Why Technocratic Understandings of Humanitarian Accountability can Harm Local Communities

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Abstract

The paper unpacks current trends regarding humanitarian accountability through an examination of an accountability system instituted by an aid organization following the 2010 monsoon floods in Pakistan. The paper argues that humanitarian accountability is mostly understood as a technical and procedural tool. This has the unintended consequence of undermining local efforts at self-advocacy, suppressing community dissent and silencing broader claims for equity. The paper concludes that if humanitarian accountability is also understood as a political and ethical project, it can, in fact, inspire innovation, support conscientious aid workers, and ignite a radical revisioning of the humanitarian contract itself.

Keywords: Accountability, humanitarian action, community partnerships, Pakistan, disaster response, Pakistan monsoon floods, ethics.
Introduction

Humanitarian accountability is increasingly understood as a set of procedural tools and systems. The paper argues that overtly technocratic understanding of accountability can inadvertently depoliticize local communities, undermining their efforts at advocating for themselves. Humanitarian organizations and the communities they seek to uphold will be better served if accountability is understood as a political and ethical project, not only a technical and procedural one. A preferential emphasis on the latter risks reducing the ideals of accountability to yet another checkbox in the burgeoning “toolkit” of humanitarian aid.

To illustrate these assertions, an accountability system that was implemented by a large international humanitarian organization in the aftermath of the Pakistan 2010 monsoon floods is reviewed. The central feature of this system was a complaint feedback mechanism, which sought to connect the recipient of humanitarian assistance directly with the organization operating in their communities. Analysis of the feedback received via this system indicates that most complaints sought to challenge the technocratic and procedural certainties of the organization in favor of inserting local knowledge claims and wider demands for equity. Through various components of the accountability system, community members asserted their voices, contesting how their interests were imagined and constrained by the humanitarian organization, refusing demands of legibility needed to “operationalize” humanitarian programming. Resulting steps that were taken by the organization to rectify or ameliorate concerns
only went so far as to correcting procedural aberrations, ignoring more deeply held egalitarian concerns, an engagement of which could have led to wide multiplier gains.

The paper advocates for humanitarian accountability as a site of potentiality and innovation. It argues that innovation through accountability can be achieved in two ways: 1) by deep and active listening of communities to radically inform and revise humanitarian projects, as opposed to the reduction of feedback as mere “complaints” regarding procedural missteps, and 2) by considering frontline workers and the “unofficial” actions they may take in response to community concerns, which exceed mere acts of rectification, as vital resources for organizational learning. To elaborate on the latter, the figure of the “conscious contrarian” is evoked; a controversial and confrontational figure from First Nations’ traditions, who inspires critical thinking and social innovation by overtly challenging prevailing social norms. The following question is posed: if frontline humanitarian workers are understood as “conscious contrarians”, whose primary investments are within the communities they serve and not the organizations they work for, what innovations in humanitarian action can such a stance of devotion and accountability inspire?

Humanitarian organizations are better served by presenting themselves as learning organizations willing to accumulate knowledge from their mistakes. In this way, accountability, even if instituted as a simple feedback mechanism, can be considered as a form of institution-community partnership. This, the paper advises, is essential for restoring trust between humanitarian organizations and affected communities, as humanitarian operations are often experienced as sites of violence (see, Aijazi 2018).
The author of the paper served as a resource person and consultant for humanitarian accountability during the 2010 monsoon floods in Pakistan. He assisted organizations with formulating, testing, and scaling their accountability systems, trained their staff, and conducted consultations with communities in response to some of the feedback they conveyed through these systems. In this way, this paper is partly autoethnographic and draws from the author’s immersion and embeddedness within the accountability discourse following the floods. The names of organizations are kept confidential. The paper is not written as a criticism towards their work alone, but is an intervention in the wider discourse on humanitarian accountability and the challenges implicit in its operationalization.

Tracing Humanitarian Accountability

The existence of knowledge sharing practices pertaining to humanitarian action date back as early as the 1920s and 1950s (Davey, Burton and Foley 2013). The question of accountability has always been part of these conversations. For example, Gay and Fisher describe the Commission for the Relief of Belgium (CBR) as being “answerable for the honest and efficient use of the resources placed at its disposal within a complex web of accountability relationships” (Gay and Fisher 1929, preface as cited in Davey, Burton and Foley 2013, p. 17). While one can reasonably deduce that the discourse on humanitarian accountability is as old as the existence of humanitarian networks themselves, this paper situates the increasing interest in accountability in two historical

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1 The CBR was established in 1914 to address the food needs of Belgian and French civilians in territories occupied by Germany that were subject to a blockade by Allied forces.
turning points: The New Public Management (NPM) directives of the 1980s, and the Rwandan genocide in 1994, which catalyzed the formulation of humanitarian standards.

