Humanitarian Assistance and Accountability: What Are We Really Talking About?

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Abstract

Background: In the past two decades, there has been a worldwide increase in the number of disasters, as well as the number of people affected, along with the number of foreign medical teams (FMTs) deployed to provide assistance. However, in the wake of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, multiple reports and anecdotes questioned the actual, positive contribution of such FMTs and even the intentions behind these aid efforts. This brought on a renewed interest in the humanitarian community towards accountability. Between 2000 and 2012, the number of "Quality and Accountability" initiatives and instruments more than tripled from 42 to 147. Yet, to date, there is no single accepted definition of accountability in the humanitarian context.

Aim: The aim of this report was to explore and assess how accountability in the humanitarian context is used and/or defined in the literature.

Methods: The electronic database PubMed and a predefined list of grey literature comprising 46 organizations were searched for articles that discussed or provided a definition of accountability in the humanitarian context. The definitions found in these articles were analyzed qualitatively using a framework analysis method based on principles of grounded theory as well as using a summative content analysis method.

Results: A total of 85 articles were reviewed in-depth. Fifteen organizations had formal definitions of accountability or explained what it meant to them. Accountability was generally seen in two paradigms: as a "process" or as a "goal." A total of 16 different concepts were identified amongst the definitions. Accountability to aid recipients had four main themes: empowering aid recipients, being in an optimal position to do the greatest good, meeting expectations, and being liable. The concepts of "enforcement/enforceability" under the last theme of "being liable" received the least mention.

Conclusion: The concept of accountability is defined poorly in many humanitarian organizations. Humanitarian providers often refer to different concepts when talking about accountability in general. The lack of a common understanding is contributed by the semantic and practical complexities of the term. The lack of emphasis on "enforcement/enforceability" is noteworthy. Other aspects of accountability, such as its "measurability" and by whom, similarly lack a common understanding and community-wide consensus. To what extent these vague definitions of accountability affect agencies' work in the field remains to be documented.

Introduction

In the past two decades, there has been a worldwide increase in the number of natural disasters as well as the number of people affected.[1] From 2002 through 2011, natural disasters affected an annual average of 268 million people.[2] With regards to man-made disasters, namely conflicts, the number of people displaced reached an "18-year global high of 45.2 million people in 2012," despite a decrease in the number of countries experiencing conflict.[1] In 2012 alone, the international humanitarian response from governments and private donors amounted to more than US $17 billion, despite suffering an eight percent decrease from the previous year.[3] The increase in the incidence of disasters is also accompanied by an increase in number of foreign medical teams (FMTs) deployed to countries affected by sudden onset disasters.[4-6]

Academic Centers/Think Tanks	NGOs, UN, and Government Agency Web Sites	
1. Global Health Council 2. Center for Global Development 3. The United Nations University 4. RAND Corporation 5. The Woodrow Wilson Center 6. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 7. Center for Global Health Research / University of Toronto 8. Emergency Trauma Care Project	1. MEASURE Evaluation 2. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) 3. Epicentre 4. International Rescue Committee 5. International Medical Corps 6. Oxfam International 7. Oxfam Great Britain 8. GIZ/GTZ 9. International Committee of the Red Cross 10. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 11. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 12. World Health Organization 13. Humanitarian Practice Network 14. UN High Commission for Refugees 15. UN Development Program 16. Inter-Agency Standing Committee 17. UNICEF 18. JHPIEGO	19. The Sphere Project[a] 20. HAP International[a] 21. ALNAP[a] 22. People in Aid[a] 23. Groupe URD[a] 24. Coordination Sud[a] 25. Emergency Capacity Building Project[a] 26. CDAC Network[a] 27. CDA Collaborative Learning Projects[a] 28. Disasters Emergency Committee 29. Quality COMPAS 30. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) 31. One World Trust[a] 32. InterAction 33. ActionAid 34. Good Humanitarian Donorship[a] 35. International NGO Charter of Accountability[a] 36. Joint Standards Initiative[a] 37. Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response[a] 38. Management Accounting for NGO[a]

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Table 1. List of Grey Literature Adapted from Jacquet et al[11]
Abbreviations: NGO, nongovernmental organization; UN, United Nations.
[a]Initiatives or bodies that focus on improving accountability as part of their work.

