but nobody is complaining because they have inherently reinforced existing power structures, or it is not very a trusting environment to give feedback.’

Humanitarians are still struggling to engage effectively with people affected by crisis. Failings are widespread, ranging from a reliance on digital technology when most people prefer to speak in person – especially on sensitive issues – to a lack of consideration of minority languages, literacy, and levels of access for people of different genders, age, or physical ability (CHS Alliance and ISS/EUR, 2020; Mathias and Singer, 2021). Although more guidelines have been created to support engagement with diverse individuals, widespread uptake of appropriate responses is lacking (Shafina and Thivillier, 2021; UNICEF, 2022). Aid recipients have also been confused by the proliferation of different agency communication and feedback mechanisms, not knowing to whom they should speak or how (ALNAP, 2022a).

Agency understanding of and engagement with existing community communication and representation structures is also generally inadequate. Communities and the people within them are complex social actors with their own hierarchies or gatekeepers (GTS, 2023) and different perspectives on what sort of assistance is required and who should receive it. These power dynamics can have strong implications for who gets what and whether individuals see that process as legitimate. Aside from inclusion and representation issues, when agencies do not engage

with existing social and communication structures, they miss the conversations happening outside of the agency-mandated channels for communication, feedback and accountability. These may be where the most honest conversations about humanitarian assistance happen because people are not always comfortable speaking freely with aid practitioners (CDAC, 2022). Although rumours and misinformation can flow through these unofficial channels – often an issue in public health responses – they are still valid spaces for ideas, opinions and complaints about humanitarian assistance that communities are not providing to agencies directly (Posada et al., 2023). There may also be existing structures for accountability, in operation through community institutions, civil society and local government, which may be seen as more legitimate by communities.

... when agencies do not engage with existing social and communication structures, they miss the conversations happening outside of agency-mandated channels.

Agencies need a balance of softer skills, strong analysis, and approaches to engage effectively with social complexities and understand the diversity of capacities and priorities of the individuals that make up a community. Some options for achieving this include engaging staff with those specific socio-political analysis skills, tapping into the knowledge of socially engaged humanitarian actors, and investing in more socially aware programming approaches.

Leadership-level support is required to prioritise the resourcing of appropriate skills for conducting social and contextual analysis at the beginning and throughout an agency's work with a community. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) underscores this need in its AAP framework, which prioritises systematic, ongoing contextual analysis of communities as the first guiding principle (ICRC, 2019). Yet specific skills are required to implement such analyses effectively and some agencies are increasingly focused on strengthening those competencies. For example, a new Social Science for Community Engagement (SS4CE) initiative from UNICEF has highlighted the potential of social science skillsets – such as sociology, anthropology, and political economy analysis – to add practical value to understanding the complex social dynamics within – and in the contexts surrounding – a crisis-affected community (PHAP, 2023b).

Meanwhile, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has explored ways of embedding skills for conducting effective accountability into hiring and progression processes (IRC, 2019). However, these skills do not have to be hired directly into international agencies: international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) can also engage local partners – who are often contextually more aware than international staff – on short-term contracts.¹⁰ For example, one interviewee explained how the knowledge of local Somalian partners was invaluable to understanding local clan dynamics, which were key to their community engagement efforts.

Agencies can also more effectively tap into the understanding of community dynamics and perceptions that are gleaned by frontline staff and volunteers working with people affected by crisis on a daily basis.¹¹ Although specific skills are useful, communicating with people does not always have to be complicated. In most humanitarian organisations, the tacit knowledge gained by frontline staff through straightforward, day-to-day conversations is not adequately respected or integrated into decision-making (ALNAP, 2022b). Humanitarian organisations tend to be quite hierarchical, leaving little room in decision-making for the opinions of those working closest to communities, including frontline staff and volunteers (Doherty, 2022; Mathias and Singer, 2021). Their inputs can be particularly useful in situations where AAP-specific staff are mobile, with more limited contextual knowledge and institutional memory.

Some agencies are starting to recognise that crucial frontline role. For example, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) are asking frontline staff to send WhatsApp voice notes to digitise the informal feedback they receive from communities. Meanwhile, Oxfam (n.d. a) uses a Community Perceptions Tracker, which allows frontline staff to capture informal feedback and suggestions via a mobile survey software on a rolling basis. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has similar systems for its staff and volunteers, first trialled during an Ebola response in Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (McKay et al., 2022). Recently conducted Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance- (BHA-)supported research by the IRC also provides a list of recommendations for organisational leadership on improving the engagement of frontline staff in AAP, focusing on a range of issues from dedicating resources to changing organisational culture (IRC, 2023). Although frontline staff have a crucial role to play in improving contextual knowledge, agencies should be conscious of not substituting staff voices for those of the communities, who still need to be the starting point for understanding needs and expectations. In hierarchical structures and cultures, some frontline staff may also not feel comfortable passing on negative feedback. As such, it is important to engage with frontline staff as essential points of contact with communities, but also to have multiple other channels for the voices of people affected by crisis to be heard.

Although frontline staff have a crucial role to play in improving contextual knowledge, agencies should be conscious of not substituting staff voices for those of the communities.

Agencies can also adopt approaches to understanding community perspectives that better tap into existing social structures. Such approaches recognise that communication and feedback mechanisms introduced by an external actor may not be trusted or preferred by communities. For example, 'social listening' is an approach to understanding what communities are saying outside the channels that agencies choose to provide. Recently, Rooted in Trust used this approach to examine social media discussions about COVID-19. This was useful for identifying misinformation that was detrimental to the public health response, but also for understanding community concerns and opinions, with the potential to feed into project design, course correction and evaluations (Posada et al., 2023). Other actors are engaging with local

accountability structures to strengthen their work with local institutions trusted by communities, as described further in [Section 3.3.1](#). These approaches have promise for tapping into discussions happening outside of the systems agencies choose to create; however, a single channel is unlikely to be representative of *all* voices of people affected by crisis. It is useful to consider which individuals from communities are included in and excluded from social discussions, and seek multiple routes to access their perspectives.

Investing in these skillsets, partnerships and approaches has the potential to improve agency understanding and communication with communities. It is, however, difficult to move beyond pilots, policies and guidance without strong leadership-level support. Interviewees consistently explained that even in organisations that list AAP as a key priority, changes in practice, resources and outcomes were harder to identify. One accountability practitioner summed up their community engagement policy: 'Paper work is just the paper work. But it's a start.'

To create real change in the skillsets and culture of organisations, leadership-level commitment is required to ensure adequate resources and momentum are applied to drive through and sustain changes.¹² There also needs to be a willingness from donors to accept that the accountability 'mechanisms' created by these contextually sensitive processes may not look like the usual suggestion boxes and hotlines, with the latter's easily accessible statistics on use and frequency of calls. Yet, the outcomes from this experimentation may ultimately be more useful.

Key recommendations for progress

- Donor and agency leadership should **invest more in the time, skills, approaches and partnerships** that support **deeper social and contextual understanding** of communities and marginalised groups within them.
- Operational agencies should **recognise the role of frontline staff, volunteers and local partners in gathering ad hoc community feedback** through their daily interactions, and **develop processes to include these inputs in programme decision-making**.

What this might look like: Examples and resources

Prioritising time for meaningful community discussions in workplans and incentivising positive AAP practices in hiring and performance appraisals.

- [IRC \(2019\) A guide for client-responsive staff management.](#)

Partnering with or hiring staff who can engage in social and political analysis to understand the structure, communication preferences and power dynamics of communities and contexts. For example, by connecting with anthropologists to understand community responses to Ebola through the Ebola Response Anthropology Platform in DRC.

- [Elhra \(2023\) Connecting anthropologists with local teams for context-specific humanitarian response.](#)
- [ICRC \(2019\) Accountability to affected people institutional framework.](#)

- [UNICEF initiative on social science for community engagement \(SS4CE\) in humanitarian action](#) (cited in PHAP, 2023b).

Investing in social listening approaches to understand community perspectives voiced outside of agency channels, as explored by Rooted in Trust during COVID-19.

- [Posada A, Lopez Iñigo R and Sport J \(2023\) Turning social listening data into action. Barriers and recommendations observed through a COVID-19 rumor response.](#)

Maximising the use of the tacit knowledge gained by frontline staff by supporting and valuing their learning, as explored by the IRC and COAST Foundation.

- [IRC \(2023\) Empowering frontline staff to enable the participation of crisis-affected people.](#)
- [Haque M \(2022\) 'What did COAST learn from testing ALNAP's tacit learning resource?'](#)
- [ALNAP \(2022b\) Sharing tacit knowledge for humanitarians: A resource pack.](#)
- Module 3 in [IFRC \(2022\) IFRC feedback kit.](#)

Providing mechanisms for frontline staff and volunteers to capture and input informal community feedback into decision-making processes. Examples include Oxfam's community perception tracker and the IFRC's feedback kit based on learning from the Ebola response in DRC.

- [Oxfam \(n.d. a\) 'Oxfam perception tracker'.](#)
- [IFRC \(2022\) IFRC feedback kit.](#)

3.1.2. Adaptive programming and flexible cultures can enable responsive accountability

The other key challenge created by a supply-based system is that agencies are not set up to respond effectively as contexts and community priorities shift. This lack of responsiveness is proving to be one of the biggest problems in the relationship between humanitarians and people affected by crisis, leading – as illustrated by the [quote from Bangladesh in Section 1](#) – to frustrations and disengagement. This often leaves frontline staff and local partners trying to pick up the pieces of those relationships, yet without the mandate to make changes. To enable adaptive and responsive programming, changes are needed within operational agencies and donor organisations.

