People-Driven Response: Power and Participation in Humanitarian Action

Jeremy Konyndyk and Rose Worden

Abstract

The notion that humanitarian response should center on the people it serves, rather than the aid agencies serving them, has been repeatedly codified in humanitarian commitments as far back as the early 1990s. Yet the mainstream humanitarian system has struggled to translate these commitments into practice: corresponding reform efforts have failed to systemically broaden accountability to and participation of aid recipients in response efforts. Major constraints have included misaligned incentive structures between donors and aid agencies, power imbalances between aid providers and aid recipients, and operational and political complexities arising at field level. To produce real systemic change, the aid system must move beyond technical and rhetorical approaches to accountability and begin reshaping the power and incentive structures that influence aid decision-making. This paper proposes a set of mutually reinforcing recommendations centered around three imperatives: enshrining the influence of aid recipients at all levels of aid decision-making; developing independent channels for soliciting the priorities and perspectives of crisis-affected people; and institutionalizing a set of enabling changes to humanitarian operational and personnel practices.

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Overview

Humanitarian relief must involve, and be accountable to, the crisis-affected people it serves.

Versions of this principle can be found in most foundational humanitarian documents—from the Sphere Standards to the Red Cross Code of Conduct to the Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles to the World Humanitarian Summit commitments. The notion also features prominently in the humanitarian reform commitments of the 2011 Transformative Agenda (as "accountability to affected populations") and the 2016 Grand Bargain (as the yet-more-ambitious-sounding "participation revolution").

Yet international humanitarian action is still not driven by or accountable to the people that it exists to serve. Humanitarian power structures continue to engage crisis-affected people as passive recipients of aid rather than a force in shaping priorities and plans. Achieving the aspiration of people-driven humanitarian action will require uncomfortable—but overdue—changes to the humanitarian system's incentive structures and power dynamics.

Reform initiatives over the years have produced numerous technical methodologies, guidance documents, and compelling pilot initiatives around humanitarian accountability and local participation—but largely failed to translate these into universal shifts in aid practice. The persistent failure of the international humanitarian sector to make good on this collective commitment points to the need for deeper changes. Toward that end, the Center for Global Development (CGD) convened an expert workshop in February 2019 to explore constraints to progress and develop priorities for future reforms. The workshop included 20 participants from a diverse range of international, national, and diaspora NGOs, donors, the United Nations, and the humanitarian research community. This paper builds on findings from that workshop, as well as a series of expert interviews conducted by CGD and a review of relevant literature.

The overarching message is that accountability and participation are ultimately issues of who wields power and influence over key resources and decisions; and reforms must address those dimensions in order to drive real change. CGD's research suggests that voluntary commitments and technical guidelines can produce effective one-off initiatives but will not generate widespread improvements in culture and practices. Moving beyond piecemeal approaches will require treating accountability not as a subordinate activity but rather as an integral element of the culture and systems of humanitarian action. An appropriately ambitious agenda must address the ingrained practices, business incentives, and power dynamics that govern day-to-day humanitarian operations. This will take real political will from aid leaders, particularly those in the donor community.

Background

The professionalization of the humanitarian industry from the mid-1990s through the early 2000s spawned a flurry of new foundational documents, many of which highlighted the centrality of local participation in aid. The 1992 Code of Conduct for International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief focused two of its ten elements on participation and accountability. It committed humanitarian organizations to involve beneficiaries in "the design, management, and implementation" of aid programs and to "strive to achieve full community participation." The Code further committed aid groups to "hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources." A few years later, the Humanitarian Charter incorporated in the 2000 Sphere Standards committed relief agencies to the "belief that the affected population is at the center of humanitarian action, and [to] recognize that their active participation is essential to providing assistance in ways that best meet their needs." The humanitarian donor community followed suit in 2003 with the Good Humanitarian Donorship principles, which affirmed that aid partners should "ensure, to the greatest possible extent, adequate involvement of beneficiaries in design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of humanitarian response." [1]

The Indian Ocean tsunami response of 2004–5, among the largest relief efforts in history, provided a test case for these commitments—and made abundantly clear that they were failing to deliver. A landmark after-action survey conducted by the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (composed of donors, aid groups, and independent researchers) found "accountability and ownership" to be a prominent weak spot in the operation. It homed in particularly on power dynamics, arguing that habitual, supply-driven practices by international relief agencies had overlooked and marginalized the more impactful work of local actors. It noted that "international agencies should…[make] their systems and practices suitable for maximum participation by local people and national governments."[2] The evaluation's lead recommendation called for "a fundamental reorientation from supplying [internationally led] aid to supporting and facilitating communities' own relief and recovery priorities."[3]

The ensuing "Humanitarian Reform" initiative launched by the UN in 2005 was inspired in large part by the wider shortcomings of the Tsunami relief operation. But it failed to meaningfully address local/international power dynamics, and arguably made them worse by further centralizing power and influence with major international agencies. The introduction of the Cluster Approach streamlined coordination at a sector-by-sector level, which was convenient for large aid organizations but ran contrary to the holistic manner in which

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[1] "Principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship," GHD Initiative,
https://www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/principles-good-practice-of-ghd/principles-good-practice-ghd.html.
[2] Elisabeth Scheper, Arjuna Parakrama, Smruti Patel and Tony Vaux (2006). *Impact of the Tsunami Response on Local and National Capacities* London: ALNAP, 12.
[3] Ibid, 44.

affected people experience and articulate their own needs. The clusters also approached accountability "predominantly as hierarchical accountability between cluster lead organizations and the Humanitarian Coordinator" rather than downward accountability to aid recipients.[4] In theory a cluster lead agency bears responsibility to ensure "participatory and community-based approaches in sectoral needs assessment, analysis, planning, monitoring and response."[5] But in 2010, an evaluation found "no evidence or examples of clusters actively promoting participatory or community-based approaches among their members" (comprised mainly of implementing partners with contractual relationships to the lead agency) or, for that matter, in their own activities.[6]

Over the next several years, persistent shortcomings in participation and accountability (and wider weaknesses in humanitarian coordination and leadership) created additional momentum for reform. After prominent shortcomings in the 2010 Haiti earthquake and Pakistan floods responses, humanitarian leaders launched a new "Transformative Agenda" to build on the previous generation of reforms. The Transformative Agenda cited accountability to affected populations (AAP) as its "ultimate objective," and also as one of its core workstreams. This process generated a set of five core commitments on AAP endorsed by major humanitarian agencies (see box 1).

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[4] Julia Steets, François Grünewald, Andrea Binder, Véronique de Geoffroy, Domitille Kauffmann, Susanna Krüger, Claudia Meier and Bonaventure Sokpoh (2010) *Cluster Approach Evaluation 2 Synthesis Report* Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, 44.

[5] Ibid, 58.

[6] Julia Steets, François Grünewald, Andrea Binder, Véronique de Geoffroy, Domitille Kauffmann, Susanna Krüger, Claudia Meier and Bonaventure Sokpoh. (2010) *Cluster Approach Evaluation 2 Synthesis Report*. Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, 43, 59.

