

BETTER ASSISTANCE IN CRISES RESEARCH



Accountability in crises: connecting evidence from humanitarian and social protection approaches to social assistance

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BASIC Research

March 2022

Implemented by



Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research (funded by UKAid) aims to inform policy and programming on how to help poor and vulnerable people cope better with crises and meet their basic needs through more effective social assistance. All costs related to BASIC Research are covered by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Summary

Social assistance in crises, whether part of a social protection system or driven by humanitarian needs, provides crucial support to people affected by disaster and conflict. Accountability is a central component of delivering effective social assistance. The increasing emphasis on reinforcing social protection in fragile contexts and the Grand Bargain 'participation revolution' workstream suggest the need for a fresh look at accountability frameworks and how they play out in practice for the people they aim to serve. This paper seeks to connect evidence from humanitarian and development accountability approaches to better understand the linkages and disconnects, and to identify opportunities for future research and learning.

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1. Introduction

I asked the UN [United Nations] why they provide food and rent to some people and not others. They answered that they do not provide this, and that it must be from another organisation. But I still don't know who provides these services.

Syrian refugee, Lebanon (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018: 3)

Social assistance in crises, whether delivered as part of a social protection system or through humanitarian organisations, provides crucial support to people affected by protracted crises and conflict. Accountability is a central component of delivering effective social assistance and is theoretically well defined, but it is framed and approached in different ways by the state, development, and humanitarian actors when engaging with and assisting the most vulnerable populations during crises. The social protection sphere centres around social accountability, while humanitarian responses focus on accountability to affected populations (AAP).

In fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS), many of the systems and relationships required for strong social accountability are not in place (Grandvoinet, Aslam and Raha 2015). This applies to accountability within social protection systems as well as AAP in humanitarian responses. The multitude of actors that provide assistance and services in FCAS bring their own definitions and frameworks for accountability and responsibility, further fragmenting accountability pathways for citizens and other populations (groups who are not citizens but reside in a certain place, such as refugees, migrants or asylum-seekers). The terminology used by humanitarian and development actors represents more than just diverse definitions. The thinking underpinning their approaches is different. Humanitarian AAP approaches are premised on a direct accountability relationship between recipients of humanitarian aid and the agencies that provide it, with the hope that people can hold humanitarian actors to account. Social accountability is more state focused and centres on citizens' ability to hold states accountable, as well as the state's responsibility to keep citizens informed. The role of development actors is to support these state-led processes.

Despite differences of approach and language, in practice, the approaches used in both types of assistance often look remarkably similar. Both humanitarian AAP and social protection grievance and redress mechanisms tend to put in place project- or programme-focused technical systems (such as telephone hotlines) so that people can raise concerns. Aid – whether labelled as humanitarian or development assistance – tends to focus on technical issues related to delivery, neglecting the more complex political dimensions of accountability in crises, which can undermine people's ability to shape and improve the assistance they receive.

Moreover, during crises, the most vulnerable people 'are often the worst placed to hold governments accountable' due to the repercussions (real or perceived) that accompany the power imbalances between state and citizens (Hickey 2011; Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2019). If government actors are perceived as a party to the conflict, whether by communities or international aid actors (Harvey 2009), the disconnect between social assistance decision makers and duty-bearers can be even more pronounced. In the midst of conflict, people's access to assistance and ability to hold the state to account often collapse, as is currently the case in the Tigray region of Ethiopia (Sabates-Wheeler and Lind 2021). Accountability is particularly complex when communities are not considered citizens, whether *de facto* (for example, internally displaced persons, or other marginalised and persecuted groups) or *de jure* (refugees).

These dilemmas are well known but are usually researched and analysed separately as part of social protection, humanitarian, or governance (citizenship) responses in FCAS. The increasing emphasis on the 'triple nexus' (humanitarian, development, and peace-building), the Grand Bargain 'participation revolution' workstream, and ensuring that assistance is people-centred requires a fresh look at accountability frameworks and how they play out in practice for the people they aim to serve. This paper seeks to connect evidence from humanitarian and development accountability approaches to better understand the linkages and disconnects, and identify opportunities for future research and learning.

Box 1.1: Key definitions

Social assistance programmes encompass social transfers, public works, fee waivers, and subsidies, and are often directed and coordinated by national governments. In areas of protracted crisis and conflict, social assistance also generally encompasses humanitarian assistance, which often uses the same modalities as state-driven social assistance programmes but usually with a greater emphasis on social transfers than other mechanisms such as subsidies or waivers.

