Broadening the Concept of Humanitarian Accountability

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Since the 1990s, Western humanitarian organizations have increasingly been concerned with developing tools to assess the efficiency of aid delivery, to establish minimum standards and benchmarks for development and humanitarian aid projects, and to convincingly communicate their organizational transparency and accountability to stakeholders (Barnett 2005; Egeland 2005). Within discussions around these issues, accountability has developed into a buzzword among professional humanitarian actors. The concept is debated at regular intervals, especially in the aftermath of so-called “humanitarian failures”, like the Rwanda genocide in 1994, and the belated responses to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the Haiti earthquake in 2010 (Roberts 2018, p. 1). As an extension of these debates, humanitarian and development organizations have joined forces across the professional humanitarian system to carve out common guidelines for how to better conceptualize and operationalize accountability.1

Yet the concept remains disputed and, while being much discussed and sought after on a policy level, has caused little systemic change for aid recipients and practitioners working on the ground (Knox Clarke 2018; Winters 2010). Moreover, discussions of accountability usually center on major international and Western organizations, thus eclipsing the multitude of smaller and more informal “civic humanitarians” operating across the Global South. The latter group, which can be loosely defined as a heterogenous set of civil society actors who provide assistance in complex humanitarian crises, receive little interest from academics and are rarely included at the negotiating table when professional humanitarians develop their policies (Knox Clarke 2018). This has left a lacuna of scholarly knowledge on how civic humanitarians and their funders understand and practice accountability, which is dwarfed in comparison to the expansive “gray literature” and policy documents discussing accountability practices for professional humanitarians (Fechter and Schwittay 2019).

As a contribution to this research gap, this report2 seeks to provide an overview of the different components of accountability as they are understood and practiced among both professional and civic humanitarians. By first describing how accountability is most commonly understood, and then discussing the multilayered nature of accountability as it is understood and practiced by civic humanitarians, we aim to point to communalities and differences in an attempt to develop a more holistic understanding of accountability that is relevant for both professional and civic humanitarians. The report relies on a literature review combining academic sources and policy

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2. This report draws on the project Holding Aid Accountable: Relational Humanitarianism in Protracted Crisis (AidAccount), funded by the Research Council of Norway in 2019 and led by Horst in collaboration with Brun, Erdal, Hassan, Jayatilaka, Musa, Pera, Serwaja, Refstie and Viga. Research team members provided feedback to an earlier draft of this report at the project kick-off workshop, 12–14 October 2020. Special thanks go to Cathrine Brun for several rounds of detailed comments, to Maria Gabrielsen for peer review of the final draft, Gee Berry for language editing, and Hilde Refstie and Emmanuel Viga for feedback on ‘community-based actors’ as well as to Kaja Borchgrevink for feedback on ‘religious communities’.
documents. It seeks to provide an overview of key discussions on accountability in both the academic and gray literature and identify some of the concept’s key components and challenges. By unpacking humanitarian accountability, as it is discussed in the literature on professional and civic humanitarians, the report aims to improve the concept’s analytical clarity. Ideally, this effort can contribute to the development of a framework through which accountability can be approached by academics and humanitarian practitioners alike, while also highlighting the overlapping practices of professional and civic humanitarians. To initiate this investigation, the report asks: *What components does humanitarian accountability consist of?*

The report begins with an exploration of the semantic and moral dimensions of accountability. Next, the report introduces the traditional typology of humanitarian accountability, namely upward (to funders and policy makers) and downward (to recipients). Then a discussion follows on how we can understand accountability in relation to the work of civic humanitarians. These actors might operate with an altogether different perception of accountability, one that is inherently relational and embedded in a combination of social, moral, legal and religious sources. Finally, the report discusses how humanitarian accountability can be understood in a way that is relevant for both professional and civic humanitarians.
Most lexical definitions of “accountability” contain two core components: to be responsible for one’s actions and living up to/answering for this responsibility (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Merriam Webster, n.d.). Accountability is to be understood as a two-way relational process of “being accountable to” and “holding accountable.” This relational process entails that subjects are both accountable to one another and hold each other to account. The “accountable” subject can be either an individual or a collective, such as an organization or a government (Bovens 2008, p. 450). Typically, the subject is held accountable according to a set criterion, standard or expectation. These standards can be moral, religious, legal, fiscal, social or cultural. Its most common usage in English, however, is in conjunction with corporate finances and audits (financial accountability), in courts and during legal prosecutions (legal accountability), and for democratic institutions (democratic accountability) (Bovens 2008; Mulgan 2000).

The concept’s connotations towards legality and audits have largely followed over into the professional humanitarian vocabulary – a point that we will return to. However, when translated to the jargon of professional humanitarians, the concept often attains an additional moral layer, in that accountability mechanisms are supposed to reflect the Western humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence, humanity and impartiality. Humanitarian accountability is hence not merely an umbrella term for specific mechanisms meant to monitor activities and finances – it is also a normative commitment that signals moral legitimacy. Subsequently, the definitions of accountability, as they appear in guidelines and policy documents, tend to straddle both a legalized vocabulary with actionable components and more generic commitments reflecting normative, moral principles (Tan and Schreeb 2015). Thus, intention, process and consequence are often baked into the same concept. This concoction impacts the concept’s operationalization, as concrete mechanisms for holding someone accountable are cloaked in an intangible legal and moral language.

This overlap between normative moral principles and legal liability further raises questions as to who or what someone is to be held accountable to. Is it towards one’s own moral responsibility? Or one’s social responsibility towards a group? Is it towards one’s organizational charter or towards the criminal law in the host country? What if the host country’s laws conflict with the aid provider’s own morality, or the organization’s charter, or international humanitarian law? In practice, these multiple aspects of accountability, such as individual moral responsibility and national and international law, will coexist. For example, in the much-distributed 2018 Sphere Handbook, it is argued that “[Humanitarian] principles are reflected in international law, but derive their force ultimately from the fundamental moral principle of humanity: that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (p. 28). Thus, the concept’s analytical clarity is distorted by its overlapping practical and normative functions.

Legality and morality often conjoin to inform humanitarian actors’ conceptualization of accountability. Moreover, the stress on equality, freedom and rights reveals the humanitarian system’s embeddedness in a traditional Western discourse of liberal political philosophy (Pallister-Wilkins 2020). Conjoining the practical with the moral is, indeed, a common characteristic of many INGOs (international non-governmental organizations), as moral stances such as neutrality, independence, humanity and impartiality are supposed to guide operational focus and procedures. This practice is grounded in the “humanitarian imperative”, namely the commitment to alleviate suffering and save lives (Sphere Association 2018, p. 28). Such ambitious commitments are obviously easier to conceptualize than to put into practice. Yet moral grandstanding and operational procedures continue to conflate in the major accountability guidelines within the humanitarian community, thus hindering the concept’s actionability.

