



Learning note

Unpicking the assumptions of the accountability to affected people agenda

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About this publication

This learning note was written following a closed-door roundtable, *Accountability to Affected Populations: Unpicking the Assumptions*, organised by ODI and the Humanitarian Policy Group in autumn 2023.

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Acronyms

AAP Accountability to affected people
TPM Third-party monitoring mechanisms

Introduction

Over the past decade, attention to accountability to affected people (AAP) as a critical part of humanitarian activity has grown, as it is increasingly promoted amongst high level actors and plays an ever more prominent role in sectoral guidelines and principles. Yet, even with this attention, the proliferation of commitments and rhetoric around the need for improved AAP have failed to translate into improvements in programming and implementation at the pace and scale these commitments demand. Rather than simply making further calls to take AAP seriously, we suggest humanitarians go back to the core assumptions underlying the AAP agenda. Interrogating and clarifying these assumptions is an essential prerequisite to building a shared understanding and purpose around what 'better AAP' really means and what humanitarians can do to achieve it.

In September 2023, supported through funding from the McGovern Foundation, ODI convened a closed-door roundtable with humanitarian, government and academic experts to examine some of the core assumptions about accountability and to unpick if, how and why these assumptions are not being realised in practice. The roundtable focused on two common and growing aspects of AAP in practice: 1) more and better feedback as a key part of improved accountability; and 2) the added value of digital data in furthering AAP agendas.

This learning note highlights the emerging insights that came out of the discussion. It examines a number of particular, deep-set challenges around the place and role of the AAP agenda in the humanitarian sector, and explores where policy and research attention might most usefully be focussed to capitalise both on high-level commitments and existing country-level programming, to provide fresh thinking around AAP and expand opportunities for greater accountability.

Discussions at the workshops underlined an emerging consensus around the need and opportunity to rethink the theories of change underpinning AAP agendas and to interrogate the specific programmatic and contextual factors that affect delivery.

Assumptions about why AAP matters

Multiple and potentially conflicting objectives sit at the heart of the AAP agenda. AAP can be conceptualised as a good in itself, as a morally good course of action in programmes designed to support

people in crisis situations. This is the most common way in which AAP is conceptualised in the humanitarian sector. Equally, AAP can also be considered good because of what it achieves. In this conception, AAP improves humanitarian outcomes by ensuring that design and delivery of humanitarian projects and programmes are responsive to crisis-affected people's priorities and needs. AAP can also be promoted as a way to empower affected populations, thereby supporting their agency in the crisis response.

It may not necessarily be an issue that AAP can serve multiple aims. However, it is possible that different theories of change, particularly when not clearly articulated, could underpin incompatible or inconsistent activities. In reality, different outcomes require different considerations and it is not necessarily the case that one intervention can serve all aims. It is not necessarily the case that the type or form of feedback most aligned to improve a given intervention's efficiency is the same as the one that will most clearly contribute to aid recipients' empowerment or the maximum inclusion of people's voices. The context and design of feedback and humanitarian projects/programmes can also challenge realisation of these aims, to different degrees and in different ways.

Second, while digital data and technologies might offer potentially exciting avenues for humanitarian actors to communicate with affected people, gain insight and aggregate perspectives, there is a need for stronger evidence on how digital technologies inform and alter AAP theories of change. Often digitalisation seems to be pushed forward irrespective of any consideration of the deeper challenges or tensions this may have with AAP's underlying theories of change. Data collected through digital feedback mechanisms is unlikely to fully represent the views of all segments of the population equally (e.g. those who do not have access to digital technologies may be excluded, while feedback mechanisms in many cases only solicit feedback from aid recipients rather than the population as a whole). Data and digital technologies are increasingly integrated into humanitarian delivery and decision making. However, rather than operating from the assumption that 'more digital' is inevitable, there is need within the sector to interrogate how digital technologies are being used, and how far this process of digitalisation is consistent with broader goals around transparency and accountability.