However, in the wake of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, multiple reports and anecdotes started questioning the a priori positive contributions of such FMTs and even the intentions behind these aid efforts.[7,8] This brought on a renewed and strengthened interest towards accountability. Foreign medical teams are not the first or only humanitarian entities being criticized. Since the early 1990s, the global limelight was cast onto humanitarian organizations, in general, for their inadequacies in handling the 1994 Goma crisis post-Rwandan Genocide, as well as later on during the 2004 South-Asian tsunami.

In the greater picture of the humanitarian community, various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have produced their own "guidebooks" stating their views on accountability and ways to achieve it. The interest of the humanitarian community towards accountability is seen evidently in the huge increase in the number of "Quality and Accountability" initiatives and instruments that have emerged over the last decade (more than tripling from 42 to 147 from 2000 through 2012).[9]

Despite such a remarkable development, to date, there is not a single accepted definition of accountability in the humanitarian context. On the contrary, the term accountability seems to represent a whole range of concepts and principles. Without a clear definition of accountability, it would be very difficult to assess critically the accountability of an organization and the assistance they provide. It is analogous to a race without declaring what the competition entails and without a finishing point (although it is not exactly a competition); anyone can claim to have finished the race at any point. How useful, then, is such a concept of accountability?

The purpose of this report was to explore and assess how the term accountability, and in particular, accountability towards aid recipients, in the humanitarian context is used and/or defined in the literature.

Method

The electronic database PubMed (US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health; Bethesda, Maryland USA) was searched for articles that discussed or provided a definition of accountability in the humanitarian context. Combinations of the keywords "*disaster medicine*," "*foreign medical team*," "*internationality*," "*relief work*," "*altruism*," "*humanitarianism*," "*accountability*," "*social responsibility*," and "*liability*" were used in the search. Only articles with abstracts in English were included. A total of 122 abstracts were identified and screened for relevance. Of this total, 20 articles were selected for in-depth analysis.

Grey literature was also included in the search strategy. Grey literature has been defined as any material produced by an organization where publishing is not its primary activity.[10]

A pre-identified list (Table 1) of 46 major humanitarian organizations and initiatives, as well as "academic, government, and [NGOs] known to be conducting global health research or investigations as part of their work" was adapted from the Global Emergency Medicine Literature Review 2012.[11] The web sites of these organizations were searched for articles, in English, that discussed or provided a definition of accountability in the humanitarian context. Through the grey literature search process, an additional 65 articles were found and reviewed. Thus, a total of 85 articles were reviewed (Figure 1).

The articles were reviewed for formal definitions of accountability or what "being accountable" meant. The definitions were then analyzed qualitatively and coding categories were derived directly from the text data. Subsequently, themes[12] were identified from the coding categories using a framework analysis method based upon principles of grounded theory.[13,14] Summative content analysis[15] was also done using computer-assisted searches for word-usage frequencies among the definitions.

For the purposes of this discussion, the following terms have been defined as follows: a disaster is taken to mean "a serious
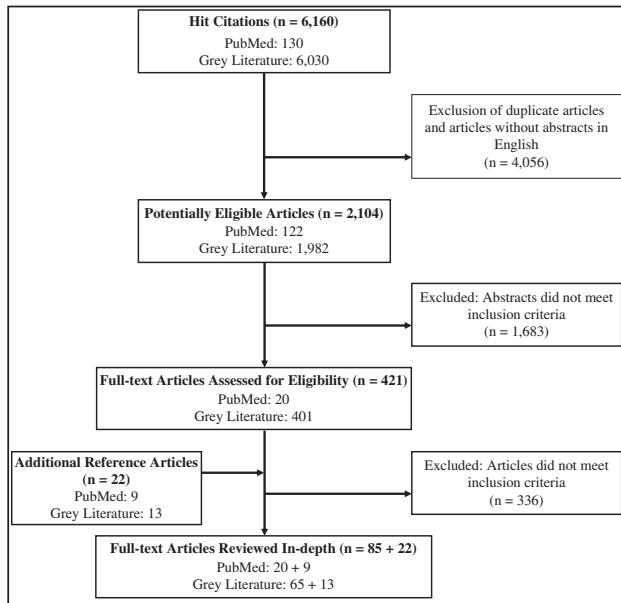
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Figure 1. Overview of Literature Review.

disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing widespread human, material, economic, or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources;"[16] humanitarian assistance would be regarded as "aid to a stricken population that complies with the basic humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, and neutrality,[17] during, and in the aftermath of, emergencies;"[3] and humanitarian assistance is distinguished from development aid in that the former "is intended to be 'short term' in nature and provide for activities in the 'immediate aftermath' of a disaster."[3]

Results

Out of the 85 articles that were reviewed, a majority (65 articles) were grey literature, as opposed to articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Thirty-three articles provided definitions of accountability (Appendix 1; available online only), of which, 23 were organizational publications or articles that represented the views of the respective organization or initiative. These 23 articles represented 15 different organizations and initiatives, and of these, nine were initiatives that promoted accountability primarily as part of their work. There were no notable differences, in general, between the definitions provided by these initiatives and other organizations.