> **Box 1. Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Five Commitments to Accountability to Affected Populations (CAAP)**
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> • LEADERSHIP/GOVERNANCE: Demonstrate commitment to accountability to affected populations through the integration of feedback and accountability mechanisms into country strategies, programme proposals, monitoring and evaluation, recruitment, staff inductions, trainings and performance management, partnership agreements, and reporting.
>
> • TRANSPARENCY: Provide accessible and timely information to affected populations on organizational procedures, structures and processes that affect them to ensure that they can make informed decisions and choices, and facilitate a dialogue between an organisation and its affected populations over information provision.
>
> • FEEDBACK and COMPLAINTS: Actively seek the views of affected populations to improve policy and practice in programming, ensuring that feedback and complaints mechanisms are streamlined, appropriate and robust enough to deal with (communicate, receive, process, respond to and learn from) complaints about breaches in policy and stakeholder dissatisfaction.
>
> • PARTICIPATION: Enable affected populations to play an active role in the decision-making processes that affect them through the establishment of clear guidelines and practice s to engage them appropriately and ensure that the most marginalised and affected are represented and have influence.
>
> • DESIGN, MONITORING and EVALUATION: Design, monitor and evaluate the goals and objectives of programmes with the involvement of affected populations, feeding learning back into the organisation on an ongoing basis and reporting on the results of the process.

However, a comprehensive review of the Transformative Agenda in 2016,[7] initiated at the request of donor and aid agency leaders, showed that AAP made the least progress of all reform areas. The review found "little or no change" on AAP, with few Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) taking AAP commitments forward. The lack of buy-in from HCTs and cluster member agencies to take recommendations forward likewise hampered its effectiveness.[8]

In the wake of these sustained shortfalls on AAP, the Grand Bargain reforms launched at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit doubled down, committing aid agencies and donors to a "participation revolution" that would involve affected populations "in making the decisions which affect their lives." While the Grand Bargain remains in process, it too is showing limited progress on this front. The 2018 Grand Bargain assessment noted while

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[7] Susana Krueger, Andras Derzsi-Horvath, Dr. Julia Streets (2016) IASC Transformative Agenda – A Review of Reviews and their Follow-up. Global Public Policy Institute. Berlin: GPPi/Inspire Consortium, https://www.gppi.net/2016/02/05/iasc-transformative-agenda-a-review-of-reviews-and-their-follow-up

[8] Susana Krueger, Andras Derzsi-Horvath, Dr. Julia Streets (2016) IASC Transformative Agenda – A Review of Reviews and their Follow-up. Global Public Policy Institute. Berlin: GPPi/Inspire Consortium, 17.

"many felt the 'participation revolution' had transformative potential, it remains unclear if humanitarian programs are becoming demand driven."[9]

Multiple independent reviews have found consistently that the Transformative Agenda and Grand Bargain have delivered limited progress on involving affected people in relief decision-making, and on demonstrating meaningful accountability to them. **Notably, neither the Transformative Agenda nor the Grand Bargain commitments on accountability and participation attempted to rebalance the underlying power disparities between aid providers and recipients.** And so, like the commitments in the 1990s and early 2000s, the participation and accountability reforms of the past decade have faltered.

Most importantly, over the past decade aid recipients themselves have consistently cited this as a major concern. In 2012 The Listening Project published extensive global surveys of aid recipients and found that while most saw aid as helpful, they also felt it needed more fundamental changes in order to make good on its aspirations. In particular, interviewees observed that aid groups do not go far enough to engage recipient communities in aid programming and decision-making. More recent research has yielded similar findings. Surveys of nearly 10,000 aid recipients in recent years, conducted by Ground Truth Solutions, have given low marks on whether aid agencies consider aid recipients' input.[10] Meanwhile, when aid recipients *are* consulted, it has a marked impact on their perceptions: the 2018 State of the Humanitarian System report found aid recipients who reported giving feedback on aid programs "were 3.5 times more likely to say that they had been treated with dignity and respect" than those who did not.[11] In the 2018 Grand Bargain assessment, a majority of aid recipients reported being unaware of available complaint mechanisms and felt that their views were not considered. Moreover, affected people are not always clear on how the feedback they give will be used, and often perceive that it makes little or no difference to the aid they receive. This perception seems well founded—the 2019 Grand Bargain assessment found that "[t]he principal challenge holding back realisation of the 'participation revolution' remains the lack of progress on ensuring that feedback from affected populations is integrated into the design, delivery and review of programmes."[12]

Constraints to Change

The persistent failure of past reform commitments to deliver meaningful change points to deeper problems with how power—in particular over resource allocation, response

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[9] Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, Lydia Poole, Sarah Bailey and Julie Belanger (2018) Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report: 2018. Humanitarian Policy Group. London: ODI/HPG, 46.

[10] Ground Truth Solutions (2019) *The Humanitarian Voice Index.* (August 29, 2019) distributed by Ground Truth Solutions, www.humanitarianvoiceindex.org/

[11] ALNAP (2018) The State of the Humanitarian System. ALNAP Study. London: ALNAP/ODI, 161.

[12] Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, Wendy Fenton and Lydia Poole. Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report (2019) Humanitarian Policy Group. London: ODI/HPG, 45 https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12734.pdf

priorities, and aid delivery tactics—is organized in the humanitarian sector. A range of practical and structural constraints have historically combined to block progress. The workshop and literature review identified obstacles to change across multiple dimensions of humanitarian action.

Distribution of power: Power over core humanitarian decision-making flows first from the donors, who both define overarching resource allocations across agencies and emergencies, and also serve on the governing boards of the multilateral aid agencies that receive the lion's share of humanitarian funding. How donors choose to allocate funding and orient major humanitarian institutions is in turn heavily influenced by the priorities of those very same multilateral agencies, and secondarily by major international NGOs. It is those institutions' assessments and perspectives that have historically shaped humanitarian funding plans and informed donor contributions. Importantly, those donor contributions are almost universally determined directly between international donors and implementing agencies, without involvement by aid recipients.

Researcher Michael Barnett has characterized this arrangement as a "club" framework, where power is held by a "humanitarian club" of elites in an "organized and hierarchical network of states, donors, international organizations, and NGOs that centers on the UN system." This club exercises control over resources and agenda setting and is reticent to open decision-making power to new members.[13] At a macro level this club takes the form of multilateral agency governing bodies and pledging conferences, where member states, donors, and aid agencies confer on high-level strategic aims. At a response level, this club constitutes the Humanitarian Country Team and the sectoral clusters, which heavily influence resource allocations and priorities. And at a field level, specific implementation decisions are made by these same individual aid agencies, with considerable discretion over whether and how they incorporate community participation and feedback into their implementation decisions. Some agencies—indeed, a growing number—are putting in place mechanisms for soliciting community feedback, but at the end of the day, the recipient community still has little recourse over how their feedback is utilized or applied.

This intermediary role of major aid agencies positions them as gatekeepers between aid funders and aid recipients. Affected populations have little access to major decision-making spaces; their voices and perspectives tend to be weakly represented, if at all. Field-level engagement with affected people's perspectives occurs, but unevenly. Beyond that there are few avenues above the project level for the affected population to engage in the major decisions that affect them. Response-level Humanitarian Country Teams do not involve representation of the affected population. Nor do aid agency governing bodies: multilateral organizations are governed by member states and/or donors, and most NGOs are governed by wealthy and/or influential people from the country where they are headquartered. As long as all major aid decisions take place in spaces dominated exclusively by international donors and aid agencies, affected people's influence will remain peripheral.

[13] Michael Barnett and Peter Walker. "Regime Change for Humanitarian Aid." Foreign Affairs. September 03, 2015. Accessed June 19, 2019. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-06-16/regime-change-humanitarian-aid.