Social accountability: This is the umbrella term for mechanisms that seek to operationalise direct accountability relationships between citizens and the state (Malena, Forster and Singh 2004). Social accountability includes ‘the extent and capacity of citizens to hold the state and service providers accountable and make them responsive to needs of citizens and beneficiaries’ (Grandvoininnet *et al.* 2015), as well as ‘a pro-active process by which public officials inform about and justify their plans of action, their behaviour and results and are sanctioned accordingly’ (Ackerman 2005).

Accountability to affected populations (AAP): This is the commitment to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organisations seek to assist (IASC 2017). In this paper, we either refer to social accountability in social protection programming, or AAP for humanitarian frameworks. ‘Accountability’ is understood as a general term that encompasses both social accountability and AAP framing of rights and responsibilities between rights-holders and duty-bearers (see Table 3.2).

Crises: BASIC Research is focused on places where multiple dimensions of crisis and fragility overlap, and where shocks, including from climate change, compound existing vulnerabilities. Ultimately, the priority for BASIC Research is to better understand how to strengthen social assistance in the most difficult settings and for the populations that are hardest to reach. Thus, the research focuses on the possibilities for changes to social assistance in places where authority is often contested, war is ongoing, governments are parties to conflicts and may not have effective control over their territory, and/or non-state armed groups are present.

2. Research questions and methodology

This paper is a desk-based literature review to synthesise the substantial and evolving evidence base on accountability in protracted crises, from humanitarian and social protection approaches to social assistance. It builds upon a seminal literature review by Development Pathways (Ayliffe, Aslam and Schjødt 2017) that analysed evidence of effective social accountability initiatives, predominantly through evaluations and across a number of contexts (beyond protracted crises). In general, the evidence base on accountability in social protection systems and social assistance more narrowly spans a range of literature types (robust evaluations using mixed methods, longitudinal studies, policy documents, grey literature, etc.), although the scope of relevant research on social accountability in protracted crises narrows somewhat. Research and evidence on humanitarian accountability (AAP and upwards to donors) predominantly takes the form of policy documents and grey literature, with a small but growing number of more rigorous studies on specific programmes (cash assistance in Lebanon, for example) or response-wide analysis (such as ODI’s work on collective accountability in Yemen). Few resources explore the intersections between humanitarian and social protection approaches in protracted crises;¹ most are case studies and focus on the delivery of social assistance via cash transfers across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, such as the CALP case studies. As such, this paper connects humanitarian aid and social protection literature under the umbrella of accountability in protracted crises, which is an uncommon framing of the accountability of social assistance. Key informant interviews (ten in total, with academics, practitioners, and policy makers in the humanitarian and social protection domains)² informed the questions interrogated here, alongside resources

¹ See the Cash Learning Partnership (CALP) Network case studies for programme linkages between humanitarian cash and voucher assistance (CVA) and social protection assistance (Smith 2020); research from the World Bank (Seyfert *et al.* 2019); and the SPACE initiative (Social Protection Approaches to Covid-19: Expert Advice, [online](#)) for operational harmonisation between humanitarian aid and social protection assistance programmes.

² See list of interviewees in Annexe 1.

recommended by researchers and practitioners or shared directly by aid organisations. The paper also draws on case studies from the BASIC Research programme focus countries (Mohamed *et al.* 2021). Readers are encouraged to review the sources used for these case studies for more nuanced and detailed analyses of social assistance and accountability in FCAS.

The guiding questions of this review aim to capture evidence and learning on accountability linkages between humanitarian aid and social protection assistance:

- What are the main approaches, policies, tools, and activities relating to accountability in social assistance during crises? What differences are there between humanitarian and social protection approaches and between different actors (government-led versus international agency-led)?
- What evidence is there about the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms for social assistance during crises in terms of knowledge about programmes and entitlements, ability to complain or give feedback, levels of participation in design and implementation, and perceptions of fairness?
- How are concerns around exclusion being addressed, and are the voices of potentially excluded people (by ethnicity, gender, age, disability) sought out in accountability efforts?
- What evidence is there about the balance of upwards accountability to donors (diligence, reporting) and social accountability measures?
- What evidence is there of how organisations providing social assistance use accountability data? How are digital technologies being used in accountability efforts and how are data protection concerns being addressed (linked to the BASIC Research Programme digital theme)?

3. Social accountability and accountability to affected populations

The predominant frameworks in social protection and humanitarian approaches to accountability are outlined in policy documents, literature reviews, and studies, summarised here to offer comparisons and contrasts between the approaches. In reviewing the main approaches, policies, tools, and activities relating to accountability for social assistance during crises, this paper examines how accountability is defined and the driving narratives behind the frameworks, comparing evidence between government-led accountability approaches and those initiated by other actors, as well as donors' influences on accountability and the social contract – that is, the trade-off of rights and responsibilities between ruling institutions and citizens (Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2019).

