Accountability Beyond Counting: What is Humanitarian Aid Responsible *For*?

By Mary Anderson

Introduction

A few years ago, in a foreign city, I ran into a close friend at the restaurant where I was having breakfast. As we ate together, he told me he was involved in a structural reorganization of an international aid-providing NGO and was struggling with staff firings, relocations, adjustments of budgets and the like. At one point, he looked across the top of his coffee cup and said to me, "Mary, if you were designing the system for responding to humanitarian needs around the world today, given what we all now know, would you, or would you not, invent NGOs?"

I still have not decided what my answer to this challenging question should be, but I know that the answer will depend, in part, on how we as a community (if we can be said to be a community) answer the related question: "What should humanitarian organizations be accountable for?"

There are at least two current approaches to addressing the question of humanitarian accountability.

On the one hand, there is a great deal of attention to monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian impacts. Some of this is donor-driven, with those who supply the funds rightly seeking greater clarity regarding the results of the efforts for which they have paid. Some donors have undertaken rather extensive efforts to develop "impact indicators" against which NGO activities in the future are to be planned and assessed. The field of humanitarian evaluation is growing, and along with this growth comes an ongoing debate about what should be evaluated, what can (and cannot) be evaluated and what are the proper techniques for humanitarian evaluations (that do not distort the humanitarian purposes of the original work).

On the other hand, there is increasing attention to articulation of the standards to which humanitarian action should be held. Some of these focus on establishing minimums regarding the goods, and quality of goods, that should be delivered. Some focus on developing codes of conduct that outline appropriate behaviors. Some introduce additional, but essentially related, areas for accountability (eg. human security), and some highlight side-effects of humanitarian work that should be taken into account alongside intended outcomes (eg. exacerbation of intergroup tensions and social conflict).

Clearly, we are groping for a way to get a handle on what, and how, humanitarian aid is doing. But, with these efforts to push our understanding of accountability comes nervousness.

- "We are small organizations."
- "We have limited resources."
- "The world and the disasters where we work are complex."

- "We have to remain neutral and impartial; we cannot be seen to take on certain issues."
- "We cannot be held accountable for things outside our control."

These are some of the nervous and valid responses heard from many individual humanitarians and many humanitarian organizations.

It is, of course, right to be responsible for our actions and the effects of our actions. It is also right to push ourselves to address additional aspects of responsibility that have to do with the protection and quality of the lives of the people on whose behalf we engage in humanitarian work. And it is right to be modest about the extent and appropriateness of claims regarding our "control," our "power."

In the pages that follow, I will grope my own way among these contending, sometimes contradictory responsibilities. To do so, I will outline five characteristics of the accountability discussion as it is now carried out that appear to limit, or bias, our acceptance of accountability. A focus on these "troubling" aspects of the discussion may help point the way forward toward a greater clarification of what we should be accountable for, and how we should realize our accountability.

Limits and Distortions in the Discussions of Humanitarian Accountability

1. "Upward Accountability" and "Downward Accountability" Terminology

While it is important to recognize that humanitarian organizations and workers are responsible to different groups, including donors on the one hand, and the people in the societies where assistance is given on the other, the terminology of "up" and "down" implies a hierarchy of accountability. Although the terms may derive from a watery reference, as in upstream and downstream flows of resources, those who are "above" are usually assumed to be more important than those who are "below." People who live upstream control, and sometimes pollute, the flow to people who live downstream. Things start upstream and happen later downstream. All the implications of the language reinforce the initiative, and control, of donors to whom we are upwardly accountable and the dependency and secondary consideration of accountability to people who receive assistance.

It is true that most of the discussions which use the terminology I am questioning do so in order to emphasize the importance of humanitarian responsibility toward those who receive assistance. By pointing to the two directions of accountability, they are promoting the rights of recipients. However, the balance of accountability enforcement today is still focused "upward" rather than "downward" as exhibited by the emphasis of both donors and NGOs on meeting financial accounting requirements. This may be so, at least in part, because of the reinforcing nature of language and practice.