➢ *Requirements for progress*: To overcome the fundamental power distribution in the humanitarian sector, accountability and participation reforms must be integrated across multiple levels of humanitarian decision-making, enabling unfiltered representation of aid recipients' perspectives in these spaces.

Fragmented business model: While the status quo concentrates tremendous power over resource and priority decisions in the hands of large aid agencies, they are not disinterested actors in these processes. As outlined in CGD's 2018 paper on Rethinking the Humanitarian Business Model, there are strong incentives for major aid agencies (and the core coordination clusters, which they lead) to emphasize needs and priorities that align with their own mandates and institutional perspectives.[14] And implementation of AAP has at times mirrored this fragmentation, with individual clusters and agencies launching their own duplicative mechanisms. An expert interviewed by CGD cited cases like the proliferation of UN and NGO complaint hotlines in Lebanon, with each aid group in each sector running its own parallel project-level hotline, as confusing and burdensome for end-users, and so ultimately counterproductive to the whole endeavor.[15]

As feedback mechanisms become more common, they are often being developed at the level of individual agencies or NGOs, or even individual projects. If this trajectory continues, there will be growing fragmentation and duplication of feedback and AAP mechanisms, which may in turn undermine both their collective effectiveness and affected people's confidence in them. It means that perspectives falling outside the parameters of traditional mandates or sectors lack a clear path to follow-up action. It also forces affected people to navigate the daunting complexity of the humanitarian architecture in order to simply convey their perspectives on the aid they receive.

This is difficult to reconcile with an approach that *should* center on the agency of affected people. Affected populations experience their own needs in a holistic way that may not fit neatly within familiar parameters of need; recent research by the International Rescue Committee has found that feedback that falls outside organizational mandates is the type most frequently received in feedback mechanisms.[16] The Listening Project observed that many aid recipients "said that [the Listening Project survey] was the first time they had been invited to speak so openly and freely; usually they had been asked only to talk about their involvement in a specific project or activity."[17]

➢ *Requirements for progress*: Develop feedback and accountability channels that are distinct from individual agency or cluster mandates, and open-ended enough to

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[14] Jeremy Konyndyk (2018) *Rethinking the Humanitarian Business Model*. Washington, DC: CGD.

[15] A 2014 Oxfam review of humanitarian program effectiveness noted that more than 130 hotlines had been reported with only a few in operation; Oxfam (2014) *GB Project Effectiveness Review Management Response*. Lebanon: Oxfam, 5.

[16] International Rescue Committee. *Feedback to Action: Strategies to Improve the Use of Feedback in Programmatic Decision-making*. New York: IRC, 24.

[17] Mary B. Anderson, Dayna Brown and Isabella Jean (2015) Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 14.

enable people to express views on their own terms rather than within pre-established sectoral parameters.

Politics and legitimacy in contested environments: The question of who legitimately speaks for the local population(s) can be complex for international agencies to navigate. As one expert observed during CGD's workshop, "the loudest voices aren't necessarily representative" of wider community views. The opportunity to influence aid providers' priorities is a form of power, and poorly managed consultation tactics risk creating or entrenching "gatekeepers" who position themselves as self-appointed arbiters between aid groups and affected populations (and in fairness, this same characterization could be applied to the role of INGOs and UN agencies).

This is further complicated by the fact that most humanitarian operations today occur in contested or violent contexts where a government is in conflict with a subset of its population, or where different groups in a single community are at odds. The question of whose perspective should carry influence raises complex tensions between the principle of humanitarian neutrality and the reality that humanitarian consultation can affect the power dynamics between opposing groups. The imperative of listening to crisis-affected people may run directly counter to the aims of a government that wants to suppress their voices or use their suffering toward its own political objectives. Conferring influence on a marginalized group—even if simply over aid priorities—can itself be seen as a politically partial act.

These challenges cannot be resolved but must instead be thoughtfully managed. Navigating this complex terrain must start with understanding it—yet political economy analysis in the humanitarian sector remains weak and uneven. While the interplay between aid and local power dynamics has been a widely recognized issue as far back as the publication of "Do No Harm" methodology two decades ago, there is still little systematic investment in this kind of analysis. Some individual agencies develop this sort of analysis internally; Mercy Corps, for example, has a humanitarian analysis team that develops reporting on local power dynamics relevant to aid operations. But this remains more the exception than the rule.

➢ *Requirements for progress*: Improve the political economy analysis that informs humanitarian decision-making to guard against empowering illegitimate gatekeepers; use feedback and accountability protocols that widely survey an affected population rather than depending on self-appointed or tokenistic interlocutors.

Donor priorities and political will: Few senior leaders in the humanitarian sector have made participation and accountability a top priority. Considerably more leadership from the highest levels of aid agencies is required to move this agenda forward. Participants in CGD's workshop felt this was unlikely to emerge spontaneously, and would likely require more of a push from the donor community. Ahead of the Grand Bargain, the 2015 State of the Humanitarian System report acknowledged that the "concerted political will" of major donors was missing, and the 2018 edition of the report places responsibility with donors "to incentivize more consistent practice by aid organizations" through financial and political

support, noting that the demand for participation in decision-making structures comes "from people who do not have the power to incentivize it."[18]

While donors have long acknowledged population participation and accountability as important, grantees perceive these as comparatively lower priorities than financial accountability, technical quality, and performance against defined deliverables. Shortfalls in these latter areas would trigger remedial action by the donor—even suspending or cancelling an award—whereas shortfalls in engaging the affected population typically would not. Grantees recognize this implicit incentive structure and adjust their own priorities accordingly.

Additionally, donor grant structures (whether direct donor grants or funding sub-granted to implementers through UN agencies) are sometimes too rigid to allow for mid-course project changes based on feedback from affected people. Aid groups also noted to CGD that when donor priorities and systems run counter to affected people's feedback, it is the donor prerogatives that predominate. Whereas accountability to the affected population represents an ideal, donors are principally accountable to parliaments and taxpayers and fear that deference to locally driven aid priorities may be seen as a loss of control over humanitarian resources.[19]

> *Requirements for progress*: Emphasize feedback and accountability as a condition of donor funding; ensure the grant funding is sufficiently flexible to enable feedback-driven adaptation; generate visible leadership and peer pressure from committed champions within aid agencies.

Practical challenges: Even where there is a sincere desire for aid-recipient involvement and accountability, aid providers face a range of practical challenges. In fast-moving crises such as a natural disaster or a new refugee influx, there is pressure on aid groups to deliver quickly and there may be limited time for in-depth local consultation. Even in more protracted situations, tight project timelines and short humanitarian funding cycles (typically 12 months or less) limit the time available for fostering local ownership.

International personnel often lack local language skills and turn over quickly, making it difficult to develop trusting relationships with local stakeholders. And the skills that aid agencies seek in staff recruitment typically relate to project management, administration, and technical expertise, whereas effective local engagement requires a skillset more akin to social work or community organizing (though these skillsets are sometimes found in the development realm). Additionally, growing reliance on remote management approaches in high-risk humanitarian environments, along with formalization of standards and processes, impede direct interaction between aid providers and recipients.

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[18] Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, Lydia Poole, Sarah Bailey and Julie Belanger (2018) *Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report: 2018*. Humanitarian Policy Group. London: ODI/HPG, 50, 34.

[19] Lotte Ruppert, and Andrea Binder. (2016) "Full Accountability to Affected People Cannot Possibly Be Bad – Or Can It?" GPPi. Accessed June 19, 2019. https://www.gppi.net/2016/07/04/full-accountability-to-affected-people-cannot-possibly-be-bad-or-can-it.