When systems for community engagement do gather feedback on humanitarian assistance – whether in the form of initial assessments of preferences or ongoing complaints, requests and suggestions for alterations – few agencies have the systems, processes or funding to support flexible change throughout the project lifecycle. Lack of time for initial participatory planning was commonly mentioned in reports,

discussions and interviews as something that, while particularly hard in rapid-onset crises, still remained a challenge in more protracted settings. Interviewees cited rigid project logframes and pre-defined calls for proposals as key hindrances preventing responsiveness to community needs, with the latter being a particular barrier to communities participating in project design in any meaningful way.

Interviews also revealed a lack of staff capacity to review and process the sometimes thousands of pieces of community feedback received via hotlines and other digital platforms. There was a real sense of frustration about the amount of useful information gathered – and the time communities took to provide it – that was just going to waste. In addition to those constraints, most organisations lack a culture of flexibility. Ingrained in the system is a sense that things have to be done as quickly as possible, with limited room for iteration. This means humanitarians tend to focus on delivering agreed activities and outputs, instead of reflecting on how those might need to change to meet *outcomes* – namely the higher-level goal of meeting community needs.

The structure of decision-making in organisations is also a barrier to project-level agility. Although frontline staff may want to adapt delivery to respond to what they hear from communities, they have limited authority to act, being hindered by the long chains of decision-making that run from them, through the management layers of their organisation, and up to the donor. The chain is even longer if feedback is collected by local partners who have to channel it through an INGO intermediary first. Interviews revealed a lack of knowledge among project staff on what the chain of decision-making looked like in their organisations and who would need to be involved to create change. These bottlenecks are compounded by the fact that most AAP staff and functions are rarely well integrated into programme cycle decision-making. One interviewee explained that consistent siloing makes accountability mechanisms practically redundant: 'If people want seeds instead of food, we don't have the ability to do something as "just" AAP people. We have been put in as a way of "being nice to people" or as "a favour" by controllers of power.' This sense of impotence can be even more challenging for frontline staff when they are faced not with suggestions but with complaints and protest (Aijazi, 2022). There are, however, practical shifts that donors and agencies can make to improve responsiveness to community inputs.

 **If people want seeds instead of food, we don't have the ability to do something as 'just' AAP people. We have been put in as a way of 'being nice to people' or as 'a favour' by controllers of power.** 

Programme director, key informant interview, 2023

The systems and processes needed to be accountable to crisis-affected communities are strongly linked to those required to engage in adaptive management and adaptive delivery processes (Obrecht, 2019; Barnes and Lonsdale, 2023). Leadership-level momentum is required to restructure decision-making processes and actively build flexibility to maximise the use of community feedback into processes, budgets and programming. To enable agencies to be adaptive – as well as to improve agility and enhance organisational comfort with iteration and change – alterations

are needed across multiple areas, including human resources processes, internal management systems, and communication with essential support services like logistics providers and suppliers (Carrier, 2020). There are organisations beginning to work in this more responsive manner. For example, the World Food Programme (WFP) is undergoing a review process to explore what linking community feedback with adaptiveness might mean for them in their ADAPT programme. They have also experimented with holding back funds from initial food delivery to respond to community appeals after the primary distribution, raising the difficult temporal trade-off of being responsive versus feeding the most people as soon as possible. Although not designed explicitly to focus on AAP, the IRC and partners' ongoing Re:Build programme provides some useful learning on implementing an adaptive management approach in displacement, including reflections on the importance of leadership support, listening to frontline staff, and having clear, decentralised decision-making processes (Dempster and Herbert, 2023).

Alongside adaptive programming and management structures, humanitarians require more flexible funding from donors. Yet donors are generally better at incentivising community-engagement considerations within proposals and reporting requirements, as exemplified by USAID/BHA (BHA, 2023), than at providing flexibility in their funding (Featherstone, 2023). The amount of flexible funding in the system is increasing but it has not met Grand Bargain commitments and is unequally applied to different partners (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2023). Although still not the default funding strategy for most donors, some governments – notably Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden – have emerged as leaders in this area and provided a larger amount of flexibility in their grants.¹³

Flexibility is not just about the funding but is also about donors and agencies having conversations at the right times to agree to shifts in approaches and processes.

Increases in flexible funding have been called for by agencies for many years now, but progress on this remains hindered by two main issues. The first is the restrictions imposed by domestic politics, with administrators calling for due diligence and tax payers concerned about how their money is being spent abroad. The second issue is that donors have not seen sufficient evidence that providing flexibility leads to better and more responsive assistance for communities (Featherstone, 2023; Willitts-King and Metcalf-Hough, 2021). Part of the challenge is that although some donors provide more flexible funding, the amount received by individual agencies as a proportion of their overall funding generally does not provide the critical mass needed to shift their internal systems to the extent required to meaningfully support adaptive programming approaches. There is also a tension between the systems needed to maximise the adaptiveness offered by flexible funding and those required to meet and report to the standards of more restrictive donors. Importantly, when flexible funding is provided to INGOs, it is not usually passed on to local partners (ALNAP, 2022a) – which inhibits adaptive delivery. Flexibility, however, is not just about the funding but also about donors and agencies having conversations at the right times to agree to shifts in approaches and processes. ALNAP's last SOHS report echoed previous findings in adaptive management research that several donors were open

to shifting project plans, but agencies were unaware they had to power to ask for alterations (ALNAP, 2022a; Obrecht 2018).

To be accountable to community inputs, agencies need to be more responsive to feedback by working in adaptive and flexible ways. Agencies can make internal shifts to create adaptive management systems and processes, while donors can support them with both flexible funding and flexible project agreements including built-in opportunities for changing plans throughout the contract period. These pieces need to come together for meaningful change to happen; a critical mass of flexible funding is required to incentivise agencies to invest in internal system changes, which in turn are needed in order to work more flexibly and facilitate responsiveness to changing community needs.

Key recommendations for progress

- Humanitarian leaders should **adopt adaptive management and programming approaches that focus on achieving outcomes identified by communities** rather than sticking rigidly to proposal activities and outputs.
- Donors should **support more flexible, outcome-orientated approaches to grant management** for local and international agencies, to enable the latter's use of adaptive programming that is people-responsive.

What this might look like: Examples and resources

Building adaptability into proposal designs, budgets and project plans with regular reflection points and resources to support changes, as conducted by the IRC and partners in the Re:Build project.

- [Dempster H and Herbert N \(2023\) Adaptive management in refugee programming: Lessons from Re:Build.](#)

Supporting adaptive delivery that can respond to changing needs by providing more decision-making power to frontline staff on implementation, as explored by Oxfam in Myanmar.

- [Barnes K and Lonsdale J \(2023\) Celebrating adaptive delivery: A view from the frontline in Myanmar.](#)

Changing human resources processes, internal management systems, and communication with essential support services – like logistics providers and suppliers – in order to improve agility and enhance organisational comfort with iteration and change.

- [Carrier M \(2020\) 'Agile' or 'adaptive' management: Implementing aid projects in complex environments.](#)
- [Obrecht A \(2019\) Shifting mindsets: Creating a more flexible humanitarian response.](#)

Donors and leaders in agencies creating incentive structures for evidence-based changes in programming and clear guidance on the amount of evidence and

level of information required to make changes.

- [Hernandez K, Ramalingam B and Wild L \(2019\) Towards evidence-informed adaptive management: A roadmap for development and humanitarian organisations.](#)

Providing more flexible funding to partners to enable projects to shift and adapt to changing needs, as demonstrated by Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden. This should also be considered in relation to local partners, to allow flexibility throughout the funding chain.

- [Featherstone A \(2023\) Supporting donors' responsibility for greater accountability to people in crisis: A review of donor AAP commitments, requirements and recommendations.](#)
- [Willitts-King B and Metcalfe-Hough V \(2021\) 'Improving quality humanitarian funding through the Grand Bargain 2.0'.](#)

3.2. Shifts in the external context threaten the system's accountability

On top of those internal structural challenges discussed in [Section 3.1](#), recent years have seen big shifts in the external context for humanitarian crises – in terms of crisis type and financing – that have strong implications for AAP. The majority of crises are now of a protracted nature (ALNAP, 2022a) and the effects of climate change mean people are increasingly threatened by more frequent and less predictable shocks (de Geoffroy et al., 2021). These changes are shifting the concerns of crisis-affected people away from short-term basic needs support and towards longer-term aspirations and resilience. Those altered patterns of needs are raising big questions for humanitarian leadership about the type of assistance agencies provide, but also on their role in human rights, advocacy and national politics. The changed financing landscape is also forcing reflection. Although there is more money in the system than ever before, it is being outstripped by the rise in needs. There are also high variations in funding for different contexts, making it particularly difficult to meet needs in protracted and 'forgotten' crises (Martin, Wight and Bunce, 2023). This is forcing humanitarian leadership to make tough targeting decisions and to consider whether and how people affected by crisis should have a say in those decisions.