The multiple layers that constitute the concept of accountability, both in its lexical definition and as it is conceptualized in humanitarian policy documents, make it difficult to succinctly translate to other languages. Ironically, communication and effective exchange of information are usually highlighted as key components for recipients to be able to hold practitioners accountable. When recipients cannot grasp the core components of accountability, especially if parts of the concept are lost in translation, it becomes difficult to operationalize (Tan and Schreeb 2015, p. 268). Lack of clear communication of responsibilities further exacerbates the power imbalance between aid providers and recipients, as the former retain all knowledge of the concept’s practical implications. How can we understand humanitarian accountability given the ambiguity of this concept?

In this section, we have aimed to unpack some of the contentious moral and semantic elements latent in humanitarian accountability, as they appear in policy documents of professional humanitarians and the academic literature. The remainder of the report will be twofold. First, the report provides a breakdown of the model of “upward” and “downward” accountability, which refers to responsibilities flowing between humanitarian actors and their donors and recipients respectively and is often used to explain professional humanitarians’ understanding of accountability. Second, the report investigates how civic humanitarians practice and understand accountability. This exploration proposes a much broader definition of accountability by zooming out from the professionals’ focus on legal and moral dimensions and recognizing other meaningful frameworks for regulating the two-way relational process that guarantee that individuals and organizations live up to and answer for their own actions in accordance with particular legal, moral, social or institutional standards.
3. Understandings of Accountability within the Humanitarian Regime

3.1. Audits and money trails: Defining upward accountability

Simply put, “upward accountability” refers to the relationship of trust and oversight between humanitarian actors and their funders. For most national or international NGOs, the guiding framework for this relationship springs from “the fiscal and legal requirements that organizations must comply with to operate and access funds” (Baranda and Büchner 2019, p. 2). Attention to financial accountability has led to the development of thorough mechanisms that regulate humanitarian organizations’ cash flow, with an increasing number of major funders earmarking donations and attaching requirements for audits and financial controls. These mechanisms are employed to make sure that donations are spent according to set agreements, and to prevent fraud, corruption, embezzlement, money laundering and financing of terrorism.

While efficient, these mechanisms of upward accountability can be quite invasive. For one, requirements to comply with host country laws risk exposing humanitarians to national governments with strict anti-NGO policies (Wolff and Poppe 2015). Moreover, the increased stress on financial accountability, especially regulations that follow major donors such as United Nation (UN) agencies, the European Union and foreign ministries, require humanitarian organizations to spend significant resources on complying with reporting requirements. Professional humanitarians are careful not to upset host country governments and major international actors, and upward accountability is not only a way to prove financial transparency, but also to prove political compliance.

Those who do receive funding must continuously report spending and follow externally imposed guidelines, making them legally and financially accountable “upwards” to donors. These mechanisms for monitoring cash flows follow a larger trend of Western organizational culture. Power argues that auditing (1997) and risk management (2007) have, since the 1990s, developed into standardized tools to regulate the structure of Western organizational life. He suggests that these tools are less about addressing real dangers and more about monitoring organizational accountability and legitimacy. Organizations strive to adopt legal frameworks and bureaucratzied hierarchies that facilitate enhanced control and oversight. These mechanisms align with the stress on monitoring and control inherent to New Public Management (NPM), which has by now expanded from government bureaucracies well into professional humanitarian organizations (Barnett 2005, p. 730).

There is obviously a need to oversee cash flows and operational infrastructure for humanitarian organizations. These organizations often work in conflict zones, where state control is weak or momentarily incapacitated. Money laundering continues to be an issue, and major organizations have been tainted by high-profile cases of systemic corruption. Nevertheless, the increasing focus on “audited” or financial accountability arguably diverts attention from the inevitable moral decisions that arise for all humanitarian practitioners, both as individuals and as part of a collective.
Some worry that the current focus on monitoring outsources individual judgements and morality to a set of indicators for best practice, as humanitarian organizations increasingly measure success similarly to commercial firms (Barnett 2005, p. 733). As Giri (2000, p. 174) puts it, “what happens when procedures of accountability seem a substitute for our preparation for a life of ethical responsibility?”

The ever-increasing pressure towards upward accountability thus runs the risk of outsourcing individual responsibility to benchmarks. Governments and other major donors are continuously pushing for more oversight on humanitarian spending. Professional humanitarians, who can receive such funds, are thus under enhanced scrutiny. They must make sure to guard their backs by strictly adhering to donor requirements, lest they be liable to major lawsuits and expensive court cases (Pantuliano et al. 2011). With enhanced scrutiny follows a bloated bureaucracy, the latter a double-edged sword which can both help legally protect humanitarian organizations while also slowing down aid delivery and operational flexibility as well as taking funds away from their intended purposes. These legal dimensions can often be traced back to the political agendas of donors, which severely impact aid by their choice of organizations and compliancy requirements to access funds. On top of this comes the increased mistrust towards how aid money is spent, which has become a bigger issue in light of broader public skepticism in donor countries. Both combine to create increasing pressure towards a technocratic type of accountability.

In short, upward accountability largely revolves around transparency and donors’ financial control over humanitarian actors. Cash flows are thoroughly documented and controlled by auditors, especially with donations coming from UN agencies, the EU or foreign ministries. This results-based monitoring system follows the logics of NPM, where control mechanisms are integral to identifying organizational weaknesses and, accordingly, to enhancing efficiency through cutbacks or restructuring. For professional humanitarian organizations, especially the larger ones, this results-based monitoring system is also utilized to evaluate the quality of their engagement with aid recipients (Klein-Kelly 2018, p. 292). How is this executed in practice? And what happens when the relationship of accountability between aid providers and recipients is regulated by pre-set indicators for best practices?

### 3.2. Downward Accountability: The Achilles Heel of Professional Humanitarians

With the onset of the 21st century, the professional humanitarian community has increasingly been concerned with calls to better tailor aid provisions and development projects according to the actual, dynamic needs of recipients. This attention “downwards”, as opposed to the “upward” attention towards funders and policy makers, comes as a clear break with practices of the previous century, and partly aims to address the aid industry’s tainted track record of not assessing the long-term impact of humanitarian engagements (Barnett 2012, p. 204). Yet “downward
accountability” – that is, the regulatory framework for feedback and interaction between aid providers and recipients – continues to take a back seat when compared to the ever-present emphasis on financial transparency for humanitarian organizations (Ebrahim 2003).