➤ *Requirements for progress*: Reinforce feedback, participation, and accountability mechanisms by prioritizing recruitment of aid professionals with those associated skills; adapt feedback strategies to suit the timing and phasing of different types of crises; ensure grant and project timelines allow for appropriately sequenced feedback and participation approaches.

Toward People-Driven Response

Past commitments to elevate affected people's voices within humanitarian action have been voluntary, unenforced, and disconnected from meaningful sources of power in the humanitarian landscape. At the same time, rebalancing power toward crisis-affected people is not a simple task; it must integrate very diverse sets of aid recipients' perspectives into a complex and arcane aid architecture without resorting to tokenism or simply empowering a set of arbitrary gatekeepers. A 2016 reflection posted by the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) argues that the recurrent failures on participation and accountability derive in part from a lack of consensus around how to realistically navigate these kinds of challenges:[20]

> *[T]here needs be a far more concrete vision of what is possible and desirable, and what is not. To what extent can and should agencies transfer decision-making power to affected people? How should AAP measures be applied in different types and phases of crises? To make real progress, agencies should stop treating AAP as the Holy Grail and agree on practical answers.*

The recommendations in this paper aim to address that challenge with practical steps that would begin tilting the culture and practice of international humanitarian action further toward the priorities of aid recipients. This is fundamentally about rebalancing whose voices shape humanitarian decision-making. Placing crisis-affected people at the center of humanitarian action means ensuring that they have access to, and influence in, the fora and processes where decisions are made—and also ensuring that those power structures will be responsive to their perspectives. It means ensuring that they can influence those decisions on their own terms, rather than solely through the institutional filters of aid agency intermediaries.

This will not be achieved simply by appending more project-level feedback mechanisms or hotlines into humanitarian response plans: a clear takeaway from both CGD's workshop and wider literature review is that such feedback, on its own, is not self-executing. Instead, it requires reimagining feedback and accountability as a **holistic approach throughout all aspects of humanitarian response, rather than a subordinate activity within it:** a set of changes explicitly and tangibly tied to levers of humanitarian power.

Generating pressure for change

The lessons of recent decades make clear that such a major shift in humanitarian culture and practice will not emerge organically. Workshop participants emphasized that systemic inertia

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is too strong, and fundamental change will require "forcing functions" to generate (or impose) political will for aid agencies to alter their institutional behavior. This paper's recommendations incorporate several mutually reinforcing elements that could force changes toward a widespread shift in humanitarian practice:

- First, people-driven response hinges upon **independence and transparency—** ensuring that the voices of aid recipients are not inherently mediated by the interests of aid providers. Aid agencies should not be both the gatekeepers of affected people's perspectives and the designated stewards of resources to address those people's needs. Agency-managed feedback and accountability tools have value but are far less transformative than independent validation and elevation of affected-people's views. In the financial accountability realm, reliance on independent audit firms and transparent publication of audit conclusions is standard procedure because no one would trust an organization (no matter how reputable) to audit its own books. The accountability of a transparent and independent audit process provides a critical incentive for the audit subject to maintain faithful and accurate financial records. The same standards of independence and transparency should be applied to performance accountability and client satisfaction. There is an inherent conflict of interest when aid feedback channels are predominantly funded and controlled by the very agencies delivering aid, for they cannot then provide meaningful accountability or credibly impose consequences for those agencies' performance. When the demand signal from affected people is filtered through the institutional interests of aid providers, it risks becoming distorted: input that falls outside of familiar sector or agency mandates slips between the cracks, and negative input may not be transparently disclosed. Independent feedback and accountability channels, with transparently disseminated findings, would shift incentives for aid providers by enabling an unfiltered articulation of affected people's priorities and perspectives.

- Second, the **priorities and behavior of donors and governing bodies are crucial** to driving (and at times imposing) change. This is a critical counterpart to the development of independent feedback channels, for donors and governing bodies wield considerable influence to translate feedback into meaningful accountability. Humanitarian organizations are almost universally dependent on institutional donor funding, which annually supplies close to 90 percent[21] of the resources for global humanitarian response. As CGD's paper on the humanitarian business model argued, this gives institutional donors enormous leverage over the behavior of humanitarian agencies, but donors have not strategically used this collective leverage to incentivize meaningful accountability reform.[22] Aid agencies continue to perceive that donors view feedback, participation, and accountability as nice-to-have rather than must-have priorities for their funding—in stark contrast to things like financial accountability or anticorruption controls. The role of governing bodies is crucial here as well, as their oversight influences the long-term policies and strategic

[21] Christian Els and Nils Carstensen (2015) "Where is all the Money Going? The Humanitarian Economy," IRIN, accessed August 5, 2019, http://newirin.irinnews.org/the-humanitarian-economy/
[22] Jeremy Konyndyk (2018) *Rethinking the Humanitarian Business Model.* Washington, DC: CGD.

direction of aid agencies. Just as governing boards review independent financial audit findings and hold organizations accountable for addressing them, so should governing boards hold aid agencies accountable for addressing shortcomings in the participation and satisfaction of the people they serve.

- Third, **individual champions could push change towards a tipping point**. Systemic change has been sluggish, despite increasing investment and experimentation by some NGOs and donors in field-level feedback initiatives. These "positive deviants" do help to demonstrate proof of concept, flesh out best practices, and create peer pressure for wider change—but so far have remained too few to shift the overall system. The humanitarian sector is sometimes analogized as an ecosystem, because, as Paul Knox Clarke of ALNAP articulates in a 2017 paper, "the elements that make up the humanitarian system have a certain amount of freedom to act, and use this freedom to adapt their behaviour depending on the actions of other organisations."[23] This suggests that if enough individual elements of the "ecosystem" adopt these changes, a tipping point can be reached that shifts the entire sector into a new equilibrium. The dramatic acceleration of humanitarian cash programming over the past decade provides a useful example of this dynamic. Cash programs went from obscure to near-universal in less than a decade, due in large part to the leadership shown by individual agencies and donors in adopting and scaling the new practice (notably the ambitious commitments of several prominent aid agencies at the World Humanitarian Summit). A similar momentum of commitments around accountability and participation could create significant momentum for change—but it will take a critical mass of stakeholders willing to champion and model this agenda.

## Imperative 1: Influence and Representation

Humanitarian leadership and governance spaces must be reformed to become more explicitly accessible and responsive to the influence of crisis-affected people. The unfiltered perspectives of affected people must be represented across three major tiers of humanitarian decision-making, where resource allocations are determined and priorities are set:

- ➢ At a governance level, where governing boards oversee and guide the strategic direction of aid institutions, review and endorse budget priorities, and ensure financial accountability.
- ➢ At response leadership level, where strategic and budgetary guidance is turned into specific response priorities and resource allocations, defining the broad strokes of an aid operation.
- ➢ And at a field implementation level, where practical decisions are made about response tactics, aid targeting, and delivery modalities.

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[23] Paul Knox Clarke (2017) *Transforming Change,* ALNAP Study, London: ALNAP/ODI, 41.

