



Policy brief/Framing note

Beyond accountability as feedback

Lessons from Somalia in holding humanitarian responses to account

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Key messages

‘Accountability to affected people’, as it is currently most commonly understood, focuses on providing channels for feedback and relatively superficial communication between humanitarian actors and aid recipients. Accountability efforts have paid far less attention to questions of power, particularly in terms of how powerful humanitarian actors can be held to account.

In protracted crises, in which large-scale and long-term humanitarian responses have significant distorting effects on host countries’ political economies, the relationship between power and humanitarian accountability is particularly acute. The ‘accountability as feedback’ paradigm which has tended to dominate accountability to affected people (AAP) initiatives in these settings has largely failed to address the challenge of increasing accountability in such crises.

Approached to accountability which directly tackle the need to hold powerful actors, particularly international humanitarian organisations, to account have the potential to meaningfully shift the current impasse in the AAP agenda. However, to be effective, they will require long-term thinking and an increased willingness on the part of humanitarian actors to engage with messy, difficult political questions.

In protracted crises, there is an urgent need to engage with the long-term political and economic effects of humanitarian interventions and work to develop approaches to accountability that directly tackle questions of unequal power distributions, which have held back progress on humanitarian accountability to date.

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Acronyms

AAP Accountability to affected people

CDAC Communication with Disaster Affected Communities

CSOs Civil society organisations

HPG Humanitarian Policy Group

IASC Inter-Agency Standing Committee

IDP Internally displaced persons

IOM International Organisation of Migration

Introduction

In prolonged crises, the slow progress of efforts to advance the accountability to affected people (AAP) agenda is well-documented, even as increasing volumes of frameworks, commitments and analyses are dedicated to the issue of AAP and the humanitarian sector's shortcomings in it. Efforts to improve humanitarians' approach to accountability have, even by the sector's own standards and measurements, lagged behind those in other areas.¹ As such, practitioners and academics have increasingly questioned not only the effectiveness of various efforts to improve AAP but whether the AAP agenda is fundamentally asking the right questions (Diepeveen et al., 2024).

A number of questions remain regarding the clarity of the core assumptions underpinning the AAP agenda – including around the relationships between the collection of feedback, improved aid delivery and increased trust in humanitarian actors (Diepeveen et al., 2024). One definition of AAP identifies three dimensions to accountability – taking account, giving account and holding to account (IASC, 2017, in Seferis and Harvey, 2022).² AAP initiatives broadly appear to focus on the first two of these (although the sector's approach to both giving and taking account is far from perfect). Yet a more complex and politically fraught process of holding powerful actors (in this case, global humanitarian organisations) to account has received less attention.

A common criticism of AAP is that, in many cases, it speaks to the priorities of humanitarian organisations rather than to those of affected communities. Despite its title, AAP often becomes a form of 'upward accountability' to donors rather than a sincere attempt to 'shift the power' downwards to local and national organisations and communities. To develop meaningful progress on enacting the humanitarian sector's stated aim of increasing 'downward accountability', there is a need not only for a rethink of the assumptions underpinning the AAP agenda, but also a renewed willingness to address difficult questions relating to power dynamics within humanitarian responses, and the role of different actors' interests and incentives in shaping these. Such a rethink would involve recognising and addressing the specific political economy dynamics; in other words, looking at the different actors involved and the relationships, rules, interests and incentives which shape their behaviour in any humanitarian response (Whaites, 2017). This approach is crucial for efforts to take the AAP agenda beyond relatively superficial processes of 'communication with communities' and requests for often siloed or project-specific feedback

1 See the 2022 State of the Humanitarian System Report (ALNAP, 2022) and 2022 Humanitarian Accountability Report (CHS Alliance, 2022).

2 In this definition, 'taking account' refers to proactively seeking inputs to ensure that humanitarian assistance is based on communities' needs rather than humanitarian organisations' priorities or capacity, 'giving account' describes processes of two-way communication and information provision, and 'being held to account' entails people being empowered to provide feedback on aid delivery and, crucially, can sanction agencies if necessary (Seferis and Harvey, 2022).

to a more profound form of accountability. This is one in which humanitarian organisations give account, take account and, most importantly, are held to account by communities receiving humanitarian assistance.