At the same time, the humanitarian sector continues to be plagued by serious accountability concerns, for example in relation to cases of sexual and violent abuse, often towards vulnerable individuals (CHS 2020). Moreover, humanitarian organizations are criticized for being notoriously slow in mobilizing resources and political will, as well as for projects being top-heavy rather than catering to the needs of recipients (CHS 2020). The continuing legacy of abuse and organizational inflexibility and inadequacy towards recipients reveals how downward accountability constitutes a weak point in the humanitarian sector. While this weak point is recognized by academics and practitioners alike, solutions seem to be implemented haphazardly and success stories are anecdotal at best (Ebrahim 2003; Knox Clarke 2018). What makes it so difficult to implement effective mechanisms of downward accountability?

On a fundamental level, the concept of downward accountability lacks a unified and actionable definition among humanitarian actors. More so than upward accountability, downward accountability suffers from being an appendix to humanitarian operations, meant to signal moral legitimacy rather than provide concrete mechanisms to hold practitioners and recipients accountable to each other (Knox Clarke 2018, p. 165; Tan and Schreeb 2015). Feedback and critique from recipients are rarely welcomed and hardly ever lead to changes in humanitarian practices. In the few cases where complaints are willingly received, the structural causes of the critique remain largely unaddressed (CHS 2020, p. 16). Moreover, where accountability and feedback mechanisms for recipients are employed, the space for critique tends to be limited to the framework of ongoing projects, rather than informing development of new policies (Krause 2014, p. 57). These tendencies have been criticized in the academic literature, with some arguing that the lack of attention to downward accountability feeds into a long trend by the professional humanitarian system of depoliticizing aid and depriving aid recipients of agency (Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2014). Furthermore, because humanitarianism is largely conceptualized as helping a stranger in need of help, its relational aspects – the context of complex social and political relations in which the provision and receipt of aid takes place – are equally ignored, as we will explore further below.

There has, nevertheless, been some progress in recent years on the number of feedback mechanisms that professional humanitarians employ to incorporate critique and insights from recipients. This development follows increased attention to the concept of “Accountability to Affected Populations” (AAP), which has parallels with the proliferation of guidelines and policy documents advocating a more holistic approach to accountability, such as the Accountable Now and the Sphere International project handbooks (Baranda & Büchner 2019, Sphere Association 2018). The increasing inclusion of mechanisms regulating downward accountability shows that the humanitarian community is no longer evaluated merely on the quantity of their provisions, but also on
the quality of the aid distributed (Egeland 2005). Process has thus come to the fore, and with it new questions are asked on how the divergent needs and individual agency of aid recipients can be integrated into a top-heavy, bureaucratized humanitarian system.

However, this endeavor has mostly resulted in haphazard conceptions and practices of downward accountability across the Western professional humanitarian sector. Definitions for how to practice accountability are often left to head offices and crystallize as preset indicators in guidelines for those working on the ground. These efforts of policy formulation have not translated to systemic change for providers or recipients. The increase in feedback mechanisms between professional humanitarians and recipients is generally viewed as a cumbersome “box-ticking exercise” by aid providers, leading to a situation where reports on downward accountability are neglected and end their days in the drawers of an HR-department (Knox Clarke 2018, p. 160).

Results-based management and monitoring, following the NPM-model, has implanted itself as key quality control mechanisms for both upward and downward accountability. Subsequently, the responsibility to ensure quality of aid is outsourced to a pre-set list of performance indicators, rather than practical and moral situational assessments. Typical questions that aid providers must ask when engaging with recipients are along the lines of: How do you want to receive information? What is your mother tongue? Who makes decisions on behalf of your community? What kind of aid have you received in the past months (IASC 2018)? For some providers, the sum of these impersonalized evaluations constitutes an operational “straitjacket”, where individual moral judgment and agency are restricted by rigid guidelines (Klein-Kelly 2018, p. 309). Paradoxically then, the new humanitarian practices that were introduced to guarantee downward accountability have led to a situation where providers are liable primarily to guidelines for downward accountability, rather than being held directly accountable to and by recipients. Recipients might of course be able to complain about the conduct of a provider directly to their organization. Yet, the many stories of neglected or even covered up complaints, combined with the power asymmetry between provider and recipient, would suggest that downward accountability is currently still not practiced in a satisfactory manner.

In sum, the model of downward and upward accountability seems to hinge on a tradeoff between moral responsibility and institutional financial control. Whereas moral responsibility reflects a moral aspect of accountability, institutional control reflects a legal aspect. The legal aspects, which regulate much of the mechanisms of upward accountability, will often be sourced in law, and thus carry with it concrete definitions of who is held responsible, what they are held responsible for, and how they are held responsible (Klein-Kelly 2018, p. 291). The moral aspect, however, which governs many of the mechanisms of downward accountability, generally lacks equally clear-cut regulations of responsibilities and procedures in the humanitarian field. Ideally, the lack of clear-cut regulations on downward accountability would allow providers and recipients to negotiate responsibilities among themselves. Unfortunately, in practice, mechanisms of
downward accountability rarely enable either provider or recipient to formulate their own desired responsibilities and expectations, apart from a very limited menu of options that some accountability guidelines propose. Thus, downward accountability reflects a desired moral dimension of humanitarian aid – where recipients can impact the quality of aid provisions and providers are held responsible for their actions towards recipients – that has yet to be achieved and institutionalized in concrete practices and procedures.

The intertwined legal and moral aspects of upward and downward accountability respectively show how accountability is a multilayered concept. Responsibilities can be anchored in either one or both dimensions, such as when providers are obliged to “tick boxes” to assure that they are being morally responsible. Some worry that this reliance on ticking off pre-set performance indicators blurs the lines for what distinguishes humanitarian organizations from other actors, such as for-profit companies and the “humanitarian efforts” of armed forces. As Barnett (2005, p. 733) puts it, “What happens ... when humanitarian agencies increasingly base their legitimacy on their ability to measure up to standards set by modern, commercial firms?”

This focus on financial transparency and control, with its basis in Western moral and legal frameworks, has resulted in a narrow definition of humanitarian accountability that is rigid towards donors and simultaneously vague and ineffective when directed towards recipients. Given the increasing desire to broaden the understanding and practice of humanitarian accountability – especially its responsiveness towards recipients – investigating the accountability practices of civic humanitarians may provide valuable alternatives. Civic humanitarians tend to be less formally organized and do not necessarily answer to the same legal responsibilities as professionals do. Simultaneously, they tend to be more socially and geographically embedded with their recipients (Fechter and Schwittay 2019, Horst et al. 2010). How does this impact mechanisms of humanitarian accountability? Through what lens can we approach accountability for civic humanitarians? And how might the civic humanitarian perspective benefit the professionals’ definition of downward accountability?
4. Civic Humanitarians and Multilayered Accountability

Who are the civic humanitarians and how do they understand and practice accountability? To return to the report’s initial definition, accountability refers to a two-way relationship in which subjects simultaneously take responsibility for something and hold themselves and others to account, based on overlapping layers of expectations. These expectations can be anchored in moral, religious, legal, fiscal, social and cultural sources. Expectations are typically fluid – even those anchored in formal institutions – and are susceptible to change over time. They can also be informal and develop out of interpersonal, social interaction (Chynoweth, Zwi and Whelan 2018). Furthermore, they are idiosyncratic, linked to a specific relation between two or more actors, and draw on the actors’ immediate temporal, spatial and cultural context. This situatedness is key to understanding why a concept such as humanitarian accountability cannot easily be pinned down to a universal definition.