3.2.1. Effective engagement with longer-term partners and accountability structures can help meet community needs during protracted crises and displacement

The increasingly protracted nature of humanitarian crisis is a growing challenge for meaningful accountability to communities. In 2022, 83% of people in need of humanitarian assistance were living in situations of protracted crisis (Development Initiatives, 2023). As qualitative research for the 2022 SOHS report demonstrated, people living in such contexts have needs that go beyond life-saving requirements of food, shelter and water. After years of living with conflict and displacement, their priorities tend to centre around securing education, permanent housing, employment opportunities and other longer-term aspirations (ALNAP, 2022a). People living in

cyclical or protracted crises are also increasingly concerned about their resilience to future shocks, including the effects of climate change. Yet humanitarian agencies and donors can be reluctant to provide what they see as being within the remit of development actors. If humanitarian actors stick to a narrow, 'basic-needs' definition of their remit, they are not being responsive to the expressed needs of these crisis-affected people, thus limiting their ability to be meaningfully accountable.

The gaps between what humanitarian actors provide and the priorities of people experiencing protracted crises are particularly stark when working with refugees in long-term displacement and internally displaced people (IASC, 2023b). The latest SOHS report indicates that the humanitarian system is quite good at doing what it was set up to do: provide rapid, basic-needs assistance in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. It is less good at providing for longer-term needs of people who are displaced and want to rebuild their lives. Indeed, evidence from the 2022 SOHS survey indicates that the aforementioned positive correlation, discussed in [Box 2](#), between community engagement and aid satisfaction breaks down in the case of refugee communities; they have more time and structures for engaging with agencies but are not receiving the longer-term, more holistic support that they require to live dignified and fulfilling lives. As one internally displaced person in DRC explained, 'You see it's difficult to continue in this life, it's not a desirable life and it's not a life in which we can recover from the crisis' (ALNAP, 2022a).

If humanitarian actors stick to a narrow, 'basic-needs' definition of their remit, they are not being responsive to the expressed needs of these crisis-affected people.

These challenges strike at the very definition of what humanitarian action is and what it is expected to achieve and have prompted a range of different reactions across agencies and donors. Some humanitarian organisations, particularly those that are well placed to be multi-mandated, are beginning to explore different approaches to addressing longer-term needs, from broadening their own remits, to linking more strongly to internal development objectives; and from connecting more effectively with longer-term development actors and local institutions, to supporting community empowerment to secure their own longer-term rights.

One approach is for organisations to explore expanding their own remit beyond the provision of life-saving assistance. For example, Mercy Corps (n.d.) has developed resilience as one of their key focus areas applied to a range of sectors, and the Zurich Flood Resistance Alliance makes a collaborative effort to engage communities in resilience planning for the effects of climate change. Although some government donors have been reluctant to spend humanitarian funding on these longer-terms concerns, arguing that – particularly in periods of scarce funding – that portfolio should be covered by development budgets, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has merged its humanitarian and development work in an effort to adopt a more holistic approach to meeting community needs in different contexts.¹⁴

A second approach is for organisations to largely maintain their narrower humanitarian remit, while seeking better connections across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus to help bridge the gap in fulfilling the needs of people affected by crisis. To date there has been quite limited progress on making nexus approaches work, but the disappointing statistics on community satisfaction in protracted settings could be a catalyst for improvement – as a tangible example of the status quo in the absence of more joined-up ways of working (ALNAP, 2023; 2022a). Some of these connecting actions could be relatively straightforward. For example, the humanitarian system could be better at sharing its wealth of data on community needs and priorities – which fall outside of life-saving goods and services – with development actors or local government and service providers. Our literature review and discussions with key informants did not, however, identify strong examples of organisations already successfully connecting AAP information on longer-term need with development actors, or even with development arms within their own dual-mandate organisations.

There are some examples, however, of humanitarians showing their ability to work with local governments or longer-term institutions like the World Bank to provide more joined-up support to people affected by cyclical or protracted crises. For example, increasingly, humanitarians are working more closely with national social-protection systems, helping to provide continuity for communities beyond the initial few months’ humanitarian assistance (Seferis and Harvey, 2022). While these linking and supporting opportunities can be particularly challenging in conflicts, where institutions and trust between governments and citizens may be damaged (ICRC, n.d.), cooperation with pre-existing, in-country social-protection infrastructure has been possible even in conflict-affected Yemen (Smith, 2021). To engage effectively with longer-term institutions, humanitarians will need to engage more in understanding the political economy of countries and their people – how governments operate, the information available, and processes accessible to different elements of the population, with an eye to potential areas of exclusion for particular groups of crisis-affected people.

A third approach to tackling longer-term needs is for humanitarian actors to give indirect support, by enabling crisis-affected communities to demand their rights from duty-bearers through social accountability processes. Such approaches support rights-holders (in the typical model this would be citizens) to hold duty-bearers (typically governments and related service providers) to account for providing their rights – as outlined in laws or human rights treaties – to, for example, health care, clean water, education and housing (Fox, 2015). Where humanitarian agencies take on functions traditionally provided by the government – such as working through government social-protection structures – they sometimes engage with crisis-affected citizens in social-accountability relationships. For example, when UNICEF temporarily took over the Community Welfare Fund in Yemen, it inherited social-accountability structures designed by the World Bank to support state–community engagement (Seferis and Harvey, 2022).

Other agencies are actively supporting crisis-affected people to engage with government structures to access their rights. For example, Mercy Corps (2018) has developed the CATALYSE approach to community mobilisation, which engages

with empowerment and explores links to broader local development processes, encouraging the adaptation of their standard CATALYSE toolkit to different socio-political contexts. Meanwhile, the IFRC (2018) has made the rights and agency of crisis-affected communities a foundational component of their latest strategy. There are examples of this being done well even in tricky refugee contexts, where the politically hairy question of durable solutions arises. In Uganda, the government and UNHCR have worked together to engage refugees in decision-making via the Refugee Engagement Forum (Trân and Deleu, 2021), which comprises elected refugee representatives tasked with advocating for the refugee community throughout Uganda. It is less clear, however, how such a structure could function in countries where the government is more hostile towards the refugee population; for example, for the Rohingya in Bangladesh. In these settings, humanitarians may have to leave their comfort zone and engage more actively in advocacy. For example, in their joint work, the UNHCR and WFP (n.d.) are increasingly encouraging host governments to consider refugees as valuable contributors rather than a burden on their system. Meanwhile, Legal Action World Wide (2023) has made resources available advising humanitarians on how to support the rights of the Rohingya.

Despite these positive examples, empowerment and rights work remain primarily the more natural domain of development actors. As one practitioner put it: 'humanitarians are allergic to politics, but by not engaging they need to think what it means for the government to be a duty bearer and issues of rights violation, access and equity to assistance.' Some humanitarian agencies question whether it is their role to build the power of crisis-affected communities and what that means for the ability of humanitarians to operate in those contexts (Brown et al., 2014). Becoming more politically engaged may feel at odds with humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence but, as one interviewee put it, for people affected by crisis in protracted settings, 'there is no humanitarian solution'.

Making better connections across the humanitarian–development remits – and being willing to challenge power holders on communities' behalf – may be the only way to be accountable to communities when humanitarian assistance alone cannot fulfil their needs.

Yet to make progress on accountability in situations of protracted crisis, it is increasingly necessary for humanitarians to recognise and understand political processes more proactively. For these communities, the distinctions between humanitarian and development remits are largely artificial and redundant. Making better connections across the humanitarian–development remits – and being willing to challenge power holders on communities' behalf – may be the only way to be accountable to communities when humanitarian assistance alone cannot fulfil their needs.

Key recommendations for progress

- Operational agencies should form better **links with those addressing longer-term services** – including development actors, local government institutions and local civil society – to **facilitate joint programming and information sharing**.
- Humanitarian leaders should **support their organisational and staff engagement with more challenging issues of politics and advocacy**, to influence local duty-bearers and host-governments to help secure the rights of people affected by crisis.

What this might look like: Examples and resources

Linking short-term humanitarian support to longer-term institutions to support sustainability, such as connecting with government social protection systems. This happened within multiple contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- [Smith G \(2021\) Overcoming barriers to coordinating across social protection and humanitarian assistance: Building on promising practices social protection approaches to COVID-19 expert advice service \(SPACE\).](#)
- [Seferis L and Harvey P \(2022\) Accountability in crises: Connecting evidence from humanitarian and social protection approaches to social assistance.](#)

Supporting the political empowerment of communities and their ability to advocate for their own needs and rights to local institutions (often referred to as social accountability approaches). This was demonstrated by Mercy Corps and People in Need.

- [Mercy Corps \(2018\) CATALYSE: Communities acting together.](#)
- [People in Need \(2022\) Applying a human-rights based approach to development and humanitarian programming.](#)

Supporting connections between refugees and host governments in discussion fora where needs can be expressed directly to local governance institutions, such as the Refugee Engagement Forum in Uganda.

- [Trân D and Deleu M \(2021\) Refugee engagement forum in Uganda: Good practice study.](#)

Advocating to governments on the rights of refugees and supporting legal claims to access longer-term needs and institutional justice mechanisms.