What this kind of politically aware approach to accountability looks like will of course vary hugely across contexts. However, a broad recognition of the importance of engaging with the complex direct and indirect political and economic effects of humanitarian responses is a crucial first step towards developing more effective and nuanced approaches to AAP. Critically, recognising the vast power imbalances between humanitarian organisations and aid recipients is key to understanding the root causes of the ‘accountability gap’, and confronting difficult questions around who is in reality able to influence and shape humanitarian programming. Such recognition could support the development of approaches to improving AAP that ensure communities are not simply consulted on decisions that are ultimately taken elsewhere, but can actively engage with and hold powerful humanitarian actors to account and shape the decisions they make.

The long-term effects of humanitarian interventions, not just on the welfare of individual communities, but on entire regional and national political economies, are particularly stark in the case of so-called ‘protracted crises’ – cases of multi-year or even multi-decade humanitarian responses. In Somalia, a decades-long international presence – including humanitarian, development, peacekeeping and stabilisation programming – has come to overshadow national state structures. In 2023, the humanitarian intervention requested a budget of \$2.6 billion (although only \$1.2 billion was ultimately provided (UN OCHA, n.d.). In contrast, Somalia’s federal state budget was \$977 million (of which all but \$283 million was provided by external donors, including the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the UN and the EU (Mohamud, 2023)). In a situation where international organisations have supplanted many of the functions of the state (Jaspars, 2020), the challenges of making the humanitarian sector meaningfully accountable to Somalia’s citizens, government and civil society are vast. A similar dynamic is visible across many such protracted crises – including in South Sudan, where international aid is considered by some as one of the ‘four pillars’ which maintain South Sudan’s ruling elite (Craze, 2023), and in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where the multi-decade international presence has fundamentally reshaped local and regional political economies (Carayannis et al., 2018).

This briefing note offers an initial examination of accountability and the AAP agenda, indicating how in its current form it has focused on a relatively limited form of accountability, centred on ‘giving’ and ‘taking’ account, at the expense of engaging with thorny questions of power, which efforts to hold humanitarian actors to account would demand. It explores how these limitations have played out in the humanitarian response in Somalia, to illustrate the shortcomings of current AAP initiatives to bring about meaningful accountability and the key challenges that future efforts will have to address to increase community voice and make humanitarian actors more accountable.

Crucially, making the humanitarian system more accountable requires going beyond simply providing feedback or conducting community consultations and instead demands longer-term, more complex forms of engagement. Such efforts, which require explicit recognition that humanitarian organisations can play, and in many cases are already playing, a longer-term role way beyond their traditional mandates are essential to addressing the extensive power imbalances which characterise humanitarian responses and prevent aid recipients from holding those actors to account (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2022).

Methods

This brief draws on desk research and 25 interviews conducted in 2023. The interviews were carried out with a range of bilateral donors, representatives of international humanitarian organisations, as well as international and Somali civil society organisations (CSOs). It is also informed by the roundtable event organised by ODI-Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) in September 2023 and an accompanying learning note, *Unpicking the assumptions of the accountability to affected people agenda*.³

3 Diepeveen, S., Tindall, T. and Bryant, J. (2023) 'Unpicking the assumptions of the accountability to affected people agenda'. ODI Learning note. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/unpicking-the-assumptions-of-accountability-to-affected-people-agenda/>)

Accountability and accountability to affected people

Defining accountability

While debates around humanitarian accountability date back nearly three decades, the need for increased accountability has become an increasingly pressing concern over the last 15 years, alongside efforts to widen participation, drive forward localisation and tackle sexual exploitation and abuse in the sector (Alexander, 2021). However, despite those calls, and the now standard integration of AAP elements into humanitarian programming, criticisms of the sector's failure to bring about genuine transformative change through AAP initiatives have only grown in recent years. A failure to 'close the loop' by responding to or acting on feedback from aid recipients, or to follow through on commitments to 'shift the power' and bring about a 'participation revolution', points to shortcomings not only in the implementation of accountability commitments, but also in the fundamental conceptualisations of 'accountability' underpinning the AAP agenda.