The impact of changing contexts for relationships of accountability becomes especially visible in protracted crises. Fundamental needs often remain unaddressed over long periods of time, yet the context alters, and individuals adapt. And as the context develops, so do the responsibilities and expectations between humanitarians and aid recipients (Feldman 2007). To illustrate the heterogeneity of humanitarian accountability in protracted situations, and the fluctuating expectations that undergird it, we present an example of long-term regional refugee camps. Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are notorious for their longevity and probable permanence. A broad set of actors sustains the camp’s humanitarian infrastructure, including professional and civic, local and international, secular and religious, leftist and Islamist humanitarians (Hanafi and Long 2010). These actors support inhabitants through housing projects, schools, and water and sanitation programs, through interpersonal, psychosocial support programs, initiatives to keep the streets clean and well-lit and much more.

Ayn el-Hilweh, Lebanon’s biggest Palestinian refugee camp, was established in southern Lebanon in 1948. It currently houses about 80,000 inhabitants. Simultaneously, it is host to several UN agencies, INGOs, NGOs, political parties, religious actors, and an underrecognized set of grassroots initiatives, such as youth movements (Sogge 2018). These locally-present actors are connected internationally to various counterparts, including donors, diaspora individuals and organizations, as well as institutional headquarters. In the camps, they engage alongside, in collaboration with, or in opposition to each other, according to everchanging circumstances and motivations. Only rarely do they function as a “humanitarian system.” Instead, they constitute a dynamic fabric, woven together by context rather than shared goals and motivations (Hanafi and Long 2010). Many of these actors will operate with different understandings of accountability: They answer to different actors and they are held responsible under different sets of expectations. As such, there is an infinite potential of overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, responsibilities and expectations that coexist within the camp’s mere 1.5 square km.

When studying humanitarian accountability, it is crucial to unpack the different relationships, expectations and responsibilities that are part of a complex fabric of aid providers in any given
context. Focusing on civic humanitarians, one might assume that expectations and responsibilities are regulated by the specific communities in which civic humanitarians operate. In what follows, we aim to cluster the multitude of civic humanitarian actors around some of the most prominent local, national, global and transnational communities and networks they operate within, first discussing those based on religion, then kinship, geographical location, ethno-national background and solidarity. This is done both to introduce key categories of civic humanitarians, focusing on those discussed within the academic and “gray” literature, as well as to illustrate how different notions of accountability can overlap and inform a specific relationship of expectations and responsibilities between aid provider and recipient.

4.1. Religious Communities

Religion and aid share a long and contentious history. First, religion is a historically important community builder. It often brings with it a set of shared norms and moral codes that are negotiated on a micro, meso and macro level, and that guide the lives of its followers. Religion can connect several localities through these shared values. A religious institution, such as a church or a mosque, both establishes a community in its specific locality but also connects to an overarching (transnational) community of co-religionists. What typically binds the local and transnational community spheres together is their adherents’ perception of shared experiences and values, combined with the material presence of religious institutions and laymen that mediate knowledge and practice (Levitt 2008, p. 768). Co-religionists thus connect to each other, creating one overarching community with sub-communities within.

This sense of shared community can extend far beyond the mere spiritual domain. In fact, humanitarian aid, as it is understood today, is historically closely embedded with the practices of religious charity. Religious institutions have long acted as intermediaries of charity and “good-doing”, across sects and localities. Whether these practices can be interpreted as humanitarianism is less established. As Barnett (2011, p. 19) puts it: “If we equate humanitarianism with compassion, then humanitarianism is as old as history.”

A key aspect of humanitarian accountability is the consideration of who should receive aid and on what basis. Within some faith-based organizations, debates are taking place as to whether aid should solely be provided to those sharing one’s religion (Barnett and Stein 2012, p. 18; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Pacitto 2016). While this is by far not a core characteristic of most faith-based humanitarians, it underscores the sense of shared spirituality that guides and motivates many such actors. Faith and spirituality might be an important lens through which humanitarian actors construct meaningful relations and connections, where communities are primarily conceived on the basis of a shared religiosity. Combined with particular notions of a “good society” and the preferred ways to achieve it, these perspectives come to inform specific “theologies of change” that impact both the concepts and practices of religious humanitarian aid (Levitt 2008, p. 772).
To this day, religion continues to be a significant “catalyst for humanitarian activism” (Levitt 2088, p. 767). Here, it is important to differentiate between (I)NGOs with a religious character, commonly known as faith-based organizations (FBOs) which operate on the macro level; the meso-level humanitarian efforts of individual institutions (as in a church providing shelter to refugees or a mosque donating food to the poor during holiday celebrations); and the micro-level activities of individuals. Many of the most prominent international FBOs today, like World Vision International, Caritas Internationalis and Islamic Relief, typically resemble their secular counterparts in both organizational structure and operational practices. While Ferris (2011) argues that their religious link is primarily discernable in their charter or communication rather than in the mechanisms they utilize to operationalize aid, others have found that also in large Muslim FBOs, religion still to some extent shapes how aid is thought of and operationalized (Borchgrevink 2017). Like secular (I)NGOs, major FBOs also adhere to professionalized guidelines and thus comply with much of the same accountability standards (upwards and downwards), including their focus on financial transparency and monitoring (Paras and Stein 2012).

Apart from prominent FBOs, religious institutions such as individual churches and transnational congregations tend also to be significant providers of humanitarian assistance (Borchgrevink 2016 and 2017, Ferris 2011). Like many civic humanitarians, these grassroots efforts often go under the radar and are rarely recognized as part of the “humanitarian system”, partly because such efforts are hard to quantify and partly because they do not fit with the methods and standards of professionalized, Western NGOs (Borchgrevink and Erdal 2017, Ferris 2011, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013). Yet the world’s two biggest religions, Christianity and Islam, have long institutionalized charity through collect and zakat. The concept of “dān” (donation) in Hinduism is another widespread religious practice of charity (Bornstein 2012b). The regulation of this aid, or charity, is often localized to individual congregations, which makes them more responsive to their immediate surroundings. Moreover, religious institutions are typically socially embedded in their localities, and share a history of trust, or distrust, with the adjacent population (Hopgood and Vinjamuri 2012, p. 42). Such institutions can thus dually come to create a local community, which connects transnationally with co-religionists in other localities.