- [NRC \(n.d.\) 'Housing, land and property \(HLP\) rights'.](#)
- [Legal Action World Wide \(2023\) Guide on international justice mechanisms for humanitarian actors working with the Rohingya.](#)

3.2.2. Participation can support prioritisation and maximise scarce resources

Although there is more funding in the system now than ever before, with international humanitarian assistance totalling USD 46.9 billion in 2022, according to the 2023 Global Humanitarian Assistance report,¹⁵ this is not enough to keep pace with skyrocketing needs that grew by a third in 2022 (Development Initiatives, 2023). Newer crises – like the war in Ukraine and the growing incidence of climate-related disasters – are adding to the already large numbers of people in need living in protracted conflict and displacement (OCHA, 2022). Not only are funds inadequate as a whole, but they are also unevenly directed. The 2022 SOHS reported that the gap between the most- and least-funded appeals was getting wider, with a 172-percentage-point coverage gap.¹⁶ This was before the war in Ukraine occurred, which has attracted large amounts of funding and overshadowed other, slower-onset crises, like hunger in east Africa. As a result of these shifts, prioritisation of a scarce resource base is one of the key policy issues of the day, with donors and agencies having to make tough choices over where and who gets assistance. For example, ICRC (n.d. b) announced difficult cuts to locations and staffing earlier this year and the WFP (n.d.) has been forced to cut back assistance in multiple places of high needs, including Bangladesh, Syria and Haiti.

This financial situation raises two important issues for AAP. First, the amount of funding directed towards accountability and participation activities has typically been low and could face further cuts. Despite efforts by some actors to make the case that communication is a life-saving activity (CDAC, 2023), funding for community engagement and accountability has been inadequate and inconsistent (IFRC, 2023). Although the rhetoric of many humanitarian leaders mentions putting people at the centre, in practice AAP practices are generally seen as an ‘add-on’ or something ‘nice to have’ rather than an essential component of humanitarian response. Both donor and practitioner interviewees spoke about instances where budget lines for AAP and the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse had been cut by the time projects made it through to contracting stage – sometimes even before going to donor review, as agencies make prioritisation decisions to meet budget ceilings.



These cuts not only undermine the system’s rhetorical commitments to AAP, but they also fail to seize a useful opportunity to deepen the meaningfulness of community participation and improve relations between agencies and the people they serve by forging difficult conversations about resource prioritisation together. In a situation of scarcity, AAP could fall further down the list of funding priorities. Yet rather than scarcity being a threat to AAP, the need to prioritise could be a key opportunity to use accountability mechanisms for the benefit of the system. As outlined in [Box 2](#), there is growing evidence that effective AAP has positive effects on a range of humanitarian performance measures, including relevance, quality and sufficiency of assistance. Involving communities in prioritisation decisions could, therefore, help make the most of scarce funding by rendering it more relevant to the people it reaches.

A greater role for crisis-affected people in targeting and prioritisation decisions could be valuable for humanitarian action. First, it is becoming increasingly clear that people affected by crisis can have very different opinions about who should receive aid than decision-makers, who are far removed from the realities of communities.

Although the recently revamped Joint and Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF, n.d.) was designed to consider crisis-affected people's holistic needs across sectors, the assessments that it incorporates still largely use the logic of the system that focuses on *equity* – targeting those most in need using what the system considers to be 'objective' measures of vulnerability. Yet, people affected by crisis can have quite different ideas on who should be targeted within their community. The latest SOHS report found that many aid recipients prefer to share assistance equally across different members of the community and may have different perspectives on who is the most deserving among them (ALNAP 2022a). By insisting on sticking to aid providers' targeting decisions from needs assessments, humanitarians can therefore have negative effects on social cohesion among community members.

Second, good communication structures are important for explaining reductions in assistance to communities. In a situation of limited resources, growing case loads and multiple different priorities, humanitarians have to make difficult choices that will leave some needs or preferences unmet. Lack of transparency in those decisions and the way they are communicated can be detrimental to relationships between communities and providers of assistance (Betts et al., 2018), yet interviewees provided examples where strong relationships between communities and frontline staff helped them retain legitimacy when the assistance provided was less than previously indicated.

Although carrying out effective participatory targeting in crises can be challenging, there are examples of agencies trying to grapple with those complexities even in the most politically difficult situations. For example, the WFP has been using a community-based targeting approach in Afghanistan that tries to balance existing local power dynamics by engaging marginalised groups, including women, and allows some flexibility in its standard targeting criteria to allow communities to determine who is most deserving of assistance (PHAP, 2023). However, to avoid exacerbation of existing power structures and exclusion, agencies need to invest time into gaining a more in-depth understanding of community power and social structures, underscoring the importance of the approaches discussed in [Section 3.1.1](#). Although the WFP's participatory targeting was partly the child of necessity due to the lack of official data available in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, it has allowed a more socially driven approach to prioritisation to emerge. Given the growing evidence of both the intrinsic and instrumental positive effects of engaging people affected by crisis in decision-making, proactive adoption of participatory approaches as a principle would be useful to strengthen more socially conscious targeting across the sector.

 **There is no right answer, you're always going to be wrong. [...] It will be messy – aggregating individual preferences, inherently, will lose some of those preferences.** 

AAP programme specialist, key informant interview, 2023

Agencies should be aware that prioritisation in situations of scarcity necessitates some difficult decisions for those socially embedded in communities. Although difficult for donors and agencies, these actors do not experience the effects of prioritisation decisions directly. This is not the case for people affected by crisis. Feeding community voices into prioritisation decisions can make the humanitarian system more accountable, but it also pushes some of the burden of difficult decisions onto community members. They will be socially embedded in the consequences of their decisions and known to the people who miss out. As one accountability practitioner explained about making participatory prioritisation choices: 'There is no right answer, you're always going to be wrong. If anyone thinks they've cracked the code, they've missed the ballgame. It will be messy – aggregating individual preferences, inherently, will lose some of those preferences.' Although the agency of communities in these decisions will be important to support the relevance of increasingly scarce assistance, there are some 'do no harm' considerations to keep in mind.

As the humanitarian system is forced to contend with issues of prioritisation, leaders making those decisions in donor organisations and operational agencies should consider whether the meaningful participation of communities in those choices could support improved relevance and targeting of increasingly scarce assistance. As they do so, ethics and community cohesion should be part of those considerations.

Key recommendations for progress

- Donors and operational agencies should consider how to **more effectively and ethically engage the voices of crisis-affected people in making prioritisation decisions** to maximise the utility of scarce resources and avoid exacerbating community tensions.
- Humanitarians should consider how to **balance their measures of need and vulnerability with community perspectives** of what is necessary, fair and legitimate in targeting decisions.

What this might look like: Examples and resources

Engaging in forms of community-based targeting that ensure the group reflects different community members, including marginalised people, avoids elite capture and is an approach that is acceptable to the community. This is the approach used in many cash-based programmes.

- [Crew R \(2023\) 'Community-based targeting: The best worst thing for limited humanitarian resources'](#).
- [McCord A \(2017\) Community-based targeting in the social protection sector.](#)

Allowing people affected by crisis the opportunity to deviate from strict agency vulnerability indicators to determine who should receive aid in their community, as practised by the WFP in Afghanistan.

- [PHAP \(2023\) HNPW 2023 - Accountability to Affected Populations \(AAP\): Every contact counts: Intentional accountability through the programme cycle.](#)

3.3. Unequal power restricts accountability

Accountability is ultimately about power. Although humanitarian actors have tended to shy away from discussions of power and politics, characterising them as ‘entangled’ or ‘too difficult’, power is at the heart of accountable relationships and cannot be ignored when considering accountability of humanitarian agencies to people affected by crisis. These challenges can seem entrenched to the extent of being insurmountable, but some agencies are making progress – and there is more to be achieved by an increased focus across the system on addressing power imbalances. The key power issues holding progress in AAP back is the power differential between communities and providers of humanitarian assistance – assistance that is still often viewed as a gift rather than a right. This is overlaid by an international system that does not always view people affected by crisis as active agents with the ability to engage in decision-making. There are also questions over whether a more locally led humanitarian system might produce structures of accountability that differ from the preferences of the international system.

These are not easy topics, but humanitarians will need to more meaningfully engage with them and build on emerging promising practice to enable progress on accountability. As one interviewee challenged, ‘the AAP community is mature enough that it’s time to take a critical review of power structures of the system that upholds the status quo so we can move beyond superficially looking at accountability on the surface level.’

3.3.1. Improved incentives for accountability are important in the absence of community power to sanction humanitarian actors

In a truly accountable relationship, the rights-holder can sanction the duty-bearer if they fail to do their job effectively or to be responsive to their recommendations and complaints (Fox, 2015). In democracies, this might function through elections, where citizens have the ability to throw the government out of office. But this accountable relationship breaks down in the humanitarian sector because of unequal power relations and the self-selecting nature of agency accountability; there is no sanctioning mechanism to force agencies to respond and communities are not meaningfully empowered to criticise agencies – with aid still representing a gift more than a right.

A key piece of the traditional accountability puzzle is missing: there is no sanctioning mechanism to hold agencies to account if they underperform or do harm. The idea to create a humanitarian ombuds as an independent, system-wide sanctioning mechanism has been perennially discussed since it originated in the late 1990s, with a more recent Dutch-funded review of its potential in 2018 (Hilhorst et al., 2018). The idea has struggled to gain traction due to limited buy-in from international actors, who would be agreeing to open themselves to external scrutiny, as well as questions of how legitimate and accessible an international, top-down solution would be to people affected by crisis (Mitchell and Doane, 1999; Hilhorst et al., 2018)). Similar criticisms have been levied at previous ERC, Mark Lowcock’s, suggestion to create an Independent Commission of Voices in Crisis, which envisaged financial incentives to encourage accountable behaviour; some saw this as a top-down solution and queried

its ability to represent the diversity of people affected by crisis (CDAC, 2021; Hilhorst, 2021). The debates seem to have stalled for the time being, with more recent efforts to tackle misconduct moving away from the idea of an international body to instead explore connections with local structures, as discussed further below.