Several different critiques of dominant approaches to AAP in the humanitarian sector have been put forward in academic scholarship. Professor Mirca Madianou argues that approaches to AAP in the humanitarian sector have focused on 'feedback' from people to humanitarian organisations, using:

'[a] narrow definition [which] [...] misses the expression of wider concerns relating to people's unmet needs, or their grievances about the government and local patronage that are often expressed outside the designated feedback channels, including in local media such as radio and social network sites such as Facebook' (Madianou et al., 2016: 976).

Other critiques point out that humanitarian interventions' mediation through project frameworks determines the specific kinds of feedback that humanitarian actors are interested in and the specific registers and forums in which such feedback can be addressed (Krause, 2014). While AAP has become more closely linked to areas such as the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, its integration with other areas – such as localisation – has been more limited (Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2021). One report has pointed to a lack of definitional clarity around what is meant by 'downward accountability' (beyond general commitments to 'shifting the power' or effecting a 'participation revolution'), identifying this lack of clarity as a key reason for AAP remaining a 'nice-to-have' for humanitarian actors (Anstorp and Horst, 2021).

Accountability as understood within the rubric of AAP is far more narrowly defined than 'accountability' as used in other contexts (e.g. in terms of political or democratic accountability), and broadly avoids uncomfortable questions around distributions of power which are

fundamental to understandings of accountability in other contexts.⁴ Indeed, it is telling that interviewees for this project from outside the humanitarian sector most commonly used ‘accountability’ in the sense of ‘holding to account’ rather than in the narrower sense of receiving and responding to feedback prevalent in the humanitarian sector (Informants 4 and 9).

As such, accountability as it is most commonly understood in the humanitarian sector represents a relatively limited form of participation, in which commitments to greater inclusion have been limited to feedback through specific channels, which have ultimately had limited impact on decision-making (ALNAP, 2018; Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2021). While AAP efforts have focused on increasing aid recipients’ voice and capacity to shape aid delivery, they have made far fewer efforts to address the balances of power between international humanitarian organisations, local non-governmental organisations and civil society, and aid recipients themselves.

The limits of ‘accountability as feedback’

While accountability to affected people has been enshrined as a core aim of the humanitarian system (e.g. in the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability), examples of successful implementation of AAP measures are relatively limited, while criticisms of the sector’s failure to bring about meaningful improvements in AAP are widespread. Issues with how information is collected (e.g. it is often siloed between different projects and organisations), the kinds of information that is sought (e.g. feedback deals only with specific projects or interventions, or its scope is limited by closed questions) and what is then done with that information, are all well-documented (Ground Truth Solutions, 2022; Krause, 2014), and were identified by many informants as major obstacles (Informants 1, 5 and 6).

While in many cases feedback can lead to ‘tinkering around the edges’ of humanitarian programming, some informants argued that it was rare for critical feedback to lead directly to a profound reformulation of any given approach in programming (Informants 5 and 9). This finding is echoed in humanitarian literature, as in one recent report for the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) which noted that, ‘there has not been a system-wide shift in how humanitarians engage with crisis-affected people or support their dignity’, as ‘[a]id recipients reported little improvement in communication, consultation or feedback’. The same report goes on to note that ‘[t]here was little sign of agencies using feedback to adapt projects or providing meaningful opportunities for community decision-making’ (Featherstone, 2023).

4 For example, an Institute for Government report on political accountability in the UK identifies effective accountability systems as relying not only on the provision of sufficient information, but also on the existence of clear systems of reward and sanction (Guerin et al., 2018). Mirca Madianou cites the Oxford definition of accountability as ‘the obligation or willingness to accept responsibility for one’s actions and their consequences’ (Madianou et al., 2016) - an understanding of accountability which seems rather remote from most common approaches to AAP.