Religion also functions on a micro level, influencing the civic engagement of individuals. Religious communities will often have their own conceptualizations of what constitutes a “good society” and the preferred ways of achieving this goal (Borchgrevink 2019, Levitt 2008). Certain values are appreciated over others and Christian and Muslim humanitarians tend to stress that certain actions have inherent value, as long as they are grounded in religious principles. For example, they may invest in education both because of the obligation to seek knowledge and support others in gaining knowledge, as well as because supporting activities that produce long-term effects are seen to give religious rewards to the giver for as long as the effect is being produced (Borchgrevink 2017). Actions can make sense when they serve a higher religious purpose, even if they do not produce corporeal results (Ademolu 2020; Barnett 2012, pp. 203–5). This
fundamentally impacts the conception of accountability: Where professional humanitarians are often held to account on the results they produce (the ability to alleviate suffering and save lives), religious actors aim to act in accordance with a religious ethic that builds on their accountability to God (Borchgrevink 2017). One may argue that the first type of accountability relates to outcome and the second to process, and that the two conceptions of accountability thus have fundamentally different starting points.

4.2. Kinship Responsibilities

Humanitarian aid is also often channeled through kinship networks, which can draw on each other to mobilize resources during times of protracted needs (Ikanda 2019). These networks will often have socialized roles of who is responsible for what, who has to answer to certain expectations, for example when the father is the breadwinner and the mother the primary caretaker. Kinship thus becomes a network that regulates expectations and responsibilities for how to take care of each other. Some argue that these familial acts of good-doing do not equate to humanitarianism – one family member primarily helps another out of duty, not out of compassion or by their own conviction (Barnett and Stein 2012, p. 12).

This definition usually sees humanitarianism as a primarily Western project to help “strangers in need”, wherever they might be, which is facilitated by an industry of particular organizations, funders, subcontractors, diplomats etc. This understanding is based on racialized perceptions of who engages in aid and who benefits from it, excluding the possibility that practically anyone can both provide and be in need of aid (Sinatti and Horst 2015). Furthermore, helping others is understood to be linked to abstract understandings of kinship – formulated as “helping one’s own” rather than coming forth from humanity and a wish to help others in need.

Kinship is a culturally-significant system of social relationships that brings with it a set of expectations and responsibilities. In turn, these shape concrete practices, as when they enable certain avenues of humanitarianism. Kinship situates humanitarian actions through relations rather than universal principles. It is a key component of social capital (Tan-Mullins et al. 2007), and can be a crucial part of local social insurance mechanisms created to mitigate risks in situations of high levels of uncertainty and low formal insurance systems. This is not only possible between actual kin, as in many situations, forms of caretaking can be rationalized through a vocabulary of kinship responsibilities (Bornstein 2012a). Accountability in this context cannot easily be reduced to a list of performance indicators, as the relations between aid provider and recipient build on multilayered moral, cultural and religious sources, and the particular humanitarian exchange is placed within a long-term social relationship.

“Kinship humanitarianism” can function as a lens through which humanitarian actions make social sense locally. As Bornstein (2012a) explores, kinship does not only connote a map of
individuals connected through blood, but also a complex apparatus that systematizes multi-directional responsibilities and expectations. She explores how humanitarian efforts are rationalized through a lens of “relational empathy” in New Delhi, where kinship is the primary motivator for acts of caretaking and good-doing. She juxtaposes relational empathy with liberal altruism as two fundamentally different motivators for humanitarian action. Bornstein (2012a) warns against imagining aid recipients as universal and abstract “others” in need: “The others whose lives are imagined do not want empathy; they want justice. Moreover, the production of empathy without context is dangerous because empathy without obligation allows the abdication of responsibility” (p. 149). Instead, then, the relational responsibilities and expectations become a central part of humanitarian support.

Similarly, Rozakou (2016) describes “socialities of solidarity” in the context of humanitarian help provided to refugees in Greece, where charity is traditionally frowned upon and only solidarity is seen as a true form of support. The concern here is with one-directional assistance rather than exchanges that are part of long-term relationships. This dilemma was addressed during the 2015 refugee crisis and the incredible levels of human suffering it brought to the fore, by locals trying not only to help but to incorporate immigrants and refugees in “culturally significant forms of interaction” (Rozakou 2016: 186). Furthermore, locals recognized victims as social persons, not similar yet familiar as conceptually placed in kinship systems, which again underlined the need for humanitarian support.

### 4.3. Community-Based Actors

Civic humanitarian actors also operate within local communities and networks, based on geographical cohabitation. Place-based humanitarian actors provide assistance and care in urban, and sometimes also rural areas. They include neighborhood associations and committees, councils of elders, federations of slum dwellers, local businesspeople, trade associations, and so on. People in a local community self-organize in response to locally pressing needs or societal issues of concern for the community. They might provide assistance for each other, but support could also be provided for newcomers in need, such as refugees and IDPs. Refugees and IDPs can also form part of these community-based structures of support themselves.

The literature on community-based actors is scattered and not always easy to find. Within humanitarian studies, it is typically found in literature on “resilience” or humanitarianism in urban areas. Hilhorst (2018) argues that there are two key paradigms in humanitarianism, where the first is the classical Dunantist perspective based on the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, meant to ensure that humanitarian aid is provided based on needs only. The second is the more recent paradigm of resilience humanitarianism, which underlines the continuity between crisis and normalcy and argues that crisis-affected populations use the resources they have to deal with crisis. Here, the focus is on these populations as “first
responders”, with the risk of responsibilizing communities for the consequences of structural conditions of poverty and need (Hilhorst 2018: 6). This literature then moves from talking about the humanitarian system to the humanitarian ecosystem, which includes a much larger group of providers of assistance or services.

Community-based actors have also received more attention with the urbanization of humanitarian crises (Archer & Dodman 2017). Refugees and displaced people increasingly find themselves in urban areas intermixed with populations who have similar needs in terms of shelter, healthcare, food and sanitation. In this situation, local organization and community-based mobilization play an important role in service provision for displaced people and hosts alike (Crisp et al. 2012).

And yet, while the existence of a large group of civic humanitarians is a relatively new and still not fully recognized fact in humanitarian studies, there are a considerable number of ethnographic studies on humanitarian assistance by local communities. These studies are spread across a wide range of fields, including refugee studies, development studies, geography and anthropology. They discuss the role of community-based actors using concepts such as civil society (Forrest et al. 2018), citizen aid (McKay and Perez 2019), social capital (Bankoff 2007) and a host of other theoretical perspectives. In many cases, the focus on the community is still seen through the lens of formal humanitarian aid, where there has been increasing interest in (the deficiencies in) community-based approaches (Bakewell 2000, Kyamusugulwa and Hilhorst 2015, Sanyal 2021).