2. A Emphasis on Codification

There is no clear evidence that written statements of standards and/or behaviors improve accountability. If there is a positive impact, it appears to arise from the process by which a group of people engage together in articulating and specifying standards they think are important. However, some who have taken part in these conversations report that the process of negotiation about what to include and exclude often leaves each party unsatisfied with the outcome.

In some instances, codification appears to be a substitute for, or a diversion from, more robust and appropriate action. Recently I read a report of a situation in which some humanitarian workers had used their positions of power to coerce sexual interactions with young women. A response of some of the humanitarian organizations in that location was to write a code of conduct for their workers which explicitly stated that this, and other extraction of favors, was an abuse of power. One report claimed that this code of conduct would be distributed to the people in the receiving society and would, thereby, "empower" these people to hold humanitarian workers accountable.

This seems unlikely to me. I am sure that there was no confusion among local people as to whether the rape of their daughters was appropriate or not. They did not need a code of conduct to inform them that this was wrong. If, however, the purpose of the code was to signal that humanitarian organizations were ready to receive complaints of their staff's behaviors and act on them effectively, then it must be asked: "is this the most effective way to convey this message?" Would people who had experienced the misuse of power by humanitarian workers find a paper expression of a code reassuring or would direct visits, expressions of sympathy and dismay, followed by establishment of systems for reporting problems and sanctioning perpetrators be more effective?

It seems clear that the writing of new rules (or the writing down of well-known old rules) is not sufficient to establish a system for accountability and it may not even be a necessary step toward this goal.

3. Emphasis on Importance of Clarifying Roles and Objectives as a Step toward Accountability

Many writers make the point that a first step toward accountability is the clarification of what one intends to do. Without clarity about what is intended, it is impossible for anyone to be held accountable for achieving their goals and fulfilling their roles.

The logic of this is clear, but the outcome is to put all emphasis on intended outcomes and, thereby, to downplay or entirely ignore unintended impacts. It is right to be held accountable for what we say we will do. But, under the circumstances of instability and societal breakdown that characterize the environments of humanitarian efforts, actual achievement of all intended outcomes is not likely and, sometimes, not even desirable. This may reflect changes in circumstances that were be predicted when roles and objectives were being clarified, or it may be because the ways of interacting with

recipient communities are more important than the actual delivery of goods. An example will illustrate.

Some years ago, I heard of a group of communities who asked the humanitarian organization operating in their area not to deliver food aid to them. They made the point that, although they faced severe food insecurity and were, indeed, appropriately targeted by the aid agency, when food was delivered to them they were immediately raided by local militia who stole not only the food, but other items as well. As these people pointed out, they preferred to continue to face their initial food insecurity rather than be put at further risk of injury and death by the violence of militia raids.

Here the humanitarian agency had committed itself to food deliveries to all needy people in the geographic area of its responsibility. But for the sake of the recipients, it had to fall short of its stated goal. This was clearly the right thing to do.

4. Link of Accountability with Control or Power

Very often, discussions of the need for accountability presume a degree of control on the part of humanitarian organizations that needs to be teased apart. On one side, there is a tendency to translate the importance of being accountable into a sense that one *can be* accountable for more than is either accurate or appropriate. This is a dilemma we faced in the Do No Harm project. By clarifying how humanitarian assistance inadvertently feeds into and reinforces conflict in warring societies, and by helping humanitarian organizations to take responsibility for and to avoid such negative impacts, the lessons learned through this project led many to believe that humanitarian organizations play a significant role in conflict resolution. This is essentially not the case. Humanitarian organizations could get everything "right" in the Do No Harm sense and conflicts could still continue. Or humanitarian organizations could get everything wrong, and wars could end. Humanitarian assistance is not the determinant of whether people fight or not.