However, alongside criticism of humanitarian organisations' failure to act on feedback (to 'close the loop', in humanitarian parlance), several informants also questioned whether the sector was asking the right questions about the AAP agenda and the reasons for the current impasse in efforts to make the sector more accountable (Informants 1 and 7). Comments on the sector's approach underlined that the integration of AAP components into all major organisations' programming had not brought about meaningful positive changes in programming or delivery, and it was suggested that efforts to improve accountability were limited by entrenched inequalities and power dynamics in the sector (Informant 1).

Similarly, informants identified and questioned a common assumption that increasing volumes and different types of data through different feedback mechanisms could in itself drive change – pointing to the lack of response on the part of humanitarian organisations to the already vast volumes of data collected from aid recipients (Informants 7 and 10). As was suggested at a September 2023 ODI-HPG roundtable on AAP, failures to improve humanitarian accountability do not stem simply from a lack of data or the 'wrong' kinds of feedback being collected, but are rather connected with a lack of clarity around several key elements of what precisely 'accountability' means and what it should look like in practice.

Shortcomings of accountability to affected people: a question of power

In a recent working paper, humanitarian researchers Louisa Seferis and Paul Harvey point out that the IASC definition of accountability identifies three dimensions of accountability: giving account, taking account and holding to account (Seferis and Harvey, 2022). While the first two of these dimensions are explicitly addressed in efforts to conduct better communication with communities and provide actionable feedback channels (although, as discussed above, there are valid critiques of these initiatives), it is striking that the capacity to hold humanitarian actors to account is the preserve of donors and humanitarians themselves, rather than communities or host governments.

While 'giving account' and 'taking account' are ultimately the responsibilities of humanitarian organisations, 'holding to account' can only happen if local actors (whether that be civil society, media, government actors or other authorities) are sufficiently empowered to engage with and pressure humanitarian actors to address shortcomings in humanitarian programming. This suggests that the current impasse in AAP cannot be solved simply by collecting more or 'better' data, or developing new tools for feedback and communication, but instead demands more complex forms of programming focused on engaging with and empowering aid recipients. In other words, progress on AAP is unlikely to come without simultaneous movement on localisation and participation of communities in programming design and implementation.

A broader look at accountability, which considers the wider political, economic and social dynamics of humanitarian intervention, would necessitate expanding the focus from simply collecting feedback, and would examine the power imbalances within humanitarian interventions and how

they shape what is possible around provision and engagement with feedback. Particularly in the case of protracted crises, where international presences have profound and long-term distorting effects on local and national political economies, accountability efforts will be more effective if they directly engage with the systemic social, political and economic effects of large-scale humanitarian interventions, and recognise that genuine changes in accountability will hinge on addressing the power imbalances between international organisations, national actors and communities.

However, there are significant obstacles to adopting such an approach to accountability, as many of the incentives for ‘shifting the power’ are not in place, or even actively work against any serious move towards ‘downward accountability’. Observers have noted that accountability is in many ways undesirable for humanitarian actors, who risk increased exposure to criticism through greater accountability (Knox Clarke, 2017; Steets et al., 2016).

Humanitarian organisations, even as they take on increasingly complex service delivery functions in a wide range of spheres, are often poorly equipped for this, including in their approach to accountability and engagement with local communities and political actors (Bennet, 2016; Informants 2 and 11). While the need for more joined-up work across the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus is by now widely recognised, there remain few internal incentives for humanitarian organisations to undertake the complex and extensive ‘retooling’ process that a move from short-term crisis response to longer-term development programming would demand.

Competition for funding in the ‘quasi-market’⁵ for project funding is a further obstacle which impedes ‘collective action in a competitive system’, as competition among humanitarian organisations disincentivises movement towards establishing collective accountability mechanisms (Featherstone, 2023; Krause, 2014). Competition for funding at the country level was also identified as an obstacle to AAP, as critical feedback is seen by agencies as having the potential to harm their reputations and reduce their capacity to win funding (Informant 3). This dynamic of competition can also be seen as contributing to ongoing failures to include local organisations, as well as affected communities, in collective AAP processes (Holloway and Lough, 2020). While approaches led by locally based or registered organisations do exist, these are in many cases in parallel to, and poorly coordinated with, internationally led accountability initiatives (Lough and Spencer, 2020). As such, shortcomings in the AAP agenda are often inextricable from broader failings around localisation and participation, which has ensured that funding and power remain concentrated in the hands of a small number of large, international humanitarian organisations. In the case of protracted crises, where humanitarian responses last for many years and have lasting, distorting effects on local and national political economies, the effects of these failings are particularly severe.