As Chambers (1986) argues, in refugee aid operations, the role of local hosts in housing refugees is often downplayed and their hospitality may be treated with suspicion. While it is important not to assume that local response mechanisms can deal with refugee influxes, just as it is crucial not to equate “community resilience” with lack of external support, at the same time, local community support needs to be acknowledged (Brun 2010). Bakewell’s study on the hosting of refugees in the border area of north-west Zambia is a case in point. There, refugees became new villagers, and Zambian villagers, chiefs and to a lesser extent local government were of the opinion that the presence of the refugees had boosted the population and helped to develop the area (Bakewell 2002).

Community-based actors are the first responders, and build on pre-existing relationships in their provisions of aid (Cretney 2015). In situations where uncertainty is prevalent, such as in disaster-prone areas, a host of systems already exist to support one another in times of need, often based on close relationships of reciprocity. These systems provide social capital to deal with risks and insecurity collectively. Rotating credit associations, cooperative societies and self-help organizations are examples of such systems, which are based on the expectation that aid provided today will be repaid when called upon in the future (Bankoff 2007). Especially in contexts where formal types of insurances and support mechanisms are absent and uncertainty is prevalent, formal and informal associations and social networks committed to individual and community welfare have always been essential to help people cope with duress (Bankoff 2007, Horst 2006).
4.4. Diaspora Humanitarians

Diaspora refers to expatriate minority communities who are engaged in their countries of origin through transnational economic, political and/or socio-cultural contributions (Horst et al. 2010). They can be defined as transnational communities of a particular kind. These communities have been dispersed from the homeland, have a collective memory, believe in an eventual return, are committed to the maintenance and restoration of their homeland, and have a collective identity, group consciousness and solidarity (Horst 2006: 32–3). As many authors have pointed out, the concept suggests an actual community, whereas it is instead better understood as a concept for claims-making and mobilizing (Brubaker 2005, Kleist 2008a and b, Turner and Kleist 2013). As such, it is also important not to assume diasporas to be unitary actors, especially not in humanitarian situations that are caused by violent conflict (Horst 2008, Koser 2007, Lyons 2007, Orjuela 2008).

Like religious actors, diaspora humanitarians operate within a broad range of structures and methods. These span from sending remittances to kin (Ademolu 2020; Garbin 2019), establishing refugee-led organizations to help those who remain in their origin countries (Olliff 2018) or engaging with INGOs to enhance their contextual knowledge of, and dialogue with, recipient communities (Horst et al. 2016). The differences between different diaspora initiatives are thus substantial, with variations in who acts, what they do, how, why and where (see Figure 1). Contributions can be made by individuals or groups; the activities engaged in can be both direct and indirect (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003); contributions can draw on material as well as social capital; and they can take place transnationally or upon (temporary) return (Horst et al. 2010).

The potential value added of diaspora humanitarianism is context-specific and depends on the type of humanitarian practice engaged in, and by whom. It can inter alia include knowledge of local languages and practices; access to transnational networks and resources; a long-term commitment to a particular geographical area; and access to locations that are inaccessible for
international stakeholders within the humanitarian system. At the same time as these factors are important opportunities in diaspora humanitarianism, there are also a number of challenges, the greatest being potential for politicization of aid or the fear of it in the case of conflict-induced diasporas. This has for example been well documented in the case of the Tamil diaspora’s involvement with its areas of origin while the armed conflict was ongoing (Orjuela 2008, Sriskandarajah 2002, Wayland 2004).

4.5. Global Solidarity

A final category of civic humanitarianism we aim to highlight here consists of people helping “strangers” locally or transnationally, responding to an urgent need, from a sense of solidarity or philanthropy. These are mutual support practices funded by private rather than public means. The literature on such “global solidarity” is relatively fragmented (Fechter and Schwittay 2019), and can be found within anthropology, geography and humanitarian studies. One reason for the fragmentation is the host of concepts that is being used, including grassroots humanitarianism (Pantti 2015, Vandevooordt & Fleischmann 2020), global solidarity (Pantti 2015, Rozakou 2016), volunteer humanitarianism (Sandri 2018), citizen humanitarianism (Jumbert and Pascucci forthcoming) and subversive humanitarianism (Vandevoordt 2019). Empirical examples include European citizens and small civil society organizations providing humanitarian aid in Asia and Africa, digital volunteers and a host of studies on citizen initiatives to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees in Europe following the 2015 refugee reception crisis.

Fechter and Schwittay (2019) coin the term “citizen aid” to refer to “projects instigated by individuals who are privately funded and aim to support others in need. The focus on ‘citizens’ emphasizes the agency of ordinary people making ethical decisions about providing assistance to others” (Fechter & Schwittay 2019: 1770). The focus is on small-scale civil society actors who respond to local needs, operating on the margins of formal aid. The idea is that the term captures the support that citizens – in a cosmopolitan sense of global citizenship – extend to each other. As Fechter and Schwittay (2019: 1773) argue, one challenge in studying these understudied initiatives lies in analytically extracting them from lenses that are fixated on their status as NGOs, or involving volunteers. Doing this, one runs the risk of missing what makes citizen aid distinctive from more formalized channels of aid.

The different studies on global solidarity networks discuss different geographical and social proximity or distance (Jumbert 2010, Silk 2004). Some of these studies focus on activities by citizens originating in the Global North and being implemented in the Global South, for example as a consequence of being/having been a tourist in a particular area (Fylkesnes 2019). Others identify the importance of social media in global solidarity networks, studying how user-created appeals – produced by ordinary people – encourage the audience to donate money to help victims of major disasters (Pantti 2015). This work shows that “ordinary people increasingly serve as mediators of
humanitarian suffering and as voluntary intermediaries between aid organizations and the general public” (Pantti 2015: 623). A final and increasing strand of studies examining global solidarity study responses to situations in the Global North.

The latter strand mainly studies citizen initiatives to support refugees in Europe, both where they live and at Europe’s borders in for example Greece and Italy. Partly due to the political prominence of refugee issues in Europe as well as elsewhere, these grassroots interventions are being associated closely with pro-migrant activism and political campaigning (Fechter & Schwittay 2019). They also tend to be framed as forms of solidarity (Rozakou 2016, 2017), and are discussed as political statements that address the lack of an appropriate response to the situation by European governments (Jumbert 2020, Vandevenoort 2019). Vandevenoort and Fleischmann (2020) illustrate how these initiatives often struggle with a temporal dilemma: on the one hand, they engage in humanitarian actions to mitigate some of the most severe effects of an increasingly hostile migration regime in the present. On the other, they aim to achieve political change to improve migrants’ precarious situation in the future.