In the absence of a sanctioning mechanism, efforts to encourage accountability mainly rely on voluntary adherence to standards or 'naming and shaming' through transparency mechanisms. In terms of transparency, critical media sources like the New Humanitarian have played a strong role in calling out abuses in the system (for example, Mednick and Craze, 2022), while the Loop platform was recently created as an independent online public mechanism for providing feedback to humanitarian agencies (Ross, 2022). Yet, both approaches have their limitations. As a transparency mechanism, the media has been key for highlighting scandals related to corruption and failures in the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse – importantly raising the need for agencies to be more actively accountable for misconduct – but has had less of an impact on more 'mundane' unaccountable practices, like inaction and tokenistic community engagement. This is a particular missed opportunity, because community engagement – if conducted effectively – could create an environment of trust and transparency that would make it both harder for staff to engage in misconduct and quicker to identify when it does occur. As one interviewee noted on these less newsworthy practices, 'The participation revolution is not in the headlines. It won't be reported that people didn't set up a feedback mechanism.' Meanwhile, few international agencies have invested in the Loop process, preferring to rely on their own internal systems for feedback. Although Loop's staff have been able to follow up on some serious misconduct reports, the voluntary nature of the platform limits its ability to provoke responsiveness to feedback and complaints by external agencies (Ross, 2022).

In the absence of a sanctioning mechanism, efforts to encourage accountability mainly rely on voluntary adherence to standards or 'naming and shaming' through transparency mechanisms.

In terms of voluntary commitments, the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability has gained traction since its advent in 2014 as a means of encouraging quality and accountability. As noted in [Box 2](#), the standard was drafted largely from a top-down perspective, but the ongoing participatory revision process offers more scope for local perspectives to influence the standard that the system will use to assess itself. However, despite some consideration of donors integrating the standard into their due diligence requirements, adherence to the standard remains voluntary. The Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative offers the services of an independent audit for organisations seeking to certify or verify how well they are doing against the CHS, but there are costs associated with these services. As such, the only means to assess and demonstrate compliance available for many organisations – particularly local and national NGOs – is self-assessment (HERE Geneva, 2023). Although there is value in having common commitments that agencies have a moral responsibility to fulfil, beyond self-selection and public pressure, the question of whether agencies listen and take action on complaints is really still just up to them.



The traditional accountability relationship is further undermined by the fact there is no social contract committing humanitarian agencies to provide assistance as a right, or to respond to community perspectives on it (Darcy, 2013). As a result, humanitarian assistance is often seen as a 'gift' for people affected by crisis, with the latter's role limited to that of grateful recipient (GTS, 2022). As one practitioner reported, 'they'd rather not rock the boat even if assistance is unclear or they have issues with it – they see it as better than nothing.' To engage in accountability processes, members of communities need to be able to give their opinions and perspectives to the agencies providing assistance. This process assumes a certain level of empowerment of those communities. As noted in the introduction to this paper, some people affected by crisis have made their dissatisfaction with humanitarian assistance known through acts of resistance against agencies, but other individuals may have their ability to speak up limited by their lived experience of vulnerability, fear of repressive governments or cultural norms (Lough et al., 2021). There are particular challenges for refugees, who tend to have the least power, even among other crisis-affected populations, due to their lack of citizenship rights in their host contexts (Martin et al., 2021). Such dynamics are made more difficult by the unequal power between the communities who receive aid and the agencies who have the power to choose whether or not to assist them. Community members who have felt the brunt of authority in the past may also expect the worst outcome if they make complaints.

These issues of power can seem entrenched and insurmountable. There are, however, some promising approaches emerging to help reduce the power imbalance between people affected by crisis and international agencies. Some focus on strengthening the self-policing nature of international agencies by linking more with local accountability mechanisms, and others on encouraging the agency and voice of people affected by crisis.

Working with local structures may increase the faith of crisis-affected people in accountability processes. New research on the prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment indicates that people affected by crisis do not always trust agencies to effectively investigate themselves and take action when complaints are made against their staff – which can reduce reporting of such instances and the potential for redress (CHS Alliance, forthcoming 2023; Gaboune et al., 2023). To increase the legitimacy and perceived safety of accountability processes in the eyes of survivors of abuse, organisations like Oxfam or the CHS Alliance, together with their partners, are exploring local solutions and community preferences for connecting with local accountability structures, both formal and informal, to support reporting and investigations via trusted intermediaries. While the functionality of local formal justice institutions can be lacking in some crisis contexts, other options are being explored. One example involves linking with trusted civil society actors and human rights organisations by nominating a representative to accompany agency investigations and represent the person making the complaint. This can help strengthen the accountability function by increasing external scrutiny, while also providing confidence to survivors by working with someone they trust who is unaffiliated with the organisation they are accusing.

Humanitarian agencies can adopt approaches that more actively encourage people affected by crisis to raise their suggestions and complaints with confidence. Some agencies, as discussed in [Section 3.2.1](#), are exploring approaches to strengthen

communities' sense of empowerment and agency, in order to help them hold their own governments accountable for providing for their rights. Although humanitarian assistance is not strictly speaking a right that humanitarian agencies are obligated to provide to communities – and conceiving it as so could undermine the role that states should be playing as the primary duty-bearer (Darcy, 2013) – some agencies are exploring making their role as 'moral' duty-bearers more explicit. For example, People in Need (2022) suggests applying social accountability approaches – such as the use of participatory scorecards and audits – for people affected by crisis to use to assess humanitarian agencies. These approaches tend to use structured criteria, created through participatory discussion, as a basis for what people can expect from assistance and what agencies have committed to deliver. Such a process can increase confidence and leverage for crisis-affected people because there is a 'social contract' as a foundation upon which they can base their claims.

 **I would love to have the kind of discussions we have on internal risk controls on AAP . . . we can also look at AAP and raise it up to the status it deserves.** 

Humanitarian policymaker, key informant interview, 2023

These nascent ideas are promising and represent a renewed willingness to engage with tricky issues of power. Until more progress is made, however, most of the incentives for agencies to be accountable are voluntary and self-enforced. This underscores the important role for humanitarian leadership in incentivising accountable behaviour within their agencies and among their staff through demonstrating their own commitment to accountability as a priority. Donors in particular have scope to enforce agency change through their priorities. As one humanitarian decision-maker stated, 'I would love to have the kind of discussions we have on internal risk controls on AAP . . . we can also look at AAP and raise it up to the status it deserves.' Leaders in operational agencies can also lead by example in shifting their narrative from humanitarian assistance as a gift bestowed by the international community to a service that humanitarians have taken temporary responsibility to provide, thereby helping people affected by crisis to exercise more agency in shaping assistance and providing feedback.

Key recommendations for progress

- Humanitarian leadership should **help embed a culture of accountability as paramount within their organisations** by demonstrably taking complaints and suggestions seriously and being open to external scrutiny.
- Operational agencies should **explore strategies for engaging with the empowerment of people affected by crisis**, by reducing the **conception of aid as a gift** and considering how approaches to misconduct could **better interact with local accountability entities that are trusted** by crisis-affected individuals.

What this might look like: Examples and resources

Transparently outlining the steps taken as a result of sexual misconduct charges and allowing independent scrutiny to investigate and determine appropriate responses, as Oxfam has done in response to safeguarding charges.

- [Oxfam \(n.d. b\) 'Immediate response actions: Sexual misconduct'](#).

Local civil society representatives accompanying agency investigations into complaints, to ensure that crisis-affected people are represented and supported by a trusted institution. This is being explored by Oxfam, CHS and partners.

- [Gaboune A, Mohammed A and Naapi J \(2023\) Barriers to reporting misconduct: Understanding power, intersectionality and context.](#)
- CHS Alliance (forthcoming 2023): Victim/survivor-centred approach to protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment in the aid sector: A contextualised analysis from three humanitarian settings.

Actively taking on the role of a temporary 'moral duty-bearer' in the absence of an effective state presence; encouraging communities to direct social accountability tools (such as participatory scorecards and audits) at humanitarian agencies to assess and improve performance, focusing on the ability of communities – and particularly vulnerable members within them – to articulate their views and raise their voices in supportive interactions with agency staff.

- [People in Need \(2022\) Applying a human-rights based approach to development and humanitarian programming.](#)
- Outline of different social-accountability strategies that could be considered for adaptation: [IRC \(2016\) Social accountability: Overview of approaches and case studies.](#)

3.3.2. Progress on decolonisation and localisation has implications for accountability to communities

Although localisation of humanitarian assistance will not automatically lead to improved accountability to communities, there are clear overlaps between debates on localisation and AAP. Being meaningfully accountable to communities and taking their inputs as the starting point for decision-making requires the system to trust their perspectives. Yet, colonial attitudes embedded in the system can reduce the trust that humanitarians have in crisis-affected people as active agents of change. There are also questions about what frameworks for accountability are seen as valid by local actors in different contexts and the level of comfort the current international system may have with those conceptions. As noted by one practitioner, being more accountable to the perspectives of people affected by crisis is 'not all technical, but about mindsets, identities and will to change.'

Giving decision-making power to people affected by crisis requires practical and mindset changes, some of which may be uncomfortable for international actors.

This strongly echoes debates on progress made to date on commitments to localise humanitarian action (Viswanathan, 2023). In terms of practical changes, some of the suggestions for progress made in [Section 3.1](#) emphasise a greater role for local partners, staff and volunteers in better understanding and responding to the needs of people affected by crisis. Some of the practical implications of this could mean the downsizing of international operations and staff in favour of playing a more supportive role to local structures that are closer to communities. But those practical changes are unlikely to happen without bigger shifts in attitudes and the way international humanitarian actors see their role in the system.

