

EXPLAIN: ESSENTIAL BRIEFINGS FOR HUMANITARIAN DECISION-MAKERS

PUTTING PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE: ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED POPULATIONS

Accountability has long been at the forefront of humanitarian discourse, but **progress for crisis-affected people is stalling**. The **'participation revolution' promised by the Grand Bargain hasn't materialised** and those giving feedback are **increasingly disillusioned by what they experience as a non-responsive and top-down aid system**.

Reduced budgets and rising needs are leading stretched donors and agencies to question whether they must **trade off community engagement approaches against 'life-saving' activities**.

Feedback mechanisms have become prolific in humanitarian responses, but agencies **struggle to close the feedback loop by meaningfully addressing local concerns**, particularly for **people trapped in protracted displacement or multiple cycles of crisis**.

EVIDENCE SHOWS STRIKINGLY SLOW PROGRESS ON EXPERIENCES OF AID AND AAP MECHANISMS

Only 36% of respondents recently surveyed by Ground Truth Solutions in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic felt they could influence the humanitarian response. Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS) Alliance's Humanitarian Accountability Report 2022 found **commitments related to accountability among the lowest scoring**.

Evaluations of responses on COVID-19 and Ukraine also indicate poor progress.

TWEAKING THE SYSTEM, WITHOUT IMPROVING OUTCOMES

Despite high numbers of humanitarian country teams with accountability frameworks and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) working groups, there are **few tangible results for people in crisis**. The State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) report showed only 36% of aid recipients believed agencies communicated well, while only **33% felt able to provide feedback or complain**.

Despite many international agencies working to improve the quality and widespread use of AAP mechanisms on their own and in inter-agency fora, such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force's portal of AAP resources and helpdesk, and work on collective accountability mechanisms, these widespread efforts have not translated into meaningful community engagement.

ADDRESSING ONGOING CHALLENGES

- **Communities don't know who to communicate with and how**. Familiar issues haven't been addressed: language barriers, limited access to technology, accessibility of physical meetings, communicating sensitive issues.
- **Junior staff working directly with communities and staff from local organisations often don't have the influence** to change projects based on feedback.
- International Rescue Committee (IRC) has tried to address this through AAP commitments in staff appraisals.

- **Agencies often lack the processes to manage or analyse feedback, or integrate it into decision-making.** The [Dutch Relief Alliance](#) Joint Response in South Sudan has set out **clear pathways for community inputs and passing them up the decision-making hierarchy.**
- **Humanitarian organisations aren't set up for flexibility and adaptive management and have trouble giving up control.** Programmes are designed without community consultation, making it **difficult to change pre-agreed outputs based on feedback.** This is further complicated when several agencies are involved in management, including **local partners closest to communities but furthest from donors who can greenlight changes.** Any flexibility made available by donors isn't typically passed on to local actors.
- **Some organisations are handing over decision-making directly to communities,** but in very small pilots. Christian Aid's survivor- and community-led response programme recognises communities' crucial role as first responders.
- **Tensions between donors and agencies can inhibit effective AAP.** Organisations can easily box tick their way through **accountability.** Some donors increasingly incentivise AAP: The UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Payment by Results approach, which rewards agencies who fulfil Grand Bargain commitments on AAP.
- **A drive for impartial decisions may be at odds with community norms.** Who decides who is the most vulnerable – the aid system, or people living in crisis who best understand community dynamics?
- **Short-termism impacts accountability.** In most crises, people's needs go beyond life-saving requirements and priorities. The **system isn't set up for long-term priorities.**

Refugees, particularly, don't receive longer-term, holistic support. Host governments may be unwilling to consider such solutions for displaced people, putting **humanitarians at odds with their accountability ambitions.** The Ugandan government and UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, have [worked together to engage refugees in decision-making.](#)

- **Understanding community culture and power dynamics is fundamental, but these skills aren't cultivated.** Some people may have their [ability to speak up reduced](#) by their culture, lived experience of vulnerability, or fear of repressive governments. **This can have knock-on effects for the relevance of aid provided and who receives it. Agencies tend to overlook strong contextual knowledge held by local staff or partners.** UNICEF is releasing a range of outputs to help humanitarian agencies better engage with social science approaches.
- **Formal feedback mechanisms often miss conversations and opinions expressed organically within communities.** The [Rooted in Trust](#) project has used **social listening, a growing approach to seeking and analysing information and opinions conveyed by populations.**
- **The sector is unregulated and self-monitored by voluntary standards. There is no sanctioning mechanism for bad practice.** The Core Humanitarian Standards are being revised to '[prioritise listening to and understanding what vulnerable people need and value](#)', but are still non-enforceable and non-binding.

[CLICK TO READ A MORE EXTENSIVE VERSION OF THIS BRIEFING.](#)

ABOUT EXplain

The greatest learning challenge for our sector is less about capturing lessons and experiences, but creating spaces for humanitarians to absorb and act on what is already known.

Operational decision makers – at all levels – are often the people with the least time to engage with vital new learning and evidence.

That's why ALNAP is piloting new approaches to communicating knowledge tailored to the needs, expectations and preferences of the busiest humanitarians.

EXplain is ALNAP's new learning experience for 2023.

- Straightforward communications to help humanitarian decision-makers make sense of, and exchange on, current evidence and discourse. Key learning and links all in one place: sourced, checked and curated by ALNAP's highly-respected global research team.
- Rich and accessible content, provided in a time efficient way, in an open peercomfortable environment.
- Bringing senior humanitarians more up to date on the latest developments, increasing awareness on the implications for their work, creating confidence as part of continuous professional development.

EXplain is an optimal mix of focused presentations, discussion and sharing of perspectives, with a range of high-quality supporting materials. It gives senior operational leaders a better understanding of what's out there and what they really need to know.

EXplain: simple communication, sense-making, exchange of experience.