What most of existing research does not study are the many grassroots initiatives of citizens with refugee and migrant backgrounds. While the focus is seemingly on “citizen initiatives”, what is being studied are the initiatives of non-migrant, white citizens, thus reproducing understandings of helpers and helped (Sinatti & Horst 2015). And yet, there are many ways in which those who have experienced similar humanitarian crises engage in helping. Such individuals are motivated by their experiential knowledge and shared fate, as well as by a desire to contribute as citizens to a better society, where they feel authorities are failing to do so (Horst & Lysaker 2019).
5. Mechanisms of Accountability

Exploring civic forms of humanitarianism as practiced by religious or ethno-national communities, or through kinship relations, it becomes clear that the concept of accountability is multilayered and inherently relational. Each community anchors its conceptualization and practice of accountability in layers of moral, social and institutional sources. At the same time, when aiming to understand how aid providers and recipients hold each other accountable in practice, it is crucial to study this process from a relational perspective. We now turn to two relational mechanisms that are relevant for understanding the civic humanitarians described above: namely, reciprocity and interdependence.

5.1. Reciprocity

Aid can be variously understood as a contract, an entitlement or a gift, reflecting different understandings of the content and purpose of any aid relationship, including the normative and procedural aspects of aid arrangements (Eyben 2006). The approach of understanding aid in terms of the gift is particularly popular within anthropological approaches to aid. For decades, the relevance of gift-giving theory and various understandings of reciprocity has been explored in attempts to theorize aid (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 1992, Hattori 2003, Paragi 2017). In particular, Mauss’s *Essai sur le don (The Gift)* has had great impact in portraying the gift as establishing relations between giver and receiver. This is achieved through the obligation to reciprocate within a system of exchange (Brac de la Perrière 2015).

Reciprocity connotes an exchange of value: an expectation that when you give something, you will receive something in return in future. The provider “invests” in a system of gift-giving that can potentially generate value, where the value might be generated by the recipient or a third party. This value does not have to be material, but can also be in the form of social capital. The exchange is shaped by and shapes the power relations of the involved parties. By this definition, reciprocity becomes a mechanism to regulate social life and interaction through the exchange of gifts (Carmichael and MacLeod 1997).

The mechanism of reciprocity might be useful for highlighting potential points of contention in relationships of humanitarian accountability. As Malkki (2015) notes, humanitarian acts are rarely purely one-directional, in that both provider and recipient give and get something through their relational exchanges. Humanitarian actors, especially those working in professionalized NGOs, are usually seen as unconditional providers of aid. Nevertheless, the exchange between provider and receiver is regulated by several sets of expectations and responsibilities. These can be requirements that recipients must adhere to in order to receive aid, or the category that they must fit into, such as being identified as “vulnerable” or underaged. There can be expectations for how the aid will be used and distributed.

Elisha (2008) highlights how reciprocal accountability is built on a basis of “relational commitments” between those providing and receiving humanitarian aid. He studies activists from an
Evangelical church in the southern USA, investigating how they struggle to maintain compassion towards local aid recipients. The activists aim to give unconditional gifts, as common in the orthodox Protestant conception of charity, while also desiring recipients to answer to a rigid definition of gratification. Recipients are implicitly expected to seek redemption, to repent, and to “change their ways” with the support of the providers (Elisha 2008).

Several others have studied elements of the reality of expectations of reciprocity despite perceptions of humanitarian aid being one-way. As Stirrat and Henkel (1997) warned in their study on development aid: there is no such thing as a free gift. A case study on post-tsunami aid in Sri Lanka argues that humanitarian aid is not merely about a material transfer, it also embodies cultural symbolism, social power and political affiliations, reinforcing and reconfiguring exchange relations among different “patrons” and “clients” (Korf et al. 2010). A study on a related topic in India goes one step further to argue that humanitarian aid in fact has sown the seeds for the creation of social hierarchy and the establishment of patron-client relations that were not there in the past (Ramani 2010). Based on the case of East Timor, Da Silva (2008) argues that the giving of international gifts involves strategies of definition of political status and the cultivation of national identity on the part of donors.

5.2. Interdependence and Care

Another mechanism that can help conceptualize how expectations and responsibilities come together to inform a relationship of accountability is the “ethics of care” – a perspective that is gaining ground in the scholarly literature on humanitarian studies. The ethics of care begins with the core notion that all relations are built on interdependence between inherently vulnerable humans, who are constantly in shifting roles of caretaking and being cared for (Held 2008). From this perspective, caring for others is not a charitable act born from an abstract desire to help “strangers in need”, but rather a fundamental practice of our everyday lives and a necessary feature of human survival (Robinson 2013). This perspective draws attention to often overlooked power relations and structural inequalities by examining relationships of care and the shifting roles and responsibilities of caretakers in a society (Lawson 2007; Robinson 2018).

As such, this perspective is arguably a useful practical tool for countering the professional humanitarians’ much critiqued tendency to decontextualize the agency and life-stories of recipients (Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2014), as it seeks to foreground human needs specific to the contexts where they develop (Robinson 2018, p. 561). Furthermore, a sensitivity to interdependence can readjust the lack of temporality that often follows when professional humanitarians conceptualize their projects as emergency responses, even when these responses and “emergencies” are protracted. Through the building of relationships between aid workers and beneficiaries, both parties might be better placed to envision their own futures and identify potentials for agency within their given situations (Brun 2016).
For civic humanitarians, the fluidity of caretaker versus care receiver roles, which is at the core of care ethics, can become pertinent. As an example, diaspora humanitarians might be inclined to see themselves as an extension of the recipient community that they are helping, with some self-identifying as both helper and victim (Olliff 2018). The fluidity of these roles seems also to impact how the suffering of the recipients is understood. Contrasting the dominant Western humanitarian discourse on the visceral “suffering body”, some diaspora humanitarians seem to focus more on structural causes of hardship, in particular the disruption of social relations (Olliff 2018). Thus, care ethics can not only have a concrete impact on a processual and implementational level, but can also be utilized as a normative lens to understand causes of hardship and identify project goals thereafter.

Reciprocity and interdependence are two similar, if not equal, perspectives that foreground how responsibilities are relationally negotiated. Whereas reciprocity highlights how an individual’s act of good-doing is an investment in a system of exchanging “gifts”, care ethics argues that caretaking is an integral part of what it means to be human. Exchanges are not always quid pro quo, but can be a human expression of compassion. Both perspectives work to inform a broad and nuanced approach to humanitarian accountability, one that focuses on relational exchanges as opposed to satisfying universal standards and quality benchmarks.