The other big issue related to mindsets is a continued lack of recognition of people affected by crisis as active and intelligent agents with the capacity to engage in decision-making about humanitarian assistance. This lack of agency can be further amplified by negative perceptions related to age, gender, sexual identity and disability. Indeed, some interviewees cited racism as the biggest issue holding back progress on accountability. Several interviewees also remarked upon the continued paternalistic attitude of aid practitioners, including the continued assumption that communities ‘aren’t smart enough to engage’ in decision-making. These attitudes limit meaningful accountability: a lack of integrity on the part of staff can reduce the trust communities have in humanitarians (Arias Cubas et al., 2023), and paternalism can also limit the willingness of agencies to hand decision-making power over to communities.

Discussions about these attitudes and behaviours can be difficult to have, but humanitarian leaders will need to get more comfortable grappling with these issues as calls to shift the power get louder. Although these issues of power can seem insurmountable, agencies *are* finding ways to move the needle. For example, Oxfam (n.d. c) has made tackling structural racism one of its core organisational commitments, and more approaches are explicitly recognising the role of communities as active agents – first responders – in crisis. One example of such an approach is that of the survivor- and community-led response programme, which provides individual or group micro-grants directly to communities, who conduct their own analysis of needs/ opportunities and decide how best to respond (Di Vicenz and Hallinan, 2023).

Although these issues of power can seem insurmountable, agencies *are* finding ways to move the needle.

Localisation is not synonymous with improved accountability to communities, but it does present important opportunities for increasing the use of locally appropriate accountability approaches. As cautioned in [Section 3.1.1](#), although local staff and organisations may have stronger connections with communities and contexts, their views should not replace the voices of people affected by crisis. Nevertheless, local NGOs could have a larger role in progressing accountability, by applying their contextual knowledge to existing practices, innovating with new locally appropriate approaches, and contributing to an increased sense of responsibility, which can be

induced by their proximity to communities and the longevity of their interactions after the internationals leave (Labbé, 2015). Several accountability practitioners working at the international level also cited local and national actors as those carrying out some of the most promising community engagement programming, particularly around digital access and finding ways to link with social channels for feedback. Meanwhile, at the collective level, the new humanitarian observatories aim to provide a space for a range of different types of national actors, including civil society, to influence humanitarian governance by assessing progress and sharing learning (Hilhorst, 2023). In addition to allowing local approaches to emerge, working more with local government actors to plan community engagement systems – such as the National Preparedness and Response Platform for Communication and Community Engagement in Fiji – has the potential to support scale and sustainability (CDAC and GTS, 2022).

Providing more space to local actors to drive accountability process may, however, raise some challenging questions, upon which international actors will need to reflect.

Some of the shifts described above might change the nature of the accountability being practised, because local actors across different contexts may not have the same conceptualisations of what ‘accountability to crisis-affected people’ means and what it should look like in practice, with different religious and cultural norms influencing what is seen as an appropriate response to misconduct (Holloway et al., 2020; Gaboune et al., 2023). In addition, the extent to which the international system is willing to concede its own conceptions of an accountable system is something that initiatives seeking to take a bottom-up approach – like the new OCHA Flagship Initiative – will need to consider. Different conceptions of what it means to be accountable may not necessarily be a negative thing for communities, however, as international influence has, in some cases, shifted the accountability focus of local actors away from crisis-affected people and towards top-down accountability to donors (Dhungana, 2020).

More concerning, perhaps, is whether principles of inclusion and neutrality might be threatened if local organisations – consciously or unconsciously – reinforce existing power structures, excluding marginalised groups from having a voice or accessing assistance (Seferis and Harvey, 2022). There may, therefore, still be a role for international actors to help support the inclusion of marginalised groups in accountability processes. That role might be to directly engage with communities or to indirectly support the activities of local civil society actors already championing the rights of marginalised groups. For example, refugee-led organisations are active in many displacement contexts and their proximity – both geographical and in terms of their shared experience – may make it easier for refugee communities to trust them and share more honest feedback (Getachew et al., 2022).

Questions of localisation, decolonisation and accountability are all intrinsically intertwined. Leaders in humanitarian organisations are well positioned to see these strategic linkages across the functions of their organisations. They are also well placed to drive the shifts in political will and mindset needed to recognise the knowledge and agency of people affected by crisis and to engage local partners in conversations about how to create a more accountable humanitarian system.

Key recommendations for progress

- Humanitarian leadership should **encourage self-reflection and action within their organisations, with the goal of recognising and tackling entrenched attitudes that limit respect for people affected by crisis as knowledge holders and active agents** with capacity in their own contexts.
- Donors and operational agencies should **enable a stronger role for local actors in supporting accountability to affected people**, including providing funding for and learning from local approaches and innovations.

What this might look like: Examples and resources

Recognising and seeking to shift racist and colonial attitudes throughout an organisation via a clear plan of action. This is a journey that several organisations are embarking on with various commitments and frameworks.

- Case studies and resources from the [Centre for Humanitarian Leadership \(2022\) Transformation in the aid and development sector: Decolonising aid.](#)
- [Oxfam \(n.d. c\) 'A call to action: Racial justice.'](#)
- [Start Network \(2022\) 'The anti-racist and decolonial framework.'](#)

Providing funding and decision-making power directly to communities as local first responders – as practised by Christian Aid and partners in their survivor- and community-led response approach.

- [Di Vicenz S and Hallinan E \(2023\) Letting go of control: Empowering locally led action in Ukraine.](#)

Working with local government structures to embed community engagement in disasters across a country, as demonstrated by CDAC and the government of Fiji.

- [CDAC \(2023\) 'Working with what we have': Key advocacy messages for inclusive communication and engagement in the Horn of Africa.](#)

Enabling feedback to flow to local civil society organisations, to support greater trust among people who better understand communities' lived experiences. This approach has been demonstrated by the work of refugee-led organisations.

- [Getachew A, Gitahi M, Kara A, and Ramazani U \(2022\) Refugee-led organisations in East Africa: Community perceptions in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania.](#)

Engaging with locally led humanitarian governance and learning mechanisms, such as the Humanitarian Observatories.

- [Hilhorst D \(2023\) 'Humanitarian observatories: Seeking change from below.'](#)

The three challenge areas discussed in this section are not necessarily easy to address, but they are important to tackle if the system is going to make meaningful progress on

accountability and to realise the potential of the current wave of high-level attention. Among each of these challenges there are pockets of promising practice and potential ways forward that can be built upon. Leadership initiative from both donors and operational agencies is required to join the dots between these different challenges and to put in place the changes in programming, processes, strategy, resourcing and mindset required to equip their organisations to be accountable to people affected by crisis. Dialogue and collaboration between system-level initiatives and individual local, national and international organisations are also needed on these essential issues, to embed accountability across the broader humanitarian system.

4. What do we still need to know? Evidence and learning gaps

The above discussion outlines core challenges and essential issues that the humanitarian system must grapple with in order to progress humanitarian accountability. Yet, there are still some remaining questions and learning gaps to be filled. The recommendations for progress outline several promising examples that can be built upon, yet organisations are still learning how to make some of these shifts effectively and in different contexts. For the humanitarian system to make further progress on accountability, there are some evidence and learning gaps to fill – which organisations can contribute to as they work on the issues outlined in this paper. The various evidence and learning gaps identified through the research carried out for this paper relate either to community engagement in humanitarian processes or to the operations of humanitarian donors and agencies. These are reviewed in turn below.

Community engagement in humanitarian processes:

- **Questions remain about what people affected by crisis – in their diversity – believe an accountable system should look like, how it should function, whose voices get represented, and what outcomes are measured.** Humanitarians tend to understand accountability – and to measure its progress and impact – from the perspective of the international level of the system; yet people affected by crisis may view accountability and its purpose in different ways. Those views are unlikely to be homogenous across communities and contexts, but exploring these perspectives is a useful consideration when designing both individual and collective accountability processes. Meaningful consultations with communities on these issues will be essential for organisations and high-level initiatives seeking to create effective accountability structures that are viewed as legitimate by people affected by crisis. Documenting and sharing organisational lessons on community consultation could also help collective learning.
- **There are opportunities to more deeply explore how humanitarians can recognise and connect with existing local accountability mechanisms, which could be useful for capturing more honest feedback and complaints.** Organisations tend to create new structures for AAP according to organisational standard operating procedures, rather than considering the mechanisms that communities already use for communication and accountability, which fall outside these ‘invited spaces’. Such channels may be both more contextually appropriate and more trusted by communities. They also might involve expressions of accountability that do not play by agencies’ rules, such as protests and demonstrations, but which warrant attention as valid expressions of dissatisfaction. As organisations engage more with local processes, there could be useful opportunities to document these

structures and also to understand where system engagement is appropriate versus where it may be encroaching on previously 'safe spaces' for dialogue.

- Current prioritisation discussions present an opportunity for learning on how agencies can support more effective and more ethical participation in resource allocation and targeting decisions. Meaningful participation in decision-making by people affected by crisis, both at the outset and throughout a project, has been an area of consistent challenge for humanitarians. Yet community inputs into current prioritisation decisions have the potential to make scarce assistance more relevant and more legitimately targeted in their eyes. As agencies seek to engage in these processes, there may be useful opportunities to learn about how to practise more meaningful participation; about how participation affects agencies' project choices compared to those they would have made based on existing data; and about both the benefits and the risks involved for socially embedded actors who have to stay and live with the consequences of their decisions.