5 This term is borrowed from Krause (2014), where she argues that humanitarian organisations operate in a ‘quasi-market’ in which projects function as a commodity produced by humanitarian organisations for donors’ consumption. Given that donor funding is limited, humanitarian organisations compete to ‘sell’ their projects to donors to receive funding.

Somalia: accountability in protracted crisis

In Somalia, questions around accountability are particularly acute, as a long-term international presence – combining humanitarian, stabilisation, peacekeeping and development elements – has had a profound transformative effect on local and national political economies over the past three decades.

Within this context, Somalia has seen the development of numerous different accountability initiatives – including the International Organisation for Migration’s (IOM) Zite Manager data platform, perception surveys and analysis carried out by Ground Truth Solutions and the Communication with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network, radio-based feedback and communication platforms such as Radio Ergo and Africa’s Voices, and the development of digital feedback platforms such as Loop. However, these initiatives tend overwhelmingly to work within the paradigm of ‘accountability as feedback’, and are less engaged with equipping communities with the capacity to hold humanitarian organisations to account.

The importance of ‘holding to account’ in addressing wider questions of accountability in Somalia is particularly stark given the massive distortionary effects of the international presence in Somalia over the last three decades. The effects of the massive infusion of food aid, and subsequently cash and other support, on empowering a political and business elite which remain largely unaccountable to the population, as well as the significant power imbalances between well-resourced international actors (particularly UN agencies) and under-funded national government and civil society, as well as the Somali population as a whole, are well-documented (Ahmad, 2012; Jaspars et al., 2020; Philipps, 2020; Informants 2 and 4). The failure of AAP initiatives to address these underlying power imbalances between international and domestic actors points to the limitations of accountability as conventionally understood by humanitarian actors in Somalia (and elsewhere). It also highlights the need to move from a relatively narrow definition of accountability to broader, more long-term forms of engagement, which grapple directly with questions of power, localisation and transparency.

Accountability to affected people in Somalia

In Somalia as elsewhere, a vast range of different AAP initiatives and programmes have been developed. These can be internal to humanitarian organisations or contracted out to third parties. Some are relatively geographically or programmatically limited, while others prioritise universal and general accessibility. Many rely on collecting large volumes of data and quantitative analysis, while others focus on collecting detailed quantitative data and conducting perception surveys with aid recipients.

Digital technologies play an increasing role in humanitarian response in Somalia as elsewhere. However, in a country in which only 12% of citizens have internet access, there is a clear limit to the reach of digital technologies. As such, platforms such as Loop have developed software which allows feedback to be provided through voice calls, while other initiatives such as Zite Manager (used by the International Organization for Migration) combine digital, hotline and face-to-face elements.

Informants also suggested that, while in densely populated areas – including internally displaced persons’ (IDP) camps – face-to-face feedback mechanisms were more feasible, there was also the need for a range of tools for collecting feedback in different settings, including more dispersed, rural areas. However, it was suggested that in all cases a face-to-face element would be essential. Indeed, previous ODI research has indicated that the effectiveness of digital technologies in humanitarian responses is often dependent on the presence of ‘trusted interlocutors’ who can act as intermediaries between humanitarian organisations and communities (Bryant, 2022).

Assumptions that increased adoption of technological solutions (such as digital feedback mechanisms and hotlines) will automatically lead to improved feedback (and consequently, accountability) fail to reckon with on-the-ground realities. For example, the degree of control exercised by gatekeepers in IDP camps and consequent reluctance to criticise them.⁶ Increased adoption of digital technologies also ignores a well-established preference on the part of aid recipients for increased face-to-face feedback options (Fluck and Barter, 2019; Informant 3). One informant, observing that the vast majority of feedback collected through IOM’s Zite Manager happened in person, warned against ‘seeing hotlines as a panacea’ (Informant 3).