In sum, the civic humanitarian label lacks a succinct definition due to its engagement across fields of formality, geography and form. The heterogenous nature of civic humanitarians, the lack of scholarly focus on non-formal aid providers, and the dispersed nature of research on various forms of civic aid combine to make a systematic overview of civic humanitarianism difficult if not impossible. This leaves many questions unanswered as to how civic humanitarians understand and practice accountability. To better understand accountability mechanisms within these divergent shapes and practices, one might benefit from employing a flexible theoretical framework that is sensitive to, and highlights, the different social and cultural contexts that civic humanitarians operate in. Is there another way to conceptualize humanitarian accountability beyond upward and downward dimensions, which makes room for the concept’s multiple layers?
6. In Conclusion: A Web of Multilayered Accountability

The humanitarian system has long been understood as the sole domain of Westernized (I)NGOs, and yet, a range of civic actors are crucial providers of humanitarian aid in any given situation of need. A neighbor, a distant family member, a co-religionist, a local church or mosque, a wealthy businessman or an engaged group of students might be central in guaranteeing the survival of individuals in dire need. These individuals and institutions are differently positioned to navigate the many layers of humanitarian accountability by being embedded in local contexts, being engaged in long-term reciprocal relationships, and thus understanding the need to mutually negotiate the distribution of responsibilities and expectations. These realities require us to ask different types of questions on the particular power relations and accountability mechanisms that may be of relevance in such contexts, which go far beyond the particular humanitarian aid relation in question.

Understanding accountability as a two-way street of responsibilities that can be anchored in several institutional and relational frameworks, this report argues that accountability relations can only make sense within a specific context. By looking at accountability through the lens of civic humanitarians, it becomes apparent that the responsibilities undergirding this concept always develop out of specific relations, where expectations are grounded in a multitude of social, moral and institutional sources. Given the growing proliferation of civic humanitarian actors, the humanitarian sector might benefit from expanding beyond the traditional understandings of humanitarian accountability in terms of “upwards” and “downwards” legal and moral dimensions, to explore the concept’s relational and contextual dimensions.

Accountability is about being responsible and taking responsibility, based on a set of expectations. The comparison between how this concept is understood and practiced differently for civic and professional humanitarians highlights its relational aspect. Accountability relies on a two-way interaction where expectations and responsibilities are negotiated. These expectations and responsibilities draw from a multitude of frameworks, be they institutional (legal systems, organizational charters), moral (religious charity, alleviating suffering) or socio-cultural (cultural norms, kinship networks). These frameworks will often coexist in any specific relationship of accountability. Each humanitarian act comes with a set of formal and informal accountability mechanisms that coexist, but where some dimensions are more dominant than others.

Rather than envisioning humanitarian accountability as neatly aligned columns that run parallel – based on models of upward and downward accountability – we want to propose that accountability can instead be envisioned as a web. Like the strings of a web, expectations and responsibilities move in several directions and can latch on to proximate or opposite anchor points. Each humanitarian actor is placed in the web through a myriad of relationships, with expectations and responsibilities to other actors. Through this complex web, they are connected to other local actors, institutions and practices in multiple ways, involving a host of sources of accountability.
To untangle this web of responsibilities, one might trace individual strings to their anchor points – as in the sources that undergird them – instead of looking at the web as a whole and trying to discern one universal pattern. Therefore, when investigating how civic humanitarians understand and practice accountability, it makes sense to avoid looking at it from the top-down model of upward and downward accountability. Instead, one can approach the concept as a mapping exercise by using the web metaphor. First, one identifies the actors (aid donors, implementers and recipients). Second, one locates the different sources (anchor points) that the actors draw on to inform their conceptions of responsibilities and expectations. Third, one traces how each actor’s different sources connect with one another in complex ways, resembling a web.

Through this exercise, the manifold sources that inform a specific relationship of accountability are highlighted. This underscores that accountability is intertwined in a contextual fabric, located at one point in space and time, yet susceptible to develop as actors and contexts alter, with old relationships breaking and new ones being established. Furthermore, it signifies that relationships of accountability are, indeed, relational. Accountability relationships are ultimately a product of negotiations of responsibilities where parties anchor expectations to a combination of moral, social and institutional sources. This approach raises questions that are fundamental to understanding humanitarian accountability: Who is held responsible for what? With what expectations? On what grounds? Through what mechanisms? The web metaphor provides the starting point from which to explore these questions systematically.

Addressing these questions can help conceptualize a definition of humanitarian accountability that encompasses both civic and professional actors. To this date, they remain largely unanswered in the academic literature (Dhungana and Cornish 2019). What little literature exists suggests that accountability practices for civic humanitarians differ qualitatively from those of professionals, in that the former are more often motivated by their immediate relations or close (social and/or geographical) proximity to recipients (Fechter and Schwittay 2019, pp. 1772–3), while the latter largely rely on results-based monitoring and donor control. Whereas in work on civic humanitarians, the focus is on the relationship between aid providers and aid recipients and accountability is an integral part of the humanitarian exchange, in the case of professional humanitarians, accountability is a separate topic of enquiry and largely refers to the relationship between donors and aid providers. More research is needed to explore the similarities and differences between the mechanisms of accountability at play in the complex web of humanitarian relationships.

This report argues that accountability is first and foremost a product of specific relations, and the responsibilities that undergird those. Striving for universalistic definitions of accountability, whether in the humanitarian sector or otherwise, quickly overshadows the concept’s inevitable contextual and relational situatedness. Efforts to carve out universal accountability guidelines have diverted attention away from this heterogeneity, and instead directed it towards audits and
New Public Management-style results-based monitoring. And yet the current professional humanitarian system’s notion of accountability – with its principles of neutrality and reliance on monitoring for preset indicators – derives from an equally contextual legacy. If humanitarian accountability is to achieve its goal of holistically increasing the quality of aid, whether through professional or civic actors, we need to recognize and unpack the broad set of expectations and responsibilities of relevance, rather than relying on predefined criteria.
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Broadening the Concept of Humanitarian Accountability

How is accountability practiced and conceptualized among different humanitarian actors?

The humanitarian system has long been understood as the sole domain of Westernized (I)NGOs, and yet, a range of civic actors are crucial providers of humanitarian aid. Civic actors are embedded in local contexts, engaged in long-term reciprocal relationships, and thus understand the need to mutually negotiate the distribution of responsibilities and expectations. These realities require us to ask different types of questions on the particular power relations and accountability mechanisms that may be of relevance in such contexts. Understanding accountability as a two-way street of responsibilities that can be anchored in several institutional and relational frameworks, this report argues for the need to expand our understandings of humanitarian accountability in terms of “upwards” and “downwards” legal and moral dimensions to include the concept’s relational and contextual dimensions.

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