There were 16 humanitarian organizations and initiatives that produced instruments to measure, evaluate, or ensure accountability (Appendix 2; available online only). Of these 16 organizations and initiatives, nine had defined accountability formally. There were two main paradigms of how accountability, in general, had been interpreted: accountability as a "process" or "means" to achieve a certain set of goals or objectives, and accountability as a goal or objective in itself:

Accountability is the means used to hold persons/entities responsible for their actions.[17]
World Health Organization (WHO; Geneva, Switzerland)

Accountability is the process through which an organization actively creates, and formally structures, balanced relationships

with its diverse stakeholders... with a view to continuously improve the organization's delivery against its mission.[18]
One World Trust (London, United Kingdom)

Accountability refers to organizations (or individuals) being held responsible to a particular group for the effects of their actions.[19]
Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (ALNAP; London, United Kingdom)

The most frequently used words in the definitions were "responsibility/responsible/responsibly" (occurring 23 times), "action" (occurring 20 times), and "account" (occurring 13 times):

Accountability for [Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)] could be defined as a proactive process of deeper "engagement" with those who we define as our stakeholders, reporting the reasons for our choices, the results of our actions and the limits, challenges and dilemmas inherent in our work, based on our responsibilities as a medical and humanitarian organization in order to change and improve our response.[20]
Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF; Geneva, Switzerland)

The principle of accountability requires that organizations and their staff fulfill and respect their legal and ethical responsibilities and use their power responsibly in humanitarian action. It is the process of taking account of, and being held accountable by, different stakeholders, primarily those who are affected by the exercise of power.[21]
Joint Standards Initiative (HAP, Geneva, Switzerland; People in Aid, London, UK: The Sphere Project, Geneva, Switzerland)

Accountability means the ability to account for one's actions whether favorable or unfavorable.[22]
Birnbaum ML

Common opinions of what accountability entails, based on word usage, were that: (a) it is in relation to the actions carried out; (b) there is a need for responsibilities to be fulfilled or taken; and (c) there is a need to provide an account of, or to account for, something – meaning "to answer for, to explain, or [to] justify."[23] However, on further analysis of the definitions, a total of 16 different concepts (Table 2) were identified. Three of these concepts ("responsibility," "answerability," and "participation") had within each of them further divergence of opinions.

First, responsibility may have been taken for "actions" (and/or the consequences) or for "decisions," which by implication could possibly include inaction:

Accountability has been defined not only as a means through which individuals and organizations are held responsible for their decisions and actions...[24]
Blagescu M

Accountability is the means by which individuals and organizations report to a recognized authority, or authorities, and are held responsible for their actions.[25]
Edwards M and Hulme D

Thus accountability involves... the responsibility to undertake certain actions (or forbear from taking actions) and the responsibility to provide an account of those actions.[26]
Larose L and Adams J

Concepts:
Answerability
- Answerability to "stakeholders" - Answerability to aid recipients - Unspecified answerability
Participation
- Active participation of "stakeholders" - Active participation of aid recipients - Passive participation of "stakeholders" - Passive participation of aid recipients - Unspecified participation
Receiving feedback from aid recipients
Giving authority to others
Responsible use and regulation of power
Respecting human rights and humanitarian standards
Integrity
Responsible use of resources
Performance monitoring and assessment
Fulfilling legal or moral duties
Fulfilling commitments
Responding to aid recipients
Balancing of needs
Transparency
Responsibility
- Taking responsibility for actions and/or consequences of actions - Taking responsibility for decisions
Enforcement and enforceability

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Table 2. Concepts of Accountability Identified from the Various Definitions

However, there was a lack of substantiation as to how one takes responsibility and scant mention of having remedial measures or the enforceability of such measures, if any.