Informants also criticised current approaches to AAP as ‘box-ticking’, suggesting that the collection of feedback did not lead to greater inclusion in decision-making (Informants 8 and 10). A report from Ground Truth Solutions echoes this, noting that:

‘a needs assessment survey here, a feedback mechanism or focus group there – is not enough. Periodic integration of community consultations into planning documents risks enabling humanitarian responses to look accountable when those in positions of power and controlling resources are not systematically reacting to people’s views’ (Ground Truth Solutions, 2022: 3).

Instead of further adoption of ‘innovative’ digital tools, the same report points to the need for systematic participation as part of a programme of longer-term development and localisation (Ground Truth Solutions, 2022: 6). While the challenges to localisation and participation remain immense in Somalia, one informant pointed to new initiatives to support Somali journalism,

6 In the Somalia context, ‘gatekeepers’ refers to the managers of IDP camps. These are often entrepreneurs who set up camps and act as middlemen between humanitarian organisations and aid recipients. They are widely thought to profit significantly from humanitarian aid, either through diversion or by charging IDPs for rent or provision of services in camps (Jaspars et al., 2020; McCullough and Saed, 2017).

highlighting in particular USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance efforts to tie humanitarian accountability to broader questions of localisation and community engagement (Informant 8). While the long-term success of such initiatives remains to be seen, they do appear to point to a fresh approach, focused on long-term engagement and support to local actors, in place of a drive to collect ever-increasing quantities of feedback, without challenging the underlying power dynamics of the humanitarian presence in Somalia.

Accountability beyond accountability to affected people

While AAP initiatives in Somalia have delivered some limited, specific results, they appear to largely fall short of addressing the wider challenges of making international humanitarian actors accountable to local actors. These wider challenges broadly relate to the significant power imbalances between international and national actors (both government and civil society) in terms of financial capacity and financing relationships, organisational interests and the incentives underpinning programming cycles, and relative decision-making power and influence.

The Somalia humanitarian response plan for 2023 indicated a need for \$2.6 billion (UN OCHA, 2023), nearly triple the Federal Government of Somalia's budget for the same year (\$977 million, of which only \$283 million came from domestic revenue sources, with the remainder provided through project and budget support from donors) (Mohamud, 2023). The vast disparity between these figures points to the outsized role played by the humanitarian sector in Somalia, and to the transformative effects international aid has had on Somalia's national political economy.

As academic Aisha Ahmad argues:

‘[b]y infusing large amounts of cash into the informal economy, international interventions fundamentally transform and dominate the local economy. From the moment international organisations arrive in a country, the biggest source of income for the local population becomes the intervention itself’ (Ahmad 2021: 317).

In Somalia, this process has been ongoing for the last three decades, as rents derived from international aid have empowered a new business and political elite, on whom international organisations have now come to a large extent to rely.

In a 2020 study of the political economy of food aid in Somalia, food security expert Suzanne Jaspars notes the close links between aid, business and politics, and the mutual benefit both aid organisations and private companies derive from a broadly unaccountable political economy of food aid (Jaspars, 2020). Jaspars also notes the relatively minor role played by the federal government in food aid, in comparison to international organisations and business actors (most notably mobile company Hormuud, which maintains interests across nearly all sectors of Somalia's economy), a fact that is reflected in the budgetary disparities between the national government and international aid actors.

Interviewees pointed towards a mixture of inertia and vested interests as key to maintaining humanitarian funding cycles, despite a growing desire to reduce humanitarian funding at the most senior levels of international organisations. A reluctance to channel money through national governance architecture, as well as recurring crises demanding rapid humanitarian response, were also identified as obstacles to a move to more long-term thinking about the international presence in Somalia (Informant 2).

