



Socializing accountability in humanitarian settings: A proposed framework

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ABSTRACT

With more than 65 million people forcibly displaced in 2017, accountability has received increased attention in international humanitarian action. Efforts to enhance humanitarian accountability have historically focused on formal, technocratic processes. Scholars in other disciplines have explored non-formal forms of accountability including socializing accountability, which refers to interpersonal processes through which interdependent individuals hold each other to account. Yet little empirical data on socializing accountability exists in the humanitarian context.

We draw on a conceptual framework that outlines practical dimensions of socializing accountability among networked non-profit staff (Romzek, LeRoux, Johnston, Kempf, & Schede Piatak, 2013) and apply it to the reproductive health responses in two case studies, Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008 and the Haiti earthquake in 2010. Using interviews with 96 aid workers in the two cases, we explore the ways in which they held each other to account through social, interpersonal means for the implementation of the minimum standard in reproductive health service provision. We identify new behaviors, rewards, and challenges, such as constructive criticism and overwhelming workloads, that augmented or undermined socializing accountability within the two case studies. We adapt and extend the model for the humanitarian context and propose a preliminary conceptual framework for assessing socializing accountability in a crisis response.

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1. Introduction

Our world is unstable: the World Economic Forum in its 2016 Global Risk Report draws attention to political instability and conflict, environmental disasters, and extreme weather events (World Economic Forum, 2016). Forced displacement commonly occurs, with one in 113 people globally classed as an asylum-seeker, internally displaced, or a refugee (UNHCR, 2017). As humanitarian crises continue to increase (UNHCR, 2016), accountability for international humanitarian action has become a central concern. Humanitarian crises—such as natural disasters and armed conflict—are by definition disruptive, often involving a breakdown in authority, social order and services provision. Basic accountability processes, including the rule of law, may be weakened or defunct. When aid workers respond to a crisis, they wield significant power over people at their most vulnerable. Focusing on accountability is

critical to protecting the lives and promoting the well-being of the more than 65 million forcibly displaced people around the world.

Humanitarian accountability has received increasing attention since the mid-1990s (Rose, O'Keefe, Jayawickrama, & O'Brien, 2013), with the number of humanitarian quality and accountability initiatives and instruments tripling from 2000 to 2012 (Tan & von Schreeb, 2015). Humanitarian actors, including United Nations (UN) agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have largely focused on formal accountability processes, such as the development of minimum standards for food, water, and health services, and reporting mechanisms for wrongdoing. These efforts were in large part fueled by documented shortcomings of the international humanitarian system in responding to high-profile emergencies such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the 2004 Asian tsunami, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake. In response to serious failures and transgressions—such as widespread sexual exploitation and mismanagement of millions of aid dollars—donors and humanitarian agencies have heightened attention to formal and technical forms of accountability. Despite this, there are still few meaningful consequences when aid actors fail to meet their obligations (Obrecht, Knox Clarke, El-Kouhene, & Noyes, 2015).

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Accountability researchers have also begun to explore informal types of accountability, such as communal and personal accountabilities (Ebrahim, 2005; Laughlin, 1996). Accounting scholar John Roberts (1996) coined the term *socializing accountability* in which individuals hold each other accountable through interpersonal means. Socializing accountability is an ongoing, interdependent process, rooted in dialogue and interaction, with instrumental and moral dimensions (Roberts, 2001). In the humanitarian sector, some practitioners and scholars have highlighted the potential value of the socializing dimensions of accountability (CHS Alliance, 2015; Lai, Leoni, & Stacchezzini, 2014), but limited empirical data exists.

We examined this under-researched aspect of accountability within the humanitarian context. We draw on a framework developed by Romzek, LeRoux, Johnston, Kempf, and Schede Piatak (2013) that outlines practical dimensions of socializing accountability among individuals working for networked non-profits (Fig. 1).¹ This framework evolved through research on the interpersonal interactions among staff of networked social service organizations in the United States, and we identified its potential value to the humanitarian field. The individuals studied by Romzek et al., and those explored in this research, were employed by non-profit service delivery organizations participating in voluntary inter-agency coordination to achieve shared objectives. The framework thus appeared to be a potentially valuable tool with which to examine socializing accountability among aid workers in humanitarian contexts. The framework identifies elements that reinforce, reflect, or undermine socializing accountability, including social norms, behaviors, challenges, and rewards and sanctions (Romzek et al., 2013).