Affected people's influence should be integrated across each of these three levels (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Incorporating Population Feedback
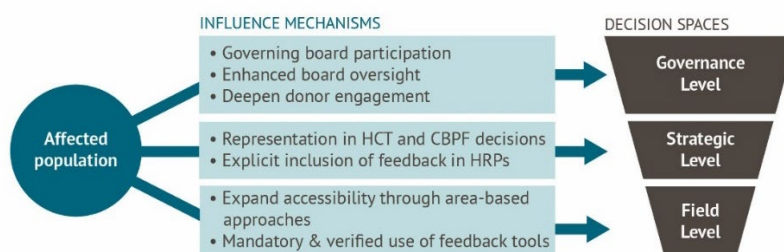
Note: Under existing practices, affected people's perspectives are principally engaged at a field project level, which then mediates how they are reflected upward into higher tiers of humanitarian decision-making. A People-Driven approach would foster mechanisms for amplifying their perspectives more directly across all tiers of decision-making.

Level 1: Governance and oversight

Representation of affected people's perspectives at a governance level is crucial, as this is where the ultimate oversight of aid agencies occurs. While governance accountability in the humanitarian sector is uneven, it can be powerful. The role of financial audit committees, for example, is a principal means of ensuring that an aid agency's leadership prioritizes financial accountability. Instilling corresponding people-centered accountability in governance structures holds similar potential.

- **Foster opportunities for direct representation**: The oversight functions of multilateral governing bodies and NGO boards of directors should actively engage the perspectives of the people the organizations serve. This will take different forms for different types of organizations, and it will be important to avoid tokenistic representation that ticks a box but has little meaningful influence on organizational direction.

  In the INGO community, it remains rare for boards of directors to include members from the countries they work in, much less from the crisis-affected communities they serve. As a baseline best practice, every INGO should seek to ensure that at least 10 percent of its board members are from countries served by the organization, and/or have lived experience as a disaster survivor. A complementary step could be to install on NGO boards a designated ombudsperson or advocate for the populations served by the agency; such a role would be charged with proactively elevating the views and interests of affected people in the board's oversight and governance processes.

  For multilateral governing bodies, which are composed of member states rather than individual directors, mechanisms should be developed to proactively enable representation of the views of crisis-affected people served by the organization. The

mechanisms will look different for each multilateral body, depending the particularities of each governing process, but most have some facility for according access and observer status to non-state actors (UNHCR's most recent Executive Committee meeting, for example, lists 60 pages of participants and observers, including from a range of NGOs and multilateral agencies, but no direct representatives of refugee populations). The distinct representation of sub-national indigenous populations in the REDD+ mechanism[24] for preventing deforestation is one example of how creative approaches to non-state-actor representation can influence international governance processes. The member states of humanitarian multilateral agencies should establish, within each respective agency governance process, mechanisms for including representation of crisis-affected people. And this should also entail administratively supporting their involvement (given their often-limited resources for travel and participation).

- **Enshrine People-Driven Response as a governance and oversight priority**: To guard against tokenism, the representation of crisis-affected people in governance processes should be tied to substantive, structured oversight of how the agency's target populations evaluate its service to them. Multilateral and INGO governing boards should annually review the performance of each respective aid organization from the perspective of the people it serves, using the "Satisfaction and Participation Audit" process outlined below. This oversight process would parallel the role that governing boards play in reviewing organizations' annual financial audits. It could take the form of a standing agenda item in annual governance meetings, and be reinforced by a standing subcommittee of board members.

- **Strengthen donor engagement with affected people's perspectives**: At the donor level, affected people's representation is less feasible because donor bodies are typically governed by national legislatures. However, there are multi-donor processes that provide a peer-oversight function, notably the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) process and the OECD-DAC peer reviews. These processes should explicitly incorporate donor policies around People-Driven Response as an element of responsible and effective donor practice.
  - At present the GHD principles advise that donors "request" their implementing partners to involve affected people in relief operations; this provision should be significantly strengthened. The GHD coalition also lacks accompanying best-practice operational guidance for this commitment; such guidance should be developed, as it has been for other commitments.
  - The OECD DAC donor peer review process should add an element evaluating how robustly donor policies support accountability and participation for

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[24] A 2018 paper finds that indigenous communities' participation in the REDD+ process delivered "tangible political benefits…by using their leverage over and participation in" global REDD+ negotiations. (William Savedoff. (2018). *Competing or Complementary Strategies? Protecting Indigenous Rights and Paying to Conserve Forests.* Working Paper 490. Washington, DC: CGD, accessed August 5, 2019. https://www.cgdev.org/publication/competing-or-complementary-strategies-protecting-indigenous-rights-and-paying-conserve)

affected populations, and whether donors sufficiently assess population satisfaction as a factor in their management of partner performance.

Level 2: Response strategy and priorities

At an overall response leadership level, steps should be taken to directly inject the perspectives of affected populations into key strategic decisions, including major HCT policy decisions, designation of priority needs, formulation of country Humanitarian Needs Overviews and Humanitarian Response Plans, and Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) allocations.

- **Representation of affected people's views**: The exact form of representation will need to be tailored to the crisis context, with the essential objective that major decisions incorporate the input, perspectives, and priorities of crisis-affected populations. This requires representation that can both **faithfully reflect** the sometimes-diverse views of crisis-affected populations, and **knowledgeably navigate** the complex landscape of humanitarian systems and institutions.

  Direct participation of affected people in Humanitarian Country Teams and CBPF advisory boards may feasibly address both competencies in some cases, such as mature protracted responses. In many contexts—even in fragile states—some form of credible local representation structure already exists. As a general principle, where such mechanisms exist, humanitarians should seek to engage them in humanitarian decision-making rather than reinvent parallel structures. This may take various forms, from self-organized local councils (which partnered with humanitarian groups in Syria), to elected municipal authorities, to parliamentary representatives. This is not simply a matter of avoiding inefficient duplication—it is a matter of legitimacy. Creating redundant aid structures can be less effective if the affected population is accustomed to working through a different and more familiar form of representation. Working around local representative structures can also undermine those structures' effectiveness and legitimacy if they are unable to influence major resource flows addressing a community's acute needs.

  But direct representation can also frequently encounter practical and political challenges. The question of which local representative structures are "legitimate" can be fraught and subjective in a contested political environment. The determination of how to engage with these structures will be a judgment call that must be informed by a deft analysis of local political dynamics (underscoring the importance, as recommended below, of investing in greater socio-political analysis within humanitarian planning). The daunting arcana of humanitarian planning processes also poses a barrier to meaningful local participation. Selecting a handful of local representatives to speak on behalf of diverse affected populations can raise risks of arbitrarily empowering gatekeepers and leading to "elite capture." In violently contested political settings, direct representation may be infeasible, or could compromise perceptions of humanitarian independence and neutrality.

  To manage these challenges, Humanitarian Country Teams should also experiment with

a new role akin to the function a public editor plays at a newspaper (a public editor independently represents readers' interests and reinforces journalistic ethics, typically through a regular public column). The position—an empowered "people's advocate"—could sit on the HCT and on the Country-Based Pooled Fund advisory board, with a mandate to elevate the perspectives of affected populations and ensure major decisions and processes take account of their perspectives. The advocate would bring familiarity with humanitarian planning systems, paired with mechanisms for outreach to affected people and their leaders. One essential tool to inform the advocate's role would be the use of broad survey mechanisms to gather representative data on the views of crisis-affected people, a tool that Ground Truth Solutions is piloting with the HCT in Chad. Such survey findings provide useful planning information, and also mitigate the risk of gatekeepers (whether local or international) by supplying an objective, data-driven reflection of affected people's views.