This disparity is also reflected in the relationships between ministries and aid organisations, with UN organisations in many cases supplanting ministries as Somalia's service delivery organisations. Jaspars cites one government adviser who suggested that 'FAO functions as the Ministry of Agriculture, the UN Development Programme as the Ministry of Planning, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) as the Ministry of Health, and perhaps WFP as the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs' (Jaspars 2020: 40). One interviewee suggested that collaboration between international organisations and ministries and local government was limited to obtaining their approval rather than involving them substantially, while the lack of transparency enabled both national and local bodies to divert aid they were responsible for distributing (Informant 4).

Issues with political accountability at the national level were also identified by numerous interviewees, who pointed to the poor resourcing of civil society and media, as well as the government's lack of concern with transparency (Informants 4 and 8). One informant suggested that there were between 350 and 500 people responsible for 'running the country' (Informant 2).

Challenges relating to accountability were seen not only in terms of state-society relations, but also in terms of the capacity of national media and CSOs to engage with the humanitarian sector. Humanitarian organisations were described by one informant as 'insular', and working in their own silos, while domestic Somali media organisations lacked the resources to engage with humanitarian organisations. The same informant argued that even if humanitarian organisations organised open meetings with local journalists, they wouldn't have sufficient resources to attend them (Informant 8).

The challenges to accountability in Somalia are therefore vast, and inextricably linked with the wider national political economy, including but not limited to the humanitarian response. This suggests that, while accountability mechanisms can play a valuable role, they can only be one part of a broader plan for long-term localisation and the transfer of power and resources to national and local actors. Ultimately, efforts to achieve meaningful accountability must go beyond the programmatic silos and limited timeframes which have characterised AAP initiatives up until now, and address longer-term more complex questions around Somalia's political and socioeconomic development.

Conclusions

The accountability to affected people agenda has largely failed to achieve its most ambitious and transformative goals. It has instead mobilised an extensive ‘accountability architecture’ which collects increasingly large volumes and complex forms of data and feedback from aid recipients, many of which are not acted on and do not appear to significantly affect the aims or structure of humanitarian programming.

In Somalia, the current approach to AAP, which prioritises the flow of information between humanitarian organisations and aid recipients (in other words, ‘giving’ and ‘taking’ account), has largely neglected consideration of the vastly unequal power dynamics which hold back the third, and arguably most important, aspect of accountability – holding humanitarian organisations to account.

While developing systems and capacities which will enable local actors to hold humanitarian actors to account (and to do this in ways which will not impair humanitarian organisations’ ability to deliver aid) is inevitably a hugely complex and time-consuming endeavour, the current impasse of the AAP agenda clearly indicates that such an approach is required to drive meaningful progress in humanitarian AAP efforts. Years of experience indicate that simply collecting feedback, whether through digital platforms, hotlines or face-to-face, is not sufficient to realise the goals of the AAP agenda, either in terms of increasing the effectiveness of aid delivery or driving greater inclusion of communities in humanitarian processes.

A new, more transformative conception of what it means for a humanitarian response to be truly accountable is therefore required. Directly confronting the political complexities and dynamics in which humanitarian interventions take place, and a frank reckoning with the effects that humanitarian actors themselves have on these dynamics, while far from straightforward, can be a first step towards this new understanding of humanitarian accountability. This approach, which would move away from equating accountability with the collection of feedback and towards a more serious and considered confrontation with the power dynamics which hold back accountability, can offer valuable new perspectives on what is needed to break the years-old impasse in the humanitarian accountability agenda.

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Appendix 1 List of Key Informants

1. Humanitarian adviser, government department, donor country (17.04.23).
2. Independent researcher (05.05.23).
3. Co-ordination and camp management specialist, international organisation (11.05.23).
4. Researcher, Somali organisation (11.05.23).
5. NGO employee, regional organisation (Horn of Africa) (12.5.23).
6. AAP researcher, international NGO (16.05.23).
7. AAP researchers, international NGO (19.05.23).
8. NGO representative, Somali NGO, (22.05.23).
9. NGO representative, Somali NGO (25.5.23).
10. AAP researchers, international NGO (25.05.23).
11. Humanitarian coordinator, multilateral organisation (16.08.23)