Second, organizations and individuals may choose to be answerable to different parties. Some organizations specified that they were accountable to the aid recipients, some used a more vague term of "stakeholders," while others did not specify at all to whom they would account:

> It is a process of… being held accountable by, different stakeholders, and primarily the people affected by authority or power.[27]

Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) International (Geneva, Switzerland)

> Accountability is the process through which an organization actively creates, and formally structures, balanced relationships with its diverse stakeholders, empowering these to hold it to account over its decisions, activities and impacts…[18]

One World Trust (London, United Kingdom)

Third, participation may involve different groups of people and at different levels. Some definitions spelled out an active participation, some a passive participation, while others simply mentioned participation. Likewise, participation may involve aid recipients specifically, "stakeholders" in general, or a non-specified group:

> [A]ccountability means making sure that the women, men, and children affected by an emergency are involved in planning, implementing, and judging our response to their emergency too.[28]

Emergency Capacity Building (ECB) Project (Bangladesh, Bolivia, Horn of Africa, Indonesia, and Niger)

> Accountability for MSF could be defined as a proactive process of deeper "engagement" with those who we define as our stakeholders, reporting the reasons for our choices, the results of our actions and the limits, challenges and dilemmas inherent in our work…[20]

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF; Geneva, Switzerland)

> The process by which an NGO holds itself openly responsible… in a way which shows it involving all concerned parties…[29]

Slim H

Specifically focusing on accountability towards aid recipients, four main themes (Table 3) were developed from the 16 concepts. Accountability towards aid recipients was about: empowering the aid recipients, being in an optimal position to do the greatest good, meeting expectations, and being liable.

"Empowering aid recipients" was about treating the aid recipients not as vulnerable, helpless victims, but as equals who have the ability to decide how their lives should be rebuilt:

> Accountability is understood as a means to challenge and correct the fundamental power disparity between aid provider and aid recipient.[30]

Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (Geneva, Switzerland)

"Being in an optimal position to do the greatest good" was about the intrinsic responsibilities of a humanitarian provider to have the necessary resources and capabilities to benefit the aid recipients:

> [A]ccountability is about strengthening our capacity to save lives and alleviate suffering in a manner that affirms individual dignity…[31]

Egeland J

"Meeting expectations" involved first having clear objectives, second having the means to assess the progress, and third achieving these objectives:

> The principle of accountability requires that organizations and their staff fulfil and respect their legal and ethical responsibilities and use their power responsibly in humanitarian action…[21]

Joint Standards Initiative (HAP, Geneva, Switzerland; People in Aid, London, UK: The Sphere Project, Geneva, Switzerland)

Concepts	Themes
Answerability *(to aid recipients)*	Empowering aid recipients
Participation *(of aid recipients)*	
Receiving feedback from aid recipients	
Giving authority to others *(specifically aid recipients)*	
Responsible use and regulation of power	
Respecting human rights and humanitarian standards	
Integrity	Being in an optimal position to do the greatest good
Responsible use of resources	
Performance monitoring and assessment	
Fulfilling legal or moral duties	Meeting expectations
Fulfilling commitments	
Responding to aid recipients	
Balancing of needs	
Transparency	Being liable
Responsibility	
Enforcement and enforceability	

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Table 3. Concepts and Themes Pertaining to Accountability to Aid Recipients, Identified from the Various Definitions

"Being liable" was about showing the aid recipients that humanitarian providers are willing to admit mistakes and take remedial actions, but this liability need not necessarily be a legal one:

> We can think of accountability as having two key components: answerability (the obligation of power-holders to justify their decisions and actions) and enforceability (the existence of mechanisms for punishing poor performance or abuse of power)…[32]
> de Renzio P and Mulley S

The last theme of being liable, and in particular, the concept of enforcement/enforceability, received the least mention and emphasis among the four.

Discussion

There is a wide variation in the interpretation and understanding of accountability in the humanitarian context, as reflected in the literature. The English word "accountability" is derived from the Old French word "acont,"[33] which "connotes both computation and narration, both counting and telling."[34] The Oxford English Dictionary, Third Edition, defines accountability as "the quality of being accountable; liability to account for and answer for one's conduct, performance of duties, et [cetera]; responsibility."[33] While it is not surprising that the definitions in the humanitarian context are different from a "standard" definition, due to the term's tendency to take on highly context-specific meanings,[35] it is, however, concerning to note the discordance among humanitarians.

The discordance may possibly mean that: (a) either the humanitarian community, in general, does not comprehend fully the concept of accountability; or (b) some humanitarians disagree with others on their understanding of accountability. Both instances would require the humanitarian community to engage in greater dialogues and to analyze formally what accountability truly means, or risk the multitude of accountability instruments becoming counter-productive.