A useful complementary tool would be the establishment of an affected people's advisory group, convened alongside the HCT as a sounding board to vet major decisions, review analysis from feedback mechanisms, and advise on the strategic direction of the response. Members of this advisory board might include local elected officials, civil society leaders, and leaders from within the affected population. Advisory group members could also be invited to attend meetings of the HCT, along with the advocate, when the expanded "HCT-Plus" group (which also involves donors) periodically convenes.

- **Put feedback and accountability at the center of response planning**: To further guard against tokenism, and to give some teeth to the representation tools outlined above, affected people's influence should be anchored concretely in the formal Humanitarian Program Cycle. Humanitarian Response Plans remain weak on feedback, participation, and accountability elements. Most Strategic Response Plans led by OCHA, and separate Refugee Response Plans maintained by UNHCR, assign only peripheral focus to AAP and participatory planning. Both processes implicitly cast the international community, rather than the affected population, as the central actor in identifying and defining humanitarian needs. Both should instead require population feedback and participation as a central focus of the humanitarian program cycle and planning process. This could be done by establishing "feedback, participation, and accountability" as a default strategic objective in all humanitarian and refugee response plans. Each response plan would incorporate a corresponding implementation strategy and rationale, and outline specifically how the affected population participated in the development and prioritization of the response plan, how their influence affected strategic priorities, and what intentional measures humanitarian actors are using to sustain the population's engagement and participation throughout the implementation of the plan.

Level 3: Field implementation

At implementation level there are well-established methodologies for soliciting representative feedback from crisis-affected populations, even in challenging environments—and **this must be the bare minimum standard** in virtually any response. But aid agencies must also go beyond feedback mechanisms: wherever feasible humanitarian

actors should ensure a direct role for affected people or their representatives in the design, planning, and execution of program interventions. Expanding participation is a form of power transfer, as it goes beyond the passive process of providing feedback on programs that otherwise remain owned by aid providers. This means not simply building participatory program approaches, but also changing coordination and program models to become more accessible to, and aligned with, local perceptions and priorities. Options for putting this into practice include:

- **Expand accessibility through area-based programming**: People experience their needs holistically, yet the humanitarian system engages them in a segmented way. Effective accountability and participatory approaches often run headlong into the fragmented organizational structure of traditional sector-based humanitarian programming and coordination. In a given field location there are likely to be multiple ongoing streams of feedback and participation mechanisms, subdivided by agency and cluster, that the local population in any site must navigate in order to convey its perspectives. Individual humanitarian agencies have little incentive, and little leverage, to address a need or priority that falls outside their mandate, and communities struggle to engage simultaneously with the numerous parallel cluster committees that reflect different dimensions of their needs.

  This poses an inherent structural impediment to the local population's ability to meaningfully influence humanitarian priorities, because the complexity of the process functions as a barrier to entry (as does the planning process itself, which is rarely accessible in local languages). Prior to the advent of the clusters, the use of area-based planning and coordination was more common. Pilots of area-based interventions by NGOs like Catholic Relief Services, the International Rescue Committee, and Project Concern International are finding that this model makes humanitarian operations and planning considerably more accessible to local populations. Shifting field-level planning and coordination away from a cluster/sector-centric model, toward an integrated, interagency, area-based model can both enable better engagement with affected people, and ensure that sector or mandate parameters do not unduly distort the feedback they provide.

- **Integrate field-level feedback and communication as a standard element of NGO and UN programs**: Some NGOs are beginning to put this into place. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has begun implementing a Client-Responsive Programming Framework within its country operations. IRC's approach integrates input, communications, and feedback elements directly into its programming and planning cycle, and mandates the country offices report back to affected populations on how their feedback was used in project planning. Alight (formerly the American Refugee Committee) has begun piloting a real-time feedback system called Kuja in refugee camps across East Africa. Alight's approach involves point-of-service surveys on refugee satisfaction with Alight's interventions, and an open-ended question on ways to improve it. The results of these queries drive real-time shifts in Alight program design; the organization estimates that it can achieve 20 percent improvement in user satisfaction over three months without any further resources, simply by rapidly adjusting services to

better align with user inputs.[25] Results are also released publicly on an open website.[26]

These agency-level mechanisms are a step in the right direction, and an important proof-of-concept for both the feasibility and utility of incorporating feedback directly into project implementation. However, there is also a risk that as this practice becomes more widespread, a proliferation of agency- or project-specific mechanisms will prove duplicative and onerous for aid recipients. Aid agencies should explore as well how they can best align or consolidate mechanisms across agencies to avoid counterproductive duplication (an issue that is explored in more detail later in this paper).

- **Require—and verify—participatory approaches in all donor-funded programs**: Donors should use their collective leverage to mandate that all programs they fund, whether through UN agencies or NGOs, apply feedback and participatory approaches in program design, implementation, and monitoring. There are signs of progress on this front: the pilot multi-donor reporting format known as "8+3" contains a mandatory question on "participation of the population," DfID's funding guidelines have included similar conditions for several years, and 2018 amendments to USAID/OFDA's proposal guidelines (referenced below) likewise mandate inclusion of an "AAP Framework" for all projects. [27] In both NGO project grants and multilateral agency contributions, donors should put these kinds of measures on par with technical quality standards or financial accountability requirements. Weak performance on PDR-related measures should put funding in jeopardy, just as weak program delivery or financial mismanagement would.

  In practice, this would function similarly to donor requirements on security protocols, or Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) protocols. Donors would require that funding recipients build such protocols into their fieldwork, but would give each partner the latitude to address the requirements within the context of their own organization's systems and culture. Donors would review the participation and feedback elements of a funding proposal to verify that they meet broad minimum requirements, and withhold funding if these elements of a proposal are found inadequate. During the implementation phase, donors would monitor the work of implementing partners (including through the kinds of potential independent mechanisms proposed in the next section) to verify that commitments are being kept, and are having the intended effect.

- **Adapt approach based on crisis phase and type**: Different categories of crises will require different approaches to amplifying affected people's voices. In situations where time is at a premium—such as fast-onset natural disaster responses or new refugee

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[25] Adele Peters, "At these Camps, Refugees can Give Real-time Customer Feedback," *Fast Company*, May 22, 2018, https://www.fastcompany.com/40575160/at-these-camps-refugees-can-give-real-time-customer-feedback
[26] "Kuja Kuja." Kuja Kuja. Accessed September 5, 2019. https://www.kujakuja.org/.
[27] International Council of Voluntary Agencies (2017), *Common "8+3" Template,* Geneva: ICVA; USAID Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (2019) *Proposal Guidelines*. Washington, DC: US government. Accessed August 27, 2019, 72. https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/USAID-OFDA_Proposal_Guidelines_June_2019.pdf

influxes—thorough consultation, feedback, and participation should not delay critical aid delivery. One interviewee drew an analogy to hospital triage: a patient who arrives unconscious in an emergency room needs doctors to exercise their best judgment, not withhold treatment until an in-depth consultation can take place. But this is a narrow set of cases, as most humanitarian work today occurs in protracted or slow-onset crisis settings. In instances where delivery cannot wait, humanitarian actors should exercise their best judgment—informed by past experience and practice—about how best to help. But as a situation stabilizes, initial judgment calls should be supplemented by increasingly thorough analysis, consultation, and local participation. In longer-term humanitarian crises, integrating PDR into the annual humanitarian planning cycle should enable well-planned consultation and participation without unduly delaying aid delivery. As multi-year crisis responses mature, these mechanisms should be iterated and expanded to transfer an increasing degree of response ownership to the affected population.