Interrogating assumptions in AAP

This section highlights the key questions and points of discussion raised about approaches to improving accountability. It reflects on specific assumptions about the role and value of feedback and of data in relation to accountability to affected people in the humanitarian sector. We then conclude with ideas on where to go from here: how might these critical insights into the limits or uncertainties of underlying assumptions in the AAP agenda translate into an agenda for greater accountability going forward?

Assumption 1: More feedback means better decision making

There is a widespread assumption that AAP (most commonly in terms of feedback on previous interventions) will lead to future improvements in the effectiveness of delivery. However, the lack of meaningful improvements in communities' perceptions of effectiveness of aid delivery across contexts points to weaknesses in this assumption.

While humanitarian actors may intend to analyse and act on data collected through AAP mechanisms, there are often constraints around a given organisation's absorption capacity of the (often large and complex) volumes of information gathered. As such, feedback may not be listened to and consequently not be incorporated into future programme design.

A related point is that decision-making (both in programmatic design and at higher strategic levels) is often not based on evidence collected through feedback mechanisms and community engagement. Donor priorities and organisational mandates inform approaches, and pragmatic considerations around access to affected populations heavily influence humanitarian planning. Operational decision-making in the sector itself has been characterised as happening in contexts of both great urgency and uncertainty¹ – not a conducive environment for considering differing perspectives from feedback mechanisms. Time lags between programme design and initial implementation, and feedback gathering activities can also prevent community engagement from meaningfully impacting

¹ See: <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/alnap-study-beyond-assumptions-how-humanitarians-make-operational-decisions>

projects. Generally, pathway dependency, particularly in the context of limited resources and capacity, makes radical reform of programming approaches challenging, while there may be a broader reluctance to engage with the most complex or hard-to-address findings unearthed by feedback mechanisms.

Assumption 2: Greater quantities of feedback will lead to greater inclusivity

While feedback mechanisms are a critical channel for communication from aid recipients to humanitarian actors, they are not without limitations. Depending on the approach taken different risks can emerge. First, it is almost impossible to guarantee that any given feedback channel will be universally accessible and inclusive. Different channels amplify certain voices and enable different people to contribute, with others being silenced (e.g. toll-free numbers require access to a phone; in-person meetings require time and access). More feedback does not necessarily mean that more diverse and open perspectives are being shared. Key questions still need to be considered about who can access and engage with feedback mechanisms (e.g. access to phones, literacy levels), and if the channels are trusted to be secure and effective.

Second, it is important to consider the kinds of data which are collected as feedback (and, conversely, the forms of response and information that may be excluded by any given feedback mechanism's design). Are there restrictions on the format, length or topic of feedback, to ensure that it aligns with programmatic options and/or priorities? Questions around whether forms of feedback fit within existing results frameworks in ways that enable them to be incorporated into decision making were raised by multiple participants. Furthermore, there is a clear need to ensure that the timings of decision making and planning processes are sufficiently aligned and flexible to incorporate feedback.

Assumption 3: Feedback collected through independent mechanisms is more trustworthy

There are ongoing debates about the added value of feedback mechanisms that are provided by third party actors, and are assumed to be independent of humanitarian delivery. For instance, organisations external to delivery might be able to solicit more unbiased perspectives. Equally, those involved in humanitarian delivery might be perceived as having a greater ability 'to act' on the basis of feedback. When probing these debates, and the different actors involved, it became clear that these differing positions are not so clear cut. Instead, they raise further questions about the trustworthiness and effectiveness of different actors and mechanisms for feedback.

Feedback is always mediated in some way: whether this is through a technical platform or third party organisation. Also, it has to be

synthesised and simplified to translate individual feedback to aggregated insights that can inform higher level/wider decision making processes. Understanding the external biases and value systems which determine how this aggregation takes place is key to gaining a fuller picture of the possible limitations of current feedback systems.

Rather than simplistically saying whether they are 'good' or 'bad', it is more productive to understand that different intermediary actors come with ideas about ways of working and supporting accountability, with potentially varying degrees of flexibility around whether they can adapt to preferences within affected communities.

There are varying views about whether feedback should be linked to internal programming to be more quickly integrated into delivery, or whether humanitarians should instead prioritise independence from delivery in order to provide space for safe and honest feedback from affected people. Likely, this points to the need for more attention on specific cases and trade-offs, with greater attention to the opportunities, constraints and omissions around who and what is used for feedback, and whose views inform its design.

