Conscious Contrarians:
Humanitarian Accountability as a Driver of Innovation

Omer Aijazi, PhD.

Director, Disaster Recovery Programs,
Canadian Partnership for Reconstruction and Development (CPRD)

This short piece is crafted from the following policy paper: Omer Aijazi (2020). "Why Technocratic Understandings of Humanitarian Accountability can Harm Local Communities." Canadian Partnership for Reconstruction and Development (CPRD).
Humanitarian accountability has emerged as a legitimate field of practice and inquiry. The author critically analyzes current approaches to humanitarian accountability and contends that humanitarian accountability is predominately understood as a set of procedural tools and systems that may inadvertently prevent local communities from advancing their social positions within the humanitarian space. The author argues that humanitarian accountability is essentially a political and ethical conversation as opposed to a technical and procedural one. This is illustrated using a case example from the 2010 Pakistan monsoon floods.

Humanitarianism is an ideology, a movement, even an industry where various actors compete for market share. It has a legal dimension comprising of laws, treaties and conventions, and a discursive component motivated by arguments of morality and compassion. Over the years, humanitarian agencies have occupied various positions along an axis from saving lives to enabling peace and development approaches (Aijazi 2014). These are unhelpful distinctions because they constrain the possibilities of humanitarian action and only encourage a limiting understanding of accountability (Slim 2000).
Tracings of Humanitarian Accountability

Humanitarian accountability can be traced to two important and competing historical turns: the emergence of the New Public Management discourse of the 1980s and the failures of humanitarianism during the Rwandan genocide.

Faced with new assaults on social service provision, the 1980s saw the proliferation of bureaucratic technologies advocating for the effective management and use of public funds. These technologies ushered in an era of the ‘three Ms’: markets, managers and measurement and advocated that the public sector should be run like a corporation for greater efficiency and impact. For humanitarian organizations, this meant the adoption of performance and results based management approaches, a trend that continues till today. New Public Management approaches primarily orient humanitarian accountability towards donors and funding agencies.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide was a powerful reminder for safeguarding the interests of local communities. The ineffectiveness of international actors in preventing and responding to the genocide came under scrutiny, as did their role in prolonging the genocide (Polman 2010). The scathing “Joint Evaluation on the International Response to the Genocide” recommended that agencies should strengthen accountability to recipients of assistance and establish meaningful consultations with them. The report argued for an independent organization to advocate for local communities and hear their concerns. This led to the establishment of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP). HAP argued that by systematically improving accountability to recipient communities, program quality, impact and outcomes will also be enhanced.
This in turn led to the development of humanitarian standards such as SPHERE and the more recent Core Humanitarian Standards.

**Case Example from Pakistan**

The 2010 Pakistan monsoon floods were cited by the United Nations as the largest humanitarian crisis in living memory. The environmental catastrophe affected 20 million people and 1/5th of the country was under water. Individuals most severely affected included small farmers and unskilled laborers who were already living below or just above the poverty line.

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Left: An accountability poster displayed at a health center.
Right: An English translation of the poster.
The accountability system put in place by a large international aid organization is briefly examined. The system comprised of a series of posters printed in Urdu placed throughout humanitarian sites such as health clinics, food distribution venues and cash for work sites. The posters listed a series of standards which frontline humanitarian workers were obliged to meet. A phone number was also included which allowed community members to report any violations of the listed standards directly to an accountability officer. The phone line was supplemented by regular monitoring visits undertaken by the accountability officer to engage with recipient communities and solicit their feedback and suggestions.

The accountability officer recorded complaints and feedback received via the phone line or in person visits in a centralized database for referral to relevant program managers. Depending on the nature of the complaint received, the officer could also initiate an investigation on their own accord. This involved travelling to the respective community and holding consultations to gauge the nature of the issue being raised. A detailed report including findings gleaned from community consultations was then communicated to the relevant program manager as well as to the Director of Program Quality. Both parties would then work together to resolve the issues raised. The type of complaints that typically triggered an investigation included reports of physical abuse by aid workers or concerns of misappropriation of relief goods.
In addition to recipient communities, the phone line was also occasionally accessed by anonymous former or current employees to report internal misconduct (whistle blowing). However, the accountability system did not engage with the numerous protests and demonstrations that community members staged in opposition to aid organizations throughout the operational region. Similarly, letters and notes written by community members to the organization’s regional or country offices were also not incorporated into the accountability work plan.

The accountability system adopted a problem-solving approach aimed at reducing anger and frustration within beneficiary communities as opposed to tackling root causes of reported problems. The following excerpt from a
Complaint received on the accountability phone line and its mode of resolution demonstrate this:

Concern: “We do not like the feel, texture and smell of the flour you have distributed to us. The flour does not even properly make a roti [flat bread]. Our neighbor received flour from another organization and their flour not only tastes better but also makes wonderful rotis.”

Resolution: Re-distribution of flour to the household based on the assumption that the previous distribution was contaminated by moisture.

This complaint was received approximately one year after the onset of the floods.

These concerns can also be understood as challenging the source of the flour, which in this case was procured from the United States through the World Food Program and therefore did not resemble the flour (in taste or texture) that is available locally. Alternate supply chains were instituted in the aftermath of the floods, which sought to link food donations in Western countries with local consumers (as opposed to sourcing items from local markets), skewing demand and supply. They also raise questions about why food was still being distributed one year after the flood? What about food sovereignty and aid dependence? The organization approached accountability vertically, between themselves and the beneficiary community, but what about lateral accountability such as holding one organization accountable to another? This is an important point, because at any given moment, several humanitarian organizations were working in the same locality, often replicating each other’s interventions and sometimes even posing as obstacles to each other’s success.
The Humanitarian as the Conscious Contrarian

Accountability to communities is a welcome turn in the pragmatic sensibilities of humanitarian organizations. Through accountability systems, local communities are encouraged to claim the validity of their social words within humanitarian decision-making. But these systems can also serve as a tool for reordering community dissent and silencing broader claims for social justice. They can operate counter-productively by de-politicizing the humanitarian space by only approaching community claims via a narrow operational and problem-solving lens.

In some First Nation traditions, the conscious contrarian is a confrontational figure who provokes social innovation and critical thinking by challenging the status quo, such as by subverting gender norms or operating within alternative notions of sexuality (Pascale et al. 2010). Humanitarian workers are also encouraged to be conscious contrarians. This will allow them to critically think and experiment, deriving innovative solutions for difficult problems. We believe this can only be possible, if we broaden the ambit of humanitarian accountability to accommodate robust conversations on social justice and spark the genius needed to drive innovation.
Bibliography


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