Process Versus Goal

The difference between definitions that portrayed accountability as a process and those that do not may simply be semantic, but it also may highlight certain fundamental differences in the thought processes of these humanitarians. Organizations or individuals who defined accountability as a process possibly may place greater emphasis on the means to an end; or, they may, in actuality, have their reservations about accountability, and defining it as a process provides them with greater leeway in meeting expectations of accountability (simply because processes are inherently harder to assess than outcomes).

Complexity of Accountability

Admittedly, accountability is complex, both semantically and practically. The contemporary concept of accountability is a relatively recent development unique to the English language, from a word that simply meant providing a count or giving an account, to one that now spans multiple semantic fields.[36] The fact that accountability is not translated easily to other languages[35,36] further contributes to the lack of understanding, especially in multicultural settings that many humanitarian organizations often work in.

Practically, two main issues stand out. First, how is, and can accountability even be, measured? Are there certain validated outcome indicators that measure accountability, or the lack thereof, specifically or sensitively? Other issues regarding accountability instruments include the relativity of accountability (ie, is someone either accountable or not accountable, or is there a gray area of being partially accountable) and adequacy of self-measurement/reporting (ie, who should measure an organization's accountability), all of which warrant a greater discussion beyond the scope of this report. Second, the multiplicity of parties to be accountable to raises the issue of whom should humanitarian organizations be accountable to.

Accountability to Whom

Each party or stakeholder has "a very different level of leverage and power over an NGO" and can, thereby, potentially skew the power

and accountability relationship.[37] However, several authors have pointed out the importance of giving greater attention to accountability towards aid recipients, as it is this group of stake-holders that provide the basis of legitimacy for the organizations.[38,39] And morally, it seems only right to do so too. Various international NGOs' research also suggest that NGOs who work with a greater emphasis on aid recipients delivered aid of higher quality.[39,40]

Accountability Towards Aid Recipients
The four main themes (Table 3) that broadly encompass the various views about accountability towards aid recipients show that there is a general thread of commonality shared by most. However, the lack of mention of having remedial measures, or the enforce-ability of such measures, is in stark contrast to several authors who cited enforcement to be an important part of accountability.[32,41,42] Current humanitarian accountability is largely a self-reporting and self-regulatory phenomenon where organizations rate their own accountability using their own checklists, or one of the many developed by other bodies/initiatives (Appendix 2; available online only). Thus, it is not entirely surprising that most definitions leave out enforcement.

Future Developments
Community-wide collaborations could be held to understand better various organizations' rationale behind defining or under-standing accountability the way they do, so as to achieve a common consensus on what accountability should be about in the humanitarian context. A next step would be to assess critically the "measurability" of accountability and how the community could go about ensuring accountability amongst all humanitarian providers. One possible approach would be to analyze the various account-ability instruments currently available and identify the pertinent aspects that can be and should be assessed. An example is the Emergency Capacity Building Project's development of a common humanitarian accountability framework.[39] Another important aspect to focus on would be the clarification of whom humanitarian providers should be accountable to, as well as ways to implement and ensure the enforceability of remedial measures. These developments undoubtedly would require the concerted effort of the humanitarian community as a whole.

Study Limitations
There are a large number of humanitarian organizations currently working around the world, and it is inherently difficult to review exhaustively every single organization's definition of accountability because of a lack of an official database or list of every single organization. This study only targeted larger humanitarian bodies with articles in English, and thus, may not completely represent the views of the entire humanitarian community. Only formal definitions of accountability, or what it means to be accountable, were reviewed, while the accountability instruments were not analyzed for the publishing organization's possible understanding of accountability.

Conclusion
The concept of accountability is defined poorly in many humani-tarian organizations. Humanitarian providers often refer to dif-ferent concepts when talking about accountability in general. The lack of a common understanding partially is contributed by the semantic and practical complexities of the term. Focusing only on accountability towards aid recipients, four main themes arose from the various definitions: empowering aid recipients, being in an optimal position to do the greatest good, meeting expectations, and being liable. Although "responsibility" was a commonly mentioned concept, the theme of "being liable" still received the least emphasis. This was largely due to the lack of substantiation regarding the responsibilities, as well as the lack of mention of concepts such as "enforcement" and "enforceability," which were regarded by scholars to be an integral part of accountability. Many other aspects of accountability, such as its "measurability" and by whom, similarly lack a common understanding and community-wide consensus.

The authors of this study hoped to provide a stepping-stone for the humanitarian community to re-examine collaboratively the concept of accountability in the humanitarian context, so as to translate it to actual improvements for the aid recipients.

Supplementary material
To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049023X15000254.

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