Assumption 4: Collecting feedback will in itself increase the trust and buy-in of affected people

The roundtable also raised concerns about potential harms of providing opportunities for feedback without clear channels to communicate back to affected people and to provide clear pathways for communities to feed into decision-making. Participants shared research insights about how unanswered/unaddressed feedback is a source of frustration and can be demoralising for affected people, increasing distance and mistrust between affected communities and humanitarian actors – a form of potential long-term harm which is rarely, if ever, factored into AAP design. This points to the importance of structural and incentive based factors that challenge meaningful engagement with and uptake of feedback in decision making. The urgent push to make humanitarian programming more accountable may in some cases itself be contributing to blind spots around the perspectives, experiences and priorities of affected communities themselves. Fulfilling AAP aims runs the risk of becoming a predominantly extractive endeavour – in other words, it may place further (unremunerated) demands on affected populations as part of aid delivery without delivering a clearly visible improvement in delivery (or, possibly more significantly, without leading to meaningful two-way communication and co-design of aid programming between communities and agencies).

There are unavoidable power dynamics in the humanitarian sector tied to the vulnerability and heightened needs that face crisis-affected people, versus (often external) actors who have the resources, structure and decision making power over programming. While the AAP agenda within its multiple aims does aim to confront and

mitigate these power dynamics, it is necessary to consider further if and how the very power dynamics AAP is aiming to challenge might be reproduced through the structures of AAP initiatives.

Assumption 5: Better data will lead to greater accountability

In the humanitarian sector as elsewhere, there is a clear trend of increasing digitalisation. However, the presence and collection of digital data on people's preferences on its own is not enough to ensure that the sector is more aware of, or responsive to, affected people. There remain major unanswered questions about precisely what kinds of data are collected through these digital tools, what they do and do not represent, and why they are collected.

Roundtable discussions unearthed some differences in opinion around the added value of digitalisation. However, numerous participants underlined the need to tailor uses of digital technology to local contexts and use patterns (for example, adding voice note capabilities to a WhatsApp feedback bot in Lebanon).

Rather than seeing digitalisation as an inevitable and straightforward line of progression, we suggest that it may be more useful to understand digitalisation as an ongoing and contested process, shaped by inherently *political* choices. For example, the increasing prevalence of third-party monitoring mechanisms (TPMs), which fulfils a desire for humanitarian organisations to signal their neutrality by outsourcing feedback mechanisms to an external partner. However, this process of outsourcing also opens the door to that TPM's own biases and assumptions, which in turn shape the kinds of data that are collected. This can be an added concern if the monitoring organisation is based outside of the country or community of concern, and might lack trusted relations and contextual knowledge to guide data collection and analysis.

Further, a *political* lens on the use of digital data to represent and analyse affected people's perspectives, can help to make sense of which accountability relationships are supported through existing practices of using digital data.

Digitalisation can enable feedback to be provided and analysed in ways that are more easily communicated up to donors. Digitalisation can help in collecting, processing and analysing larger quantities of data. This can potentially be more easily and quickly communicated 'upward' to donors, as seen with TPM reporting. However, the same aggregated digital data does not necessarily feed into processes of accountability with affected people. There also remain major questions around the ways in which digitalisation plays into existing donor-community power dynamics, and under what circumstances it reinforces or reduces power inequalities. The potential of 'big data' to increase the marginalisation of minority communities and/or

marginalised groups requires further investigation and development of context-specific ways of countering this.

Nonetheless, participants suggested that while in many cases digital solutions were not perfect, they in many cases represented the best option for organisations to collect large volumes of feedback within budgetary limitations. However, there also was hesitation around a 'digital first' approach to accountability, and a sense that digital mechanisms for collecting data on affected people's perspectives are not on their own sufficient for strengthened accountability. Access to trusted and reliable digital communication channels remains limited, sometimes even due to communications capacities being blocked or targeted. Without a clearly delineated rationale and theory of change for the use of a given technology, it may have unintended negative consequences without delivering meaningful improvements in aid delivery or community involvement in decision-making.