Operations of humanitarian donors and agencies:

- **More evidence is needed to document the processes and systems required to join the dots between AAP processes, flexible funding, and adaptive programming to respond to community requests.** Flexible funding has often been discussed as the key ingredient to making assistance relevant and responsive. Yet, its application is hindered both by the relatively limited amount of unearmarked funding available and by the lack of systems to maximise that potential for responsive programming based on community needs. Evidence that links community-responsive programme changes directly to the provision of flexible funding will be important for increasing the confidence of donor agencies and domestic administrations to further invest in flexibility.
- **Responsiveness may also be helped by a clearer map of which actors and institutions are involved in responding to community requests in a timely manner.** Multiple actors are involved in signing off humanitarian programmes and in making changes to previously agreed plans. To create more efficient structures that ensure timely response to community inputs, organisations need a clearer picture of the political economy that links decision-making with practical action within their organisation and with the external actors with whom they engage. For example, this may need to take into account frontline staff, local government, logisticians and suppliers. Although these maps are likely to differ by agency, context, crisis type and the type of community input, having a clearer template of what it takes to create change and make decisions could act as a starting point for further tailoring.
- **The system also needs more good practice examples of how the humanitarian system can connect with longer-term actors in different political environments, to ensure the holistic needs of crisis-affected communities are better served.** There are some areas of promising practice outlined in this paper, but more detailed learning would be useful – particularly to cover a wider range of actors and approaches, such as linking more with government institutions, sharing information and remits with development actors, and exploring social accountability approaches with local rights-based actors to empower communities. A deeper exploration of these different ways of working is also likely to provide useful

learning on how humanitarian actors can balance humanitarian principles while sensitively engaging in questions of politics, power and advocacy – particularly in contexts of protracted displacement or climate vulnerability, where issues of intergenerational accountability may arise.

Gathering evidence of impact:

- Across the areas for learning identified above, it will be important to capture evidence of the effects of these altered practices on outcomes for crisis-affected communities. As outlined in [Box 2](#), there is growing evidence that the use of effective accountability processes has positive effects on the dignity of crisis-affected people and on various measures that the humanitarian system uses to assess itself, including on relevance, timeliness and sufficiency. However, stronger evidence of the impact of different accountability approaches on the outcomes for crisis-affected communities will be important to ensure that the most useful approaches are adopted in the future and to provide confidence to decision-makers to continue investing in embedding accountability throughout the system. The outcomes that are measured, however, should ideally be informed by what people affected by crisis *themselves* value from humanitarian assistance.

As organisations seek to answer these questions, and as high-level initiatives to improve accountability develop, there is a need to document and share the lessons and outcomes – both successes and challenges – with the rest of the system to support collective progress. As noted in [Section 3.3.2](#), it is also important that local and national actors are recognised as key learning partners and sources of knowledge throughout these processes.

5. Conclusion: Tackling core challenges to embed accountability throughout the humanitarian system

Opportunities to improve accountability to people affected by crisis – currently afforded by growing high-level attention and increasing evidence of its effectiveness – will not be realised unless the key challenges outlined in this paper are addressed head-on by humanitarian leaders. Those in leadership positions have an essential role to play in creating the enabling structures for meaningful accountability, by supporting structural changes towards a demand-led system, rising to new challenges in a changing context, and seeking to address power imbalances.

The key recommendations this paper offers for progressing those areas of challenge are listed in [Table 3](#), along with tangible examples of what this might look like for organisations. As humanitarians seek to address these challenges, it will be important to document and share learning on key areas, as indicated in [Section 4](#), to continue to progress the system's understanding of effective accountability to people affected by crisis. Several of those topics relate to the interdependencies between accountability and other key sticking points for the system, including localisation and the HDP nexus, which crosscut the different issue areas and ways forward identified in this paper. It will be useful for actors and initiatives seeking to drive change in each of these areas to connect effectively *across* them to ensure the results of their efforts are positive for people affected by crisis. After all – those people do not live in the thematic silos within which the international system chooses to organise itself.

Meaningful engagement by humanitarian leadership on the challenges and recommendations outlined in this paper represents an opportunity for getting accountability right and for reversing the growing distrust and disengagement expressed by many crisis-affected communities towards the humanitarian system. Tackling some of these seemingly difficult issues head-on, by building on tangible examples of promising practice, can help move accountability to people affected by crisis from a frustrating, longstanding and increasingly technical sticking point to a functional core foundation that is embedded throughout the system's structures, processes, and mindsets.

Table 3: Summary of challenges, issues for engagement and key recommendations, with examples and resources

Core challenges	Essential issues for engagement	Key recommendations for progress
<p>Embedded skills, structures and incentives perpetuate a supply-driven system</p>	<p>Soft skills and social analysis can support better understanding of and connection with communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donor and agency leadership should invest more in the time, skills, approaches and partnerships that support deeper social and contextual understanding of communities and marginalised groups within them • Operational agencies should recognise the role of frontline staff, volunteers and local partners in gathering ad hoc community feedback through their daily interactions, and develop processes to include these inputs in programme decision-making
	<p>What this might look like: Examples and resources</p> <p>Prioritising time for meaningful community discussions in workplans and incentivising positive AAP practices in hiring and performance appraisals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IRC (2019) A guide for client responsive staff management <p>Partnering with or hiring staff who can engage in social and political analysis to understand the structure, communication preferences and power dynamics of communities and contexts. For example, by connecting with anthropologists to understand community responses to Ebola through the Ebola Response Anthropology Platform in DRC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elhra (2023) Connecting anthropologists with local teams for context-specific humanitarian response • ICRC (2019) Accountability to affected people institutional framework • UNICEF initiative on social science for community engagement (SS4CE) in humanitarian action (cited in PHAP, 2023b) <p>Investing in social listening approaches to understand community perspectives voiced outside of agency channels, as explored by Rooted in Trust during the COVID-19 pandemic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Posada A, Lopez Iñigo R and Sport J (2023) Turning social listening data into action: Barriers and recommendations observed through a COVID-19 rumor response <p>Maximising the use of the tacit knowledge gained by frontline staff by supporting and valuing their learning, as explored by the IRC and Coast Foundation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IRC (2023) Empowering frontline staff to enable the participation of crisis-affected people • Haque M (2022) 'What did COAST learn from testing ALNAP's tacit learning resource?' • ALNAP (2022b) Sharing tacit knowledge for humanitarians: A resource pack • Module 3 in IFRC (2022) IFRC feedback kit <p>Providing mechanisms for frontline staff and volunteers to capture and input informal community feedback into decision-making processes. Examples include Oxfam's community perception tracker and the IFRC's feedback kit based on learning from the Ebola response in DRC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oxfam (n.d. a) 'Oxfam perception tracker' • IFRC (2022) IFRC feedback kit 	

Adaptive programming and flexible cultures can enable responsive accountability and the closure of feedback loops

- Humanitarian leaders should **adopt adaptive management and programming approaches that focus on achieving outcomes identified by communities** rather than sticking rigidly to proposal activities and outputs
- Donors should **support more flexible, outcome-orientated approaches to grant management** for local and international agencies, to enable the latter's use of adaptive programming that is people-responsive

What this might look like: Examples and resources

Building adaptability into proposal designs, budgets and project plans, with regular reflection points and resources to support changes, as conducted by the IRC and partners in the Re:Build project

- [Dempster H and Herbert N \(2023\) Adaptive management in refugee programming: Lessons from Re:Build](#)

Supporting adaptive delivery that can respond to changing needs by providing more decision-making power to frontline staff on implementation, as explored by Oxfam in Myanmar

- [Barnes K and Lonsdale J \(2023\) Celebrating adaptive delivery: A view from the frontline in Myanmar](#)

Changing human resources processes, internal management systems, and communication with essential support services – like logistics providers and suppliers – in order to improve agility and enhance organisational comfort with iteration and change

- [Carrier M \(2020\) 'Agile' or 'adaptive' management: Implementing aid projects in complex environments](#)
- [Obrecht A \(2019\) Shifting mindsets: Creating a more flexible humanitarian response](#)

Donors and leaders in agencies creating incentive structures for evidence-based changes in programming and clear guidance on the amount of evidence and level of information required to make changes

- [Hernandez K, Ramalingam B and Wild L \(2019\) Towards evidence-informed adaptive management: A roadmap for development and humanitarian organisations](#)

Providing more flexible funding to partners to enable projects to shift and adapt to changing needs, as demonstrated by Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden. This should also be considered in relation to local partners, to allow flexibility throughout the funding chain

- [Featherstone A \(2023\) Supporting donors' responsibility for greater accountability to people in crisis: A review of donor AAP commitments, requirements and recommendations](#)
- [Willitts-King B and Metcalfe-Hough V \(2021\) 'Improving quality humanitarian funding through the Grand Bargain 2.0'](#)