**New Public Management**

Faced with austerity measures to curtail state-led social service provision, the 1980s saw the proliferation of NPM technologies, which advocated for the effective management and use of public funds. NPM represents a desire to apply techniques from the private sector to public services, fueled by growing skepticism towards extensive, centralized governments and the rise of neoliberal orthodoxy and market-led reform (Rothstein et al. 2010). This ushered in an era of the ‘three Ms’: markets, managers, and measurement. NPM discourse (in its various shades) caught on rapidly, both within donor countries as well as their recipients. So much so, that by the 1990s, most governments across the world had embarked on some kind of public sector reform (Lane 2002). Opinions on the proliferation of NPM remain divided: some argue that it was part and parcel of an imperial neoliberal project (Haque 2004), while others have argued that the uptake of NPM technologies were less a matter of coercion from multilateral financial institutions and bilateral donors or neoliberal authoritarianism, but the continuation of a well-established strategy of reform (Turner 2006). Regardless of opinion, today NPM technologies form the core organizational principles of many governments across the world.
Humanitarian organizations, either by virtue of direct attachment to national governments or through funding streams, were also brought under the purview of NPM technologies (Vähämäki 2017). For example, in 1988 the Swedish parliament decided that Swedish government agencies must be governed by performance management standards. This directive carried over to the Swedish government’s development and humanitarian wing: Sida. Moving forward, Sida was mandated to have “clear objectives” and “follow-up performance indicators” in its various country strategies (Holmgren and Svensson 2004). Overall, these pressures have led to the incentivization of short-term wins as opposed to deep structural change, and a preference for quick, clear, and achievable results (Walle and Hammerschmid 2011). Arguably, this has led to a wider separation between “development” and “humanitarian” organizations, which increasingly occupy positions along an axis, from minimalist (saving lives) to enabling peace and development approaches (Aijazi 2014a, 2014b). Enabled by NPM thinking, Slim (2000) argues that these distinctions are essentially interesting, purposefully put in place to limit accountability, protecting organizations from “unfair” criticism (they do what is possible and only answerable to what is promised in the proposal). For example, the log-frame, initially popularized by USAID in the 1970s, and now universally standardized, is as much a curated system for limiting accountability as it is a project management tool (see, e.g., Coleman 1987).

The translation of NPM approaches to humanitarian assistance nudges accountability upwards, towards donors and funding agencies. Earle (2002) asks who are such systems of accountability for: “Are they to identify problems and successes, to
foster learning within an organization and to feed into project design thus improving delivery? Are they intended to provide examples of best practice which can be replicated elsewhere? Or are they intended for use in the higher echelons of management to assess progress towards overall agency or department goals and to respond to information demands from home governments and electorates?” (p. 8-9). Depending on the response to these questions, it is not too implausible to consider that accountability, when only considered along lines of efficiency, can erase certain important and pressing questions, such as: how to better save and sustain life?

The Rwandan genocide and humanitarian standards

Another turning point, to which the rise of the accountability discourse can be traced, is the Rwandan genocide. Following the catastrophe, the ineffectiveness of international actors in preventing and responding to the genocide came under scrutiny as did their role in prolonging it (Polman, 2010). The World Disaster Report captured this mood succinctly:

“Increasingly, in the late 1990s, agencies working in emergencies have been battered by accusations of poor performance and depicted as competitive corporate entities driven more by funding than humanitarian imperatives. Aid stood accused of fuelling conflict. Charity’s role was challenged. The problem was less one of compassion fatigue as of compassion discredited.”

The Rwandan Genocide was a powerful reminder that humanitarian practice must be evaluated in its ability to safeguard and protect local communities (Rieff 2003).
The scathing, “Joint Evaluation on the International Response to the Genocide” recommended that agencies should strengthen their systems for improving accountability to recipients of assistance (Eriksson, 1996). In the view of the report, this meant establishing mechanisms for consultation with people affected by humanitarian emergencies. The report argued that recipients of humanitarian assistance themselves need a respected, independent organisation or network of organisations to act on their behalf, and a person or body to hear their concerns regarding assistance or security. These discussions eventually led to the formation of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (or HAP), which proposed that quality, accountability, and program results are inextricably linked. HAP advocates that by improving agency accountability in a systemic way, program quality, impact, and outcomes can also be enhanced.