What next? Moving beyond ‘accountability as feedback’ and ‘accountability as data’

Accountability to affected people remains a core priority within humanitarian programming. Martin Griffiths, the UN’s Emergency Relief Coordinator, launched a flagship initiative in April 2023 among other aims seeks to tackle the ‘intractable problem’² of the ‘persistent lack of accountability to affected communities’.

Within a renewed commitment to accountability, this roundtable suggested that meaningful improvements to greater accountability in humanitarian programming may require a serious re-think of the fundamental assumptions that implicitly and explicitly underpin AAP initiatives. The assumptions that underpin existing approaches that rely on feedback and/or data do not appear to be borne out by the existing evidence. Without taking accountability off the agenda, there is a real need to interrogate these assumptions further, and to develop clearly articulated theories of change about what meaningful AAP entails in practice, and how a given intervention contributes to achieving it.

The discussion itself was illuminating on this point: amidst a heavily researched and discussed topic, AAP experts and practitioners recognised the persistence of a number of key, tenuous and under-evidenced assumptions. There was a shared desire to work towards more precise, evidence-based and contextually specific theories of change around the AAP agenda.

While what these theories of change will look like in practice will vary across organisations and contexts, we conclude by outlining four key areas for consideration when developing and implementing more precise and contextually specific approaches to AAP. These draw on both this roundtable and wider ongoing ODI research on AAP.

² See: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2023/04/05/whats-flagship-initiative-emergency-aid>

1 Explicitly discussing approaches to AAP interventions that go beyond the existing paradigm of ‘accountability as feedback’.

Accountability to affected people is broader than feedback, and requires considering dialogue, transparency, and engagement with power dynamics between communities and humanitarian actors. Recognising both the value and limits of feedback can help to return attention to what this bigger agenda might entail. On the one hand, this may include developing mechanisms to ensure that feedback is both listened to and acted on. On the other, discussion will likely have to engage with challenging questions. For example, around how far feedback responds to the power imbalances, or how feedback mechanisms can take into account social, political and economic effects of large-scale humanitarian interventions, including what are referred to as ‘protracted crises’.

2 Exploring what internal reforms and policies can be employed to increase prioritisation of AAP within humanitarian organisations.

For AAP to be realised, it cannot be viewed as simply a form of external engagement with communities. This means reemphasising an often considered point that AAP must be a priority internally within humanitarian organisations – in other words, an essential part of programming as opposed to a ‘nice to have’. Beyond repeating this, this requires considering how to achieve this reprioritisation, for example, how to make decisions about reprioritisation and who should be involved, and how to incentivise the prioritisation of AAP within organisations, from individual champions to structural reforms.

3 Linking accountability programming to broader efforts to address political economic inequalities between international aid organisations, local partners and communities.

AAP has been held back to large extent by inequalities in the broader political economy of humanitarian programming, including around decision making, resource distribution and competing interests. This involves looking at power dynamics and interests within the sector, as well as clarity and frankness about the interactions between humanitarian interventions and domestic political economies in countries of intervention, and considering what AAP can do within wider relations of unequal voice and power. Ultimately this will go beyond the limits of AAP and touches on broader questions the humanitarian sector is confronting around post- and neo-colonial power dynamics, understandings of the nature and limits of humanitarian needs and crisis, and the unequal distribution of attention, compassion and aid. Still, a reformulation and new approach to accountability can be a core element of the changes that are needed to make the humanitarian sector relevant and effective as the challenges and demands it faces only continue to increase.

4 Integrating forms of engagement that are considered legitimate and trusted by affected communities, to more effectively prioritise communities' agency and voices.

AAP approaches that emphasise data and/or feedback can reduce accountability to a question of soliciting more, and more representative, views of affected populations. This stands in tension with accountability as a *political* agenda that involves creating space for agency and voice of affected communities within humanitarian programming and delivery. A focus on what forms of engagement are considered legitimate and trusted by communities can be a starting point for 're-politicising' AAP, in that it focuses attention on approaches that are meaningful to affected communities.