Imperative 2: The Importance of Independence

Independence is an essential component of accountability. Workshop participants observed that a feedback and accountability mechanism will struggle to be objective about the same agency that operates and finances it. Feedback on affected people's satisfaction will only generate accountability if it is elevated and communicated independent of the control of the institutions that are subject to the feedback (see figure 2). This principle is applied reflexively to financial accountability; yet when it comes to beneficiary satisfaction and accountability, aid agencies retain enormous discretion over assessing their own performance.

Figure 2. Feedback Accountability Loop
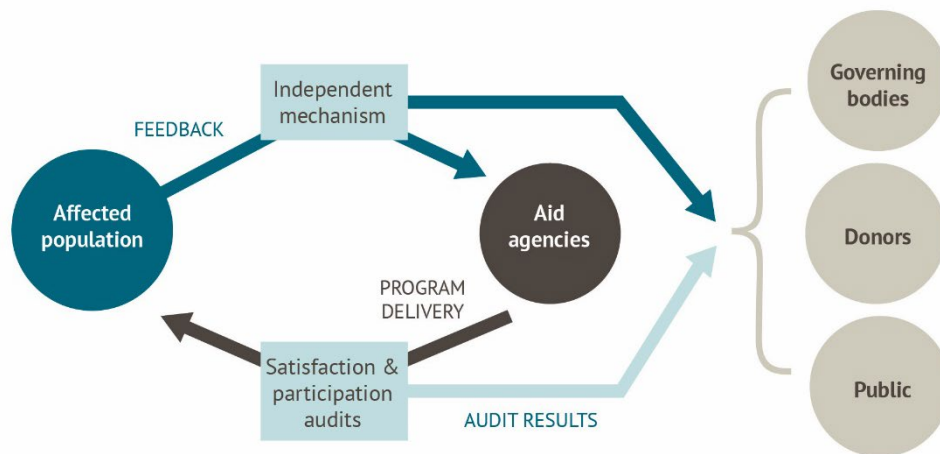
Note: Current practices frequently enable aid agencies to mediate the feedback that they receive about themselves, controlling what is shared with the donors, governing bodies, and publics that oversee their work. A People-Driven approach would remove aid agencies from this middleman role and instead use independent mechanisms to convey the perspectives of affected people, and audits to verify that aid agencies are heeding their feedback.

To provide an honest broker function that keeps aid delivery priorities faithful to the priorities expressed by affected people, accountability mechanisms must be independent and tied to meaningful consequences. This can also be important in the eyes of the affected population, who may be reluctant to give candid feedback directly to the same people providing them with assistance.

- **Satisfaction and participation audits**: Most aid agencies undergo annual financial audits to demonstrate to donors and stakeholders that their financial statements represent a "true and fair" reflection of their financial situation. The growth of client feedback mechanisms and third-party monitoring arrangements opens the potential for a parallel process of auditing agency performance from the perspective of the people they serve, and with a similar rationale: to ensure that the results and outcomes that aid agencies claim in their public and donor reporting present a "true and fair" reflection of how effectively they are serving crisis-affected populations.

  Much like financial audits, satisfaction and participation audits could be conducted by independent consulting firms chartered by aid agency governing boards. Financial auditors review an agency's internal records and use spot-check verifications to assess compliance with standards and controls, and to develop a representative picture of an agency's financial position. Similarly, satisfaction and participation auditors could review reporting from agency feedback mechanisms and third-party monitoring mechanisms that have reviewed the agency's work. Auditors could then conduct field-level spot checks in a sampling of program sites to assess the robustness of feedback mechanisms; verify evidence that action was taken to address issues arising from affected people's feedback; and engage with affected people to learn whether they were satisfied with the support and engagement from the aid agency.

  Data collected through these audits could be compiled into a formal assessment of whether the agency is adhering to internal policies and donor requirements, and generate findings for rectification or improvement. These reports would be shared with the agency's board, posted publicly on the organization's website, and shared with donors—just as a financial audit would be. The structure to provide this kind of independent service is nascent, but the foundation already exists. The Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative (HQAI), a donor-funded NGO, has begun auditing compliance with the (much broader) Core Humanitarian Standard; other private companies that provide third-party monitoring of aid projects would also have the core competencies to provide this kind of specialized audit service.

  An important impetus for this must come from donor demand. HQAI's work shows the potential to supply this kind of independent audit function, but the modest number of organizations that have voluntarily sought its services also underscores the tepid demand for it.[28] Few of the largest NGOs in the sector, and no multilateral organizations, are listed as participants. The willingness of some

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[28] The Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative offers two levels of audit review. The lighter level, "certification," covers 19 NGOs; the more intensive "verification" level covers 8. http://hqai.org/organisations/

NGOs to voluntarily undergo external performance audits is laudable, but it will only become industry standard when the largest players join in—and that, in turn, will only happen if they have a concrete interest in doing so. Donors should begin requiring—or at least strongly urging—all aid agencies that receive their funding to initiate a satisfaction and participation audit process, and make clear that this will affect funding decisions.

- **Establish response-level mechanisms distinct from individual agencies**: Wherever feasible, aid recipients' voices should be engaged directly, holistically, impartially— and distinct from the agencies supplying their aid. Affected people's feedback will not always align with individual agencies' mandated priorities, nor be comfortable for the agencies receiving the feedback. While agency-owned feedback mechanisms can be useful, they are limited both by the scope of the agency's work, and by the fact that the agency has an interest in avoiding reputational damage. Workshop participants also cited concerns that agency- or sector-siloed feedback tools may fail to follow through on feedback that falls outside their bailiwick, and that such tools could not be fully objective. As agency systems proliferate, there is a risk of replicating the "assessment fatigue" that often sets in when communities are subjected to too many overlapping humanitarian needs assessments. In settings with numerous aid organizations, common-service feedback mechanisms have the added benefit of avoiding debilitating duplication. Common, response-level mechanisms are a vitally important counterpart to agency-level mechanisms.

    Impartial response-level mechanisms can take a range of forms, and the specific application in a given country will be a judgment call between the HCT, the affected population, and the donor community. Response-wide common feedback tools have been piloted by the UN in several countries. The Nepal Common Feedback Project was established in the wake of the 2015 earthquake to comprehensively solicit input from affected communities. It was designed as a common service of the humanitarian community writ large, outside of any individual agency. Its reporting has enabled the systematic inclusion of community input into relief planning, demonstrating, for example, links between household indebtedness and shelter reconstruction[29] that siloed sector assessments would be prone to miss. In Iraq, an inter-agency feedback hotline provides another example of a shared response-level platform that engages end users holistically rather than through sector or agency siloes. It is countrywide, toll-free, and shared across agencies and sectors (in contrast to the counterproductive proliferation of hotlines witnessed in Lebanon referenced earlier). This more user-friendly approach has seen wide uptake, logging over 100,000 calls.