Core challenges	Essential issues for engagement	Key recommendations for progress
<p>Shifts in the external context threaten the system's accountability</p>	<p>Effective engagement with longer-term partners and accountability structures can help meet community priorities during protracted crises and displacement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational agencies should form better links with those addressing longer-term services – including development actors, local government institutions and local civil society – to facilitate joint programming and information sharing Humanitarian leaders should support their organisational and staff engagement with challenging issues of politics and advocacy, to influence local duty-bearers and host-governments to help secure the rights of people affected by crisis
	<p>What this might look like: Examples and resources</p>	
	<p>Linking short-term humanitarian support to longer-term institutions to support sustainability, such as connecting with government social protection systems. This happened within multiple contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smith G (2021) Overcoming barriers to coordinating across social protection and humanitarian assistance: Building on promising practices social protection approaches to COVID-19 expert advice service (SPACE) Seferis L and Harvey P (2022) Accountability in crises: Connecting evidence from humanitarian and social protection approaches to social assistance <p>Supporting the political empowerment of communities and their ability to advocate for their own needs and rights to local institutions (often referred to as social accountability approaches). This was demonstrated by Mercy Corps and People in Need</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mercy Corps (2018) CATALYSE: Communities acting together People in Need (2022) Applying a human-rights based approach to development and humanitarian programming <p>Supporting connections between refugees and host governments in discussion fora where needs can be expressed directly to local governance institutions, such as the Refugee Engagement Forum in Uganda</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trân D and Deleu M (2021) Refugee engagement forum in Uganda: Good practice study <p>Advocating to governments on the rights of refugees and supporting legal claims to access longer-term needs and institutional justice mechanisms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NRC (n.d.) 'Housing, land and property (HLP) rights' Legal Action World Wide (2023) Guide on international justice mechanisms for humanitarian actors working with the Rohingya 	
<p>Accountability can play a positive role in prioritisation decisions to maximise the use of scarce resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Donors and operational agencies should consider how to more effectively and ethically engage the voices of crisis-affected people in making prioritisation decisions to maximise the utility of scarce resources and avoid exacerbating community tensions Humanitarians should consider how to balance their measures of need and vulnerability with community perspectives of what is necessary, fair and legitimate in targeting decisions 	

	<p>What this might look like: Examples and resources</p> <p>Engaging in forms of community-based targeting that ensure the group reflects different community members, including marginalised people, avoids elite capture and is an approach that is acceptable to the community. This is the approach used in many cash-based programmes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crew R (2023) 'Community-based targeting: The best worst thing for limited humanitarian resources' • McCord A (2017) Community-based targeting in the social protection sector <p>Allowing people affected by crisis the opportunity to deviate from strict agency vulnerability indicators to determine who should receive aid in their community, as practised by the WFP in Afghanistan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PHAP (2023) HNPW 2023 - Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP): Every contact counts: Intentional accountability through the programme cycle 	
<p>Core challenges</p>	<p>Essential issues for engagement</p>	<p>Key recommendations for progress</p>
<p>Unequal power restricts accountability</p>	<p>Improved incentives for accountability are important in the absence of community power to sanction humanitarian actors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanitarian leadership should help embed a culture of accountability as paramount within their organisations, by demonstrably taking complaints and suggestions seriously and being open to external scrutiny • Operational agencies should explore strategies for engaging with the empowerment of people affected by crisis, by reducing the conception of aid as a gift and considering how approaches to misconduct could better interact with local accountability entities that are trusted by crisis-affected individuals
	<p>What this might look like: Examples and resources</p> <p>Transparently outlining the steps taken as a result of sexual misconduct charges and allowing independent scrutiny to investigate and determine appropriate responses, as Oxfam has done in response to safeguarding charges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oxfam (n.d. b) 'Immediate response actions: Sexual misconduct' <p>Local civil society representatives accompanying agency investigations into complaints, to ensure that crisis-affected people are represented and supported by a trusted institution. This is being explored by Oxfam, CHS and partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaboune A, Mohammed A and Naapi J (2023) Barriers to reporting misconduct: Understanding power, intersectionality and context • CHS Alliance (forthcoming 2023): Victim/survivor-centred approach to protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment in the aid sector: A contextualised analysis from three humanitarian settings <p>Actively taking on the role of a temporary 'moral duty-bearer' in the absence of an effective state presence; encouraging communities to direct social accountability tools (such as participatory scorecards and audits) at humanitarian agencies to assess and improve performance, focusing on the ability of communities – and particularly vulnerable members within them – to articulate their views and raise their voices in supportive interactions with agency staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People in Need (2022) Applying a human-rights based approach to development and humanitarian programming • Outline of different social-accountability strategies that could be considered for adaptation: IRC (2016) Social accountability: Overview of approaches and case studies 	

Progress on localisation and decolonisation has implications for accountability

- Humanitarian leadership should **encourage self-reflection and action within their organisations, with the goal of recognising and tackling entrenched attitudes that limit respect for people affected by crisis as knowledge holders and active agents** with capacity in their own contexts
- Donors and operational agencies should **enable a stronger role for local actors in supporting accountability to affected people**, including providing funding for and learning from local approaches and innovations

What this might look like: Examples and resources

Recognising and seeking to shift racist and colonial attitudes throughout an organisation via a clear plan of action. This is a journey that several organisations are embarking on with various commitments and frameworks

- Case studies and resources from the [Centre for Humanitarian Leadership \(2022\) Transformation in the aid and development sector: Decolonising aid](#)
- [Oxfam \(n.d. c\) 'A call to action: Racial justice'](#)
- [Start Network \(2022\) 'The anti-racist and decolonial framework'](#)

Providing funding and decision-making power directly to communities as local first responders – as practised by Christian Aid and partners in their survivor- and community-led response approach

- [Di Vicenz S and Hallinan E \(2023\) Letting go of control: Empowering locally led action in Ukraine](#)

Working with local government structures to embed community engagement in disasters across a country, as demonstrated by CDAC and the government of Fiji

- [CDAC \(2023\) 'Working with what we have': Key advocacy messages for inclusive communication and engagement in the Horn of Africa](#)

Enabling feedback to flow to local civil society organisations, to support greater trust among people who better understand communities' lived experiences. This approach has been demonstrated by the work of refugee-led organisations

- [Getachew A, Gitahi M, Kara A, and Ramazani U \(2022\) Refugee-led organisations in East Africa: Community perceptions in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania](#)

Engaging with locally led humanitarian governance and learning mechanisms, such as the Humanitarian Observatories

- [Hilhorst D \(2023\) 'Humanitarian observatories: Seeking change from below'](#)

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Endnotes

- 1 The IASC defines accountability to affected populations (AAP) as an active commitment to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organisations seek to assist (IASC, 2015).
- 2 The latest available figures were published in 2022 and reflect the situation in 2021. A new visual mapping has also been made available by OCHA (2023).
- 3 The two specific commitments related to accountability were among the lowest scoring of the nine commitments: 'Communication participation and feedback' ranked 7th out of 9 different commitments and 'welcomes and addressed complaints' ranked the worst in 9th place. With average scores of 2.43 and 1.94 out of 4, respectively. Where scores between 1 and 2 signify efforts are being made to apply this requirement, but they are not systematic; and scores between 2 and 3 signify systematic efforts towards applying this requirement are being made, but certain key points are still not addressed.
- 4 ALNAP's 2022 SOHS report found that only 36% of people in ALNAP's aid recipient survey thought humanitarians communicated well with them, down from 39% in the last 2018 report (ALNAP, 2022a). Meanwhile, only 33% said they were able to give feedback or complain, again a decline from 36%.
- 5 A recent global analysis by Ground Truth Solutions (2022), found that while the majority of crisis-affected people want to have a say on aid provision, only 36% of respondents in DRC and CAR felt they could influence the humanitarian response. This is in comparison to the 94% and 80% of people in DRC and CAR, respectively, who said that communities should be able to influence aid provision.
- 6 Efforts include a vast array of trainings, guidelines and toolkits, many of which can be found on this portal <https://aap-inclusion-psea.alnap.org/>.
- 7 Interviewees were careful, however, not speak of 'crosscutting themes' or 'mainstreaming' AAP for fear that progress to date would be watered down and rendered ineffectual instead of establishing it as fundamental.
- 8 Communities who were consulted about the aid they receive were 2.2 times more likely to say that aid addressed their priority needs, 2.7 times more likely to say that the aid they received was of good quality and 2.5 times more likely to say that the amount of aid was sufficient. Similar results were also found for the ability to provide feedback or complain on the same indicators. Affected communities surveyed who said they were able to provide feedback or complain were 1.8 times more likely to find the aid they received relevant to their most important needs, 2.5 times more likely to say that the aid they received was of good quality and 2 times more likely to say that the amount of aid was sufficient.
- 9 Please see endnote 4.
- 10 For example, local CSOs and 'intermediaries' can be more usefully embedded in communities and also more trusted for open feedback than international actors (UNICEF, 2021).
- 11 Volunteers living within communities were particularly useful conduits for community engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic (WFP, 2022).
- 12 For example, the Red Cross and Red Crescent's movement-wide plans for community engagement and accountability has created a group of 'goodwill ambassadors', which includes secretary generals, presidents and senior leaders to embed community engagement and accountability concerns at a high level (Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, 2022).
- 13 According to Metcalfe-Hough et al. (2023) Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the UK all reported that they provided at least 30% of their humanitarian aid as 'unearmarked' or 'softly earmarked' in 2022.
- 14 While being more accountable to communities was one of the driving forces for the shift made by SDC last year, it is too early to know the effect of the new structure on serving the holistic needs of crisis-affected communities.
- 15 A growth of 27% on 2021.
- 16 The COVID-19 Nepal response plan was 9% funded compared to the Afghanistan flash appeal, which was 181% funded.

ALNAP

ALNAP

ODI

203 Blackfriars Road

London SE1 8NJ

United Kingdom

alnap@alnap.org