Over time, these discussions culminated in a concerted shift towards “do no harm principles” and humanitarian standards, such as those by People in Aid, the Sphere Project, and the Core Humanitarian Standards (Purvis, 2005). Unfortunately, in their current iterations, and much different from the recommendations of the Joint Evaluation Report or the ethos put forth by HAP, humanitarian standards, much like NPM perspective also seem to favour the adoption of narrow evaluation mechanisms, codes of practice, and quality benchmarks. The overall effect remains the same: a growing separation between the technical components of accountability and its moral and ethical dimensions (Everett and Friesen 2010). Organizations such as the MSF have publicly voiced their opposition to humanitarian standards. Tong (2004), who works with MSF, asks: “[is it] really possible to link quality and accountability to technical
standards?” (p. 182). She continues “while it is possible to ensure a sufficient number of wells, but do the indicators reflect the fact that women are being raped on their way to get water?” (ibid).

Accountability as a set of short-term and rules-based behavior, rather than a system of relations, according to Ebrahim (2005), ultimately undermines “true organizational learning” and can even hamper organizational survival. The following section takes these considerations further in light of a humanitarian accountability system instituted by an international organization following the 2010 monsoon floods in Pakistan.

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

2 Conversation with a recipient in Rajanpur, South Punjab, October 2010.
Accountability in the Wake of Pakistan Monsoon Floods

The monsoon floods

The 2010 Pakistan monsoon floods, at the time of their occurrence, were cited by the United Nations as the largest humanitarian crisis in living memory. The environmental catastrophe affected 20 million people, submerging nearly one-fifth of the country. It is estimated that the number of people affected by this disaster exceeded those affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake combined. Individuals most severely affected included small farmers and unskilled labourers who are already the most vulnerable in the country, living below or just above the poverty line (e.g., see, Akram and Aijazi 2010; Hunzai and Aijazi 2010). It is estimated that some 3.1 billion USD of humanitarian assistance was channelled into Pakistan that year for relief and reconstruction efforts, activating and energizing numerous NGOs. Even though insufficient commitment to aid effectiveness and accountability was noted (DARA 2011), many organizations set in place accountability systems, one of which is discussed in this section.

The accountability system

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

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

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

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

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

The feedback and complaint database for one of the three operational regions of the humanitarian organization was reviewed and analysed for October 2010. The month represents a time period of intense activity and adjustment as the organization had just set up shop in the region a few weeks prior. This is also the first month of operation of the accountability system, as well as the busiest. It is important to note that the launch of the accountability system coincided with a time period of growing community unrest, including demonstrations at various project sites, letters of anger and frustration written by community members to the organization’s regional and head offices, and sit-ins outside the gates of the organization’s sub-regional offices closer to community locations.

The purpose of this preliminary analysis is not to provide a definitive and comprehensive breakdown of the complaints received, but rather to highlight some emerging trends that have bearing on the paper’s arguments. A total of 54 calls were entered into the database that month. The M&E officer reminded that the actual number of calls was approximately two times more, but only those that were considered “genuine” were recorded. There is no set criterion for what constitutes a genuine call, but the officer was of the view that many calls had no bearing on accountability and were from curious bystanders or were generalized pleas for assistance.
It seemed that the phone line was accessed primarily by men – only three callers were recorded to be women. This is in line with local trends of mobile phone ownership. According to the M&E officer, based on his research, most households share a mobile phone, with men commanding control of the resource. Also, the optics of calling a seemingly random number were such that women were unlikely to call in.

The majority of calls were invitations to conduct needs assessments in the caller’s village to begin operations there (70% of calls). The standard reply, as instructed by the Regional Manager, to these callers was that the organization is stretched beyond capacity and cannot extend their operations at the given time but will forward these locations to various program managers to consider should more funding be made available. These responses of course left the following pressing questions unanswered: What made the organization choose one locality over the other in a context of widespread need and devastation? How were decisions to support one life over the other made?³

According to the Officer, many callers hung-up, very upset, wondering the same questions: “Why are you operating at this locality, when our village is far more destitute than several of the areas where you are currently working in? On what criteria are villages selected, as it doesn’t seem to be on any genuine understanding of need?”⁴

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³ There were no strict operational codes guiding these decisions, other than what emerged from a series of rapid needs assessment and the strategy of triage: prioritise those who can be accessed the quickest.
⁴ Remarks made by a caller to the M&E Officer, October 2010.
Even though several different types of interventions were underway, all of the calls pertained to the distribution of supplies: food (80% of calls) or other essential items (20%). Some specific concerns included:

- Denial of food or other essential items despite being on the distribution list (the three complaints that were recorded by women concerned this).
- Parents and their adult children treated as one household simply because they lived under one roof, even though they maintained separate kitchens, eating, and spending schedules.
- Unexplained removal of individuals from selection lists and distribution items designated for them given to other parties. Calls of this nature were often from community leaders and activists who were concerned with systematic abuse of power.
- Community members pointed out obvious omissions of vulnerable people from their villages: “Your team missed so and so, but he is blind and has 12 children. Nobody is more deserving than him. Or, she is a widow with no living family, how can you omit her?”
- Designated food items were missing from distribution packages.
- The distribution was co-opted by notables from the village who diverted a large number of distributions to their family members despite not being needful.
- Some community members complained of harassment by powerful households in their respective villages for lodging a complaint with the M&E Officer.

5 Notes entered by M&E Officer in the complaint database.
• A few callers noted the low quality of food items being distributed and suggested diversifying the type of assistance being meted out.

• At least one instance of serious abuse of power and physical coercion by the organization’s distribution team, reported by several callers. Due to its nature, the complaint triggered immediate action by the M&E Officer (detailed below).

**Humanitarian violence**

The Officer received numerous calls regarding a particular ongoing food distribution program. Callers complained that they had been denied their allocated food packages without reason. One agitated caller burst into tears as he described how the women from his village were beaten when they refused to leave the premises of the distribution point to protest their removal from the lists. The Officer requested that the caller visit his community and asked him to gather any community member who wanted to report any concerns or share their stories regarding the distribution event.

The Officer visited the village the following day. He was taken to a large ground. This was the village eidgah, where communal prayers are offered during the two annual religious festivals of Eid. The Imam of the village mosque was also present. There were approximately 30 men and 20 women gathered. This included those who were selected to receive food packages and their family members. Of the 240 households

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6 The author of the paper also accompanied the M&E Officer during their visit.

7 Individual in charge of day-to-day administration of the mosque and appointed for leading daily prayers in congregation. The Imam is held in high esteem by local community members and is symbolic of prevailing Islamic beliefs and moral standards.
estimated to be in the village, some 60 had been selected for food aid by the organization.

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

The night before, humanitarian staff attempted to distribute tokens to as many beneficiaries as they could locate. The staff stayed back till 1 am, until they decided to head back and distribute any remaining tokens on the morning of the distribution. On that day, beneficiaries lined up outside the venue, and those not on the list were dispersed. Tokens were handed over to remaining beneficiaries waiting in line. The distribution was being facilitated by humanitarian staff as well as some influential

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8 Tokens are used to identify beneficiaries on the day of the distribution.
people from the village. These are referred to as “community focal persons” and are tasked with assisting the organization make inroads into the community.

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

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

**Technocratic Approaches to Accountability can Depoliticize the Humanitarian Space**

There has been plentiful documentation of preferential and discriminatory treatment of disaster survivors following natural disasters pointing to the skewed nature of aid distribution (e.g., see. Aijazi 2018, Aijazi 2016). An important factor contributing to this is the persistence of traditional land leasing arrangements that give landlords unsurmountable power. Often, they are connected to or represent political parties, maintain close ties to the provincial governments and the police, and facilitate the entry of foreign aid organizations, and therefore possess free reign to favor their own political constituents during aid distribution (Arai 2012). In contrast, local communities are also dynamic political actors capable of transformative interventions, even in the wake of major disasters and the relief efforts that ensue in their wake. In fact, disaster survivors strategically maneuver the post-disaster arena to safeguard their interests (e.g., see, Aijazi and Panjwani 2015).

The handling of comments received through the accountability system lend to the argument that these were indeed technocratic responses (such as insisting on the distinction between a “beneficiary” and a “community member”). And, that these responses compromised the ability of local communities to mobilize and advocate for themselves, therefore, “depoliticizes the humanitarian space.” The reference to politics here refers to everyday negotiations, gestures, and forms of reciprocity that enable
individuals and communities to advocate for themselves, somewhat in contrast to the kind of politics (with the capital P) more commonly evoked in the literature on disasters and politics (e.g., see Siddiqi 2014).

The accountability system adopted a problem-solving approach aimed at reducing (not necessarily resolving) anger and frustration within communities. By relying on simplistic cause and effect, it chose not to tackle the structural and root causes grounding the reported concerns, but favoured a simple problem-solving logic aimed at increasing confidence in the humanitarian system and resolving the immediate misstep at hand via operational rehaul. In this way, humanitarian organizations are able to protect themselves, deflect any criticism directed at them for not resolving root causes of inequity or even furthering them, and at the same time implying that they are indeed ethical and accountable organizations wholly devoted to their beneficiaries.