We apply the framework to the humanitarian responses in two case studies, Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar (2008) and the 2010 Haiti earthquake and focus on the ways in which aid workers held each other accountable through social means for the minimum standard in reproductive health service provision. Reproductive health care in humanitarian crises is a poorly researched yet lifesaving set of interventions (Casey, 2015). During armed conflict and natural disaster, reproductive health needs rise (Austin, Guy, Lee-Jones, McGinn, & Schlecht, 2008) while access to health services often shrinks (Banatvala & Zwi, 2000). For example, maternal mortality in humanitarian emergencies and fragile settings is almost twice the global average (UNFPA, 2015), and an estimated one in five forcibly displaced women and girls have experienced sexual violence (Vu et al., 2014). Despite this, reproductive health has been, until more recently, historically neglected in humanitarian operations (Chynoweth, 2015; Hakamies, Geissler, & Borchert, 2008; Palmer, Lush, & Zwi, 1999).

Using interviews with 96 humanitarian staff in the two case study settings, we adapt and extend the model by suggesting additional categories for the ways in which socializing accountability operates in the humanitarian context. We propose a conceptual framework that is potentially valuable as the humanitarian sector grapples with effective ways to hold relief actors accountable in often chaotic settings with otherwise limited effective accountability mechanisms.

This study does two things. First, it provides empirical insights into an under-researched area: socializing accountability in humanitarian settings. Second, we extend Romzek et al.'s existing conceptual framework on socializing accountability and adapt it for the humanitarian context. The proposed socializing accountability framework for humanitarian settings (SAF-h) can be applied

to future humanitarian responses, assisting understanding of the role of socializing accountability in humanitarian accountability processes as well as other relief efforts.

2. Accountability in humanitarian action

In the broadest sense, accountability concerns processes and mechanisms through which institutions and individuals must answer for, and bear consequences for, their action or inaction. In the humanitarian sector, there is no universally accepted definition of accountability (Tan & von Schreeb, 2015). The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), a well-known humanitarian accountability-related initiative, suggests that accountability “is not primarily about fulfilling one’s responsibilities: it is primarily concerned with adjusting power and information imbalances in relationships” (Obrecht et al., 2015, p. 7). The CHS Alliance, one of the largest networks focused on humanitarian accountability, similarly defines accountability as processes related to the responsible use of power (CHS Alliance, 2014). By explicitly situating accountability in terms of the power differentials, these bodies bring accountability to crisis-affected populations to the fore.

In this paper, we use the term “formal accountability” to describe the systems and mechanisms that institutions, such as donors, UN agencies, and NGOs, use to monitor, assess, sanction, and gain compliance from affiliated organizations and individuals. In the humanitarian context, this includes, for example, contracts between agencies, reporting requirements from NGOs to their donors, and specified mandates for agencies with a particular technical expertise. We use “informal accountability” as an umbrella term to describe non-formal types of accountability, including socializing (interpersonal), mutual (inter-agency), collective (sectoral), and personal (fidelity to personal ethics).

Commentators note the proliferating, and at times competing, accountabilities in the humanitarian sector (cf. Cosgrave, 2013; Davis, 2007; Everett & Friesen, 2010; Featherstone, 2013; Gross Stein, 2009; Raynard, 2000). Aid workers’ fundamental accountability is to crisis-affected communities, often described as “downward accountability”. Yet these may be at odds with “upward” accountabilities, such as to donors and national and international authorities, and “horizontal” accountabilities, which include accountability to colleagues, coordination bodies, other aid agencies, and can include accountability to the self, or one’s personal ethics. In regards to *what* humanitarian staff are accountable *for*, this includes a plethora of legal, ethical and inter-agency principles and standards, such as national and international law, national protocols, humanitarian principles, and contractual agreements with donors and other agencies. Means for holding aid workers accountable include complaints mechanisms, self-regulatory bodies, and evaluations, although mechanisms for enforcement are notoriously weak: few aid actors experience significant consequences when they fail to meet their obligations (Obrecht et al., 2015). In particular, there remains a dearth of effective processes for affected communities to meaningfully hold humanitarian actors accountable. We conceptualize humanitarian accountability as a diamond: multifaceted and continuously refracting the tensions and possibilities of humanitarian action (Fig. 2).

The drive for humanitarian accountability has been largely technocratic in nature, concentrating on the development of minimum standards, codes of conduct, and results-based management. Many of these processes and mechanisms have been valuable. Minimum standards in service delivery, for instance, can provide guidance to humanitarian staff—operating in chaotic and oftentimes bewildering environments—on the pre-determined, lifesaving interventions that are critical to preserving the health and

¹ Romzek et al. use the term “informal” accountability rather than “socializing”. We prefer “socializing” in this paper to emphasize the social, interpersonal elements of accountability. To avoid confusion and maintain consistency, this paper uses socializing accountability rather than informal accountability when referring to their work.

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