On the other side, humanitarian action does have real power. When an organization decides whether or not to provide life-saving assistance, where to provide it, what to provide, when to provide it and for how long, and sets criteria of eligibility for who shall receive this assistance, it exercises enormous power over individuals, groups and societies. The direct effect of lives saved does not tell the whole story of impacts for which humanitarian action is responsible.

We have direct and tangible impacts for which we should be accountable. In addition, humanitarian organizations have learned through much cumulative experience that, in addition to intended effects, we have unintended and intangible side-effects. We need to take responsibility for all of these. We also need to become better at tracking them and ensuring they support our humanitarian objectives. These imperatives should not tempt us into social engineering, macro-management of other people's societies or attempts to direct the betterment of other peoples' systems.

As we develop appropriate systems for accountability, we need to keep track both of the full extent of our accountability as well as its limits.

5. Regular Claims that Accountability Entails Commitment of Significant Time and Other Resources

Much of the literature is concerned with the costs of ensuring that accountability systems are developed, adopted and enforced. This emphasis is troubling for two reasons. First, nothing will kill an attempt to improve humanitarian action more quickly than associating the attempt with high time costs. Virtually all humanitarians feel overworked. They say that the urgency of the situations in which they work is so great that there is only time to respond and nothing more. This perception persists and provides a ready reason for not adopting any new approach or system. Experience shows that the urgent response and thoughtfulness are not mutually exclusive.

Second, and more important, is the likelihood that accountability is not primarily a matter of time and money. To emphasize that accountability costs time and money may misdirect efforts to achieve it. In most of our daily lives, we live with direct accountability for many of our actions. We drive on the right side of the road (most of the time) and stop at most stop signs because there may be immediate feedback if we behave outside these norms. Experience shows that some part—indeed, perhaps the major part—of humanitarian accountability can be found in daily feedback from interactions with societies where we work.

In our quest for humanitarian accountability, rather than focusing our attention exclusively on the models provided by established professional systems (such as those adopted by scientists to monitor experimentation or corporations for adherence to safety standards), we should focus on less structured and less costly approaches. A core of humanitarian action involves (or should involve) human interaction. There are existing models for assessing impacts, and ensuring they are positive, in interpersonal, societal interactions, such as “rapid rural appraisal” and “getting to yes”. Both involve listening at multiple levels and assume that people have an ability to develop a variety of solutions to problems rather than that there is a single solution. “Getting to Yes”, further, puts the interests of all parties on the table in a way that establishes a degree of mutuality and honesty in the relationship. These models, or others, may suggest approaches that are more suitable to the actual standards we want to assess and enforce through humanitarian action.

Conclusion

Returning to the question posed by my challenging breakfast partner with which I opened this paper, I find that my answer comes down to how we define a humanitarian NGO.

If I were to invent the system for responding to emergencies, I would not invent merely efficient organizations (such as corporations or militaries) who can *only* deliver the quantity and quality of goods to the right spot in the right time. I have heard estimates

that the percentage of material assistance provided by the international community in any crises falls between 3 and 10 percent of the total. Except in a very few circumstances where international help is primary for a while, most emergency help is provided locally by local people. The delivery of goods, important as this is, is not really what international humanitarian organizations are all about. We are not primarily a logistics enterprise. Therefore, accountability should not be focused primarily on the logistics of aid.

Humanitarian action delivers goods as an expression of values. It carries both the stuff of assistance *and* implicit messages about human worth. It carries messages about responsibility and transparency, about accepting and enjoying differences among people, about interactions based on empathy that is neither condescending nor patronizing but represents an honest identify of one human with another.

If I were inventing the system for delivering humanitarian assistance to people in a crisis, I would certainly invent organizations that recognize the importance of the implicit messages they carry as well as the efficiency of their delivery systems. I would invent organizations that hold themselves accountable for both their direct and indirect and their tangible and intangible impacts. I would invent organizations that listen attentively, regularly and carefully to the assessments and valuations of people who live in the societies where they do their humanitarian work.