    Independent third-party monitoring (TPM) mechanisms could also be scaled up to

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[29] UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Nepal (2018) *Inter Agency Common Feedback Project: Community Perception Report – Reconstruction, Food Security & Livelihood and Protection.* New York: UN, accessed August 5, 2019. https://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/inter-agency-common-feedback-project-community-perception-report-reconstruction-food.

provide this sort of service, either through independent contractors or as a common service managed by the Humanitarian Coordinator. Reliance on TPM mechanisms has grown in recent years, particularly in insecure settings where donors and aid agency managers cannot conduct first-hand monitoring of project implementation. But the setup of independent monitoring has benefits beyond verifying that the proper number of boreholes were rehabilitated or medical supplies provided. It also provides a mechanism for independently assessing the quality of service provision and probing aid recipients' perspectives on the support they receive. A 2016 report from the UK-funded Secure Access in Violent Environments (SAVE) research consortium finds that TPM mechanisms hold the potential to provide "compelling qualitative findings at the impact level."[30] Likewise, a USAID-funded multi-project TPM mechanism in Somalia found that aid recipients expressed gratitude and a measure of surprise that their opinions were being considered—something they indicated was quite rare.[31]

Another option—where technologically viable—could be the development of **digital feedback platforms** adapted from the Aadhaar feedback platform used in Andhra Pradesh, India (see box 2). Aadhaar, the national biometric ID system in India, is used by the Andhra Pradesh state government to enable real-time support and feedback on social services. This model can systematically gauge client satisfaction and apply corrective nudges when services miss the mark. Given the growing use of biometric registration and mobile technology in humanitarian settings, and the often widespread access that affected people have to mobile technology, this kind of IT-based feedback platform could potentially be adapted to humanitarian response as well.

- **Reinforce through donor practices**: A critical common thread across all of these models— common feedback platforms, TPM, and digital platforms—is that **establishing them typically depends on donor action**. The Nepal Common Feedback Project got off the ground with foundational financing from DfID; the Iraq hotline project struggled to launch until donors in Iraq coalesced around the idea; TPM has tended to be a donor-driven initiative (the SAVE research consortium found aid agencies are often quite uneasy about it); and even the Aadhaar digital feedback platform was established by the government in a quasi-donor capacity, as a quality assurance function for government-funded programs administered through private vendors. This suggests that building independent feedback and accountability systems into humanitarian response will need to be donor-driven if it is to gain traction.

[30] Elias Sagmeister, Julia Steets, Andras Derszi-Horvath and Camille Hennion (2016) *The Use of Third-party Monitoring in Insecure Contexts: Lessons from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria, accessed August 5, 2019* https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/save-2016-the-use-of-third-party-monitoring-in-insecure-contexts.pdf.

[31] Report briefing received by author in previous USAID role.

Box 2. Biometrics in Krishna District, Andhra Pradesh

In Andhra Pradesh, India, biometric ID registration through the national "Aadhaar" system supports remote real-time monitoring of government social benefit programs. At the point of service delivery, users authenticate by fingerprint, with unsuccessful attempts relayed to a call center for immediate corrective action. Participants who successfully authenticate and obtain the service receive automatic follow-up via phone survey to solicit feedback on user experience. This unique level of direct contact with recipients ensures greater accountability for provider performance, allowing the government to efficiently manage service delivery and ensure responsiveness across a wide range of providers.

Imperative 3: Institutionalize Change

People-driven response cannot succeed as a siloed activity; to truly change humanitarian culture and practice it must be reinforced and enabled with wider systemic change. Lessons from the healthcare sector are instructive here. Just as humanitarian aid delivery is highly siloed through the traditional clusters and agencies, healthcare provision is often siloed by provider specialization. And in both domains, a highly siloed model yields a highly fragmented form of service delivery that is costly and difficult for recipients to navigate. Where health systems have moved toward alternate models of patient-centered care that actively engage and listen to patients (see box 3), this transition has entailed wholesale changes to the surrounding business model. Patient-centered, rather than physician-centered, care models have required new training for healthcare workers, new methods for assessing drivers of patient well-being, new systems for patient management and tracking, new costing methods for care provision, and numerous other adaptations.

Similarly, institutionalizing a transition toward demand-driven humanitarian practice and culture would require a set of corresponding changes to how interventions are designed, staffed, costed, and financed:

- **Invest in analysis**: People-Driven Response must be grounded in a rigorous and systematic analysis of community coping strategies and local power dynamics. This sort of rigorous mapping of the socio-political terrain of a response is extremely rare in humanitarian settings, and must become a standard feature, alongside programmatic assessments, of the humanitarian planning cycle. This is particularly important in contested environments like civil wars, or in communities riven by ethnic tensions. The design of a PDR approach must take care to thoughtfully analyze local political dynamics and ensure intentionally balanced involvement and influence among different groups. It is also vital to ensure complementary approaches toward triangulating a clear picture of needs and priorities, rather than engaging through gatekeepers. This kind of analysis lacks an obvious home in the current humanitarian landscape. Donors should support organizations to develop this kind of analytical capability for project-level engagement, and also support it at a response strategy level via OCHA or independent analysts.

- **Project flexibility and timing**: UN and donor grant-making practices should be adapted to explicitly enable implementing partners to make prompt real-time project adjustments based on feedback findings. Rigidly defined project plans and targets can at times make this difficult, and onerous processes for approval of changes to a project workplan (particularly in UN-funded sub-grants to NGOs) can impede application of feedback findings.

- **Financing**: Building feedback and accountability platforms, conducting in-depth socio-cultural analysis, and hiring new staff skillsets will all need to be paid for. Donors (whether institutional donors, pooled funds, or multilateral agencies sub-granting to implementing partners) will need to be willing to cover the costs of these investments, even at the expense of program delivery. Given the impact on population satisfaction and the improvements in program quality that can result, these modest additional costs are a worthwhile trade-off.

- **Staffing**: The expertise required for PDR approaches is more akin to a community organizer or social worker than a traditional project manager, technical specialist, or logistics officer. Humanitarian agencies will need to hire for different skill sets, recruiting outreach and participation experts on par with technical specialists or financial oversight staff. Hiring more staff with appropriate local language skills is an important element of these mechanisms' success as well.

Box 3. Lessons from the Health Sector

Patient-centered care is based on the premise that treating the patient holistically, through active listening and personal customization, can yield better efficiency and health outcomes. Centering the patient as an active participant in their own care entails bringing in social workers and other non-medical experts to consult together as a team. Reforms may include making time for longer, in-depth, contextualizing consultations, changing billing practices to code for a team of clinicians, and potentially consulting legal aid or social workers as needed.

Similar reforms have produced positive results in humanitarian contexts. UNRWA introduced agency reforms in line with the family health team approach beginning in 2011. Reforms included operational changes like reorganizing clinical staff into teams of at least one doctor, nurse, and clerk, per family, plus administrative changes to manage patient files and increase clinic accessibility. Following the reforms, patients experienced a decrease in wait times and repeat visits.[32]

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[32] UNRWA Department of Health (2015) Annual Report 2014. East Jerusalem: UNRWA. Accessed September 11, 2019.

The Challenge Ahead

Revolutions are about changing power structures. A participation "revolution" will not be achieved by the same players continuing to wield the same power in the same ways that they always have. Building a culture of real accountability and participation into humanitarian action will take concerted change to humanitarian incentives and power dynamics—but as this paper outlines, it is achievable. The recommendations articulated here are neither definitive nor exhaustive: they will require iteration and adaptation as they are taken to scale. But they provide a starting point for going from rhetorical commitment to tangible action.

The question now is one of political will: Can those who wield the status quo power in the humanitarian system share that power with crisis-affected people? Will they live up to their longstanding—but mostly unrealized—commitments to put affected people at the center of humanitarian response? Or will they continue to tacitly put preservation of their own influence ahead of the aspirations and prerogatives of the people they exist to serve?

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