Let’s return to the example in the previous section. Upon receiving the report from the M&E Officer, the Head Office proposed a complete reassessment of the village and new beneficiary lists were prepared. This was based on the premise that the previous assessment took place at a time when the poor and vulnerable were still residing in displacement camps, and only more well-to-do residents were present in the village (their homes were noted to be in geographies better protected from overflowing waters). This was accompanied by a re-selection of “village focal points” this time not from the village elites but from within the beneficiaries themselves. Finally, a more neutral distribution point was selected (a school), as the warehouse previously used was owned by the local landlord. After these steps, food packages were re-distributed, and
an extra round of distribution was also scheduled for the village to compensate for the incident.

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

The distribution manager and his staff conducting the botched distribution, who were all from the operational region, were also subsequently removed and posted elsewhere to minimize the possibilities of future collusion. Initially, the thinking was that distribution staff should be hired from the very region in which operations are to take place to facilitate community mobilization. However, following the incident, the organization changed its stance, citing collusion with communities as a possible impediment for the fair distribution of goods and made it a rule to bring in staff from elsewhere. No stance was taken on the very structures of inequitable power relations (feudalism and land ownership for example), in fact questions of land ownership and tenancy were categorically labelled as “development concerns” outside the purview of the humanitarian ambit. The localization of culpability to its frontline workers can be interpreted as another step at protecting the organization’s more senior staff, and reduced the systemic issue of abuse of power to a localized ethical failure and an organizational policy error.

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

**Accountability as an Ethical and Political Project can Inspire Innovation**

The true potentiality of accountability lies in its ability to push for innovation. This can be realized within the realms of operations or program design, but also in the very relations of power that bind and separate humanitarian organizations from local communities. Accountability, if truly respected and enabled, can reconfigure the stature of humanitarian organizations from an attitude of expertise and technical capacity to the directionality of humility and learning. Sure, many organizations have some sort of a commitment to accountability, knowledge management, and learning, but the linkages between them is tenuous and superficial, and never intended to recast communities as truly being knowledgeable on their lives and circumstances, but mere participants in the many unfolding humanitarian dramas. An orientation of learning is such where the “technical expertise” and savvy of aid workers are put on the backseat in favour of orientation of deep listening and power-sharing beyond participation, which can enable a true influence over agenda setting, resource allocation, and setting the very measures of humanitarian success or failure.
At the same time, humanitarian workers must be encouraged to occupy more assertive roles in favour of the communities they intend to serve and not necessarily the organizations where they are employed. This points to the necessity to speak truth to power within their departments, units, and organizations as needed, and be willing to challenge the status quo. The figure of the conscious contrarian comes to mind. In some First Nations traditions, the conscious contrarian is a confrontational figure who provokes social innovation by challenging the status quo, such as by subverting gender norms or operating within alternative notions of sexuality. This prevents people “from getting stuck in rigid ways of thinking and living” (Tilleras, 1988, viii). Carefully instituted accountability systems can facilitate humanitarian workers to adopt the role of conscious contrarians; humanitarians who are devoted foremost to the communities they serve. Feedback received through these systems should be allowed to seep into deepest recesses or organizational planning and impregnate the imagination of those tasked with assisting others to overcome extenuating circumstances, such as those of natural disasters and conflict, but also endemic poverty, marginalization, and discrimination, which are part and parcel of the very structures that accentuate the consequences of natural hazards and conflict. This stance can only be successful if the ambit of humanitarian accountability systems is also broadened to move beyond operational fixes, to accommodate robust conversations on social change and equity.

Arguably many humanitarians already occupy such a positionality and tirelessly work to advocate for communities within their institutions. But such a stance is far from the norm and often humanitarians who are seen to be devoted to communities at the
detriment of loyalty to the organization are penalized. A well-considered accountability system can provide humanitarians with the empirical proof needed to push for wider change and minimize artificial distinctions between humanitarian and development to better save and sustain life. In the organization presented in this paper, several staff members themselves used the accountability line to report instances of organizational misconduct without having the pressure to disclose their identities for fears of repercussions. Complaints of this nature included reports on mismanagement of funds, systemic corruption, and harmful programmatic or project practices. While actions pursued in response to them were often minimalist, at least a line of communication prompting internal scrutiny was opened.

**Conclusion**

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 and equity. They can operate counterproductively by de-politicizing the humanitarian space. By this, I mean curtailing opportunities for self-advocacy, by relegating any such efforts to the realm of a narrow operational and problem-solving lens.

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