We first provide a summary of approaches to social accountability in social protection and AAP in humanitarian programming. We then explore the connections and differences between the two approaches and what those differences mean for attempts to improve links between humanitarian responses and social protection programming during crises to strengthen national systems and meet humanitarian needs through local ownership of those systems.

3.1. Social accountability

Social protection actors often use the concept of social accountability as a guiding framework to improve service delivery, particularly in FCAS where corruption is rife, and citizens may not have clear pathways to connect with service providers (Camargo and Stahl 2016).

The driving narrative behind social accountability is a rights-based approach that draws from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), specifically the rights to access social security (Article 22), to enjoy an adequate standard of living (Article 25), and to fulfil duties to the community that ensure the general welfare of a society (Article 29). Social accountability thus includes democratic principles such as the right to be heard and demand a response, ideally within a legal framework ensuring basic social protection guarantees (ILO 2012; Swithern 2021).³ This is either framed as citizens' capacity to hold the state accountable (citizen-

³ ILO Recommendation 202 (2012) on National Social Protection Floors recommends that Member States should have a legal framework for basic social protection guarantees, 'defining the range, qualifying conditions and the levels of the benefits...', and states that for complaints and appeal mechanisms to function effectively, they should

centric) or the state's responsibility to keep citizens informed and engaged (state-centric). Citizen-centric social accountability refers to 'the extent and capacity of citizens to hold the state and service providers accountable and make them responsive to needs of citizens and beneficiaries' (World Bank 2013). State-centric definitions frame accountability as the responsibility of those holding the power and making decisions on behalf of people, be they state institutions, aid providers, or other authorities (Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) 2007; IASC 2017; Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2019). Social accountability is then defined as 'a pro-active process by which public officials inform about and justify their plans of action, their behaviour and results and are sanctioned accordingly' (Ackerman 2005). Whether citizen- or state-centric, social accountability is thus a key human rights principle and a defining feature of the relationships between governments, communities, and civil society.

Social protection systems have increasingly used social accountability as the framework to guide the approach to accountability. While the specific policies vary among different stakeholders, the frameworks are rights-based and focus on the social contracts between citizens and the state – that is, the 'implicit agreement' of rights and responsibilities between ruling institutions and citizens (McCandless 2018)⁴ – linked to notions of democratic accountability and legitimacy (World Bank 2003). The primary decision makers or stakeholders are government (state), often in partnership with development actors, although social protection is seen as government-led and therefore based on a social contract. Framed as a right, social accountability can then facilitate access to the state through 'social accountability spaces, which allow citizens to make claims, hold duty-bearers accountable and build their collective social and political capabilities' (Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2019).

Social accountability approaches are broadly framed as interlinked dimensions that collectively contribute to a stronger social contract within a given context.

- **Citizen action** is a primary element of social accountability and the basis of citizen-led engagement. It includes diverse activities, such as demand-making, with an emphasis on organised and 'capable' citizen groups (Grandvoinet *et al.* 2015; Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2019).
- **State action** is the other key element of social accountability. It is part of an enabling environment aimed at strengthening accountability, which includes government champions willing to engage with citizens on social issues (Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities (CDAC) Network 2020).
- **Information flows** (in various directions) are essential for an accountable and responsive state. This includes information content, presentation, accuracy, appropriateness, access, and use.
- **Interface** is the 'locus of interaction' between state and citizen actors – that is, how they interact (Grandvoinet *et al.* 2015; Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2019).
- **Civic mobilisation** is action by intermediaries, such as civil society groups, that spurs citizens to act. Mobilisation is often necessary to facilitate citizen 'voice', particularly for those groups considered more marginalised or vulnerable within society.

Most social accountability initiatives focus primarily on citizen action, although it is 'increasingly clear that the lack of state action is often what prevents the intended outcomes of social accountability from materialising' (Grandvoinet *et al.* 2015). Many analyses also recognise that the concept of 'government' is not homogenous, particularly in FCAS. Social protection systems are often led by the central authority, which takes decisions with donors, while local government is responsible for delivering the assistance (*ibid.*). These entities may or may not align their approaches, and local governance structures may not be involved in decision making despite being the front-line interface with crisis-affected communities.

Social accountability frameworks recognise and define different approaches to citizen engagement, and outline citizens' roles with different levels and types of agency (see Table 3.1).

be 'impartial, transparent, effective, simple, rapid, accessible', and 'free of charge for applicants' (TRANSFORM Initiative, [online](#)).

⁴ Although there is considerable reflection on how the Western conceptualisation of a social contract is ill-suited to capture the relationship between authorities and citizens in non-Western contexts, the notion of social contracts still features prominently in social accountability and governance analysis across FCAS (Ochieng 2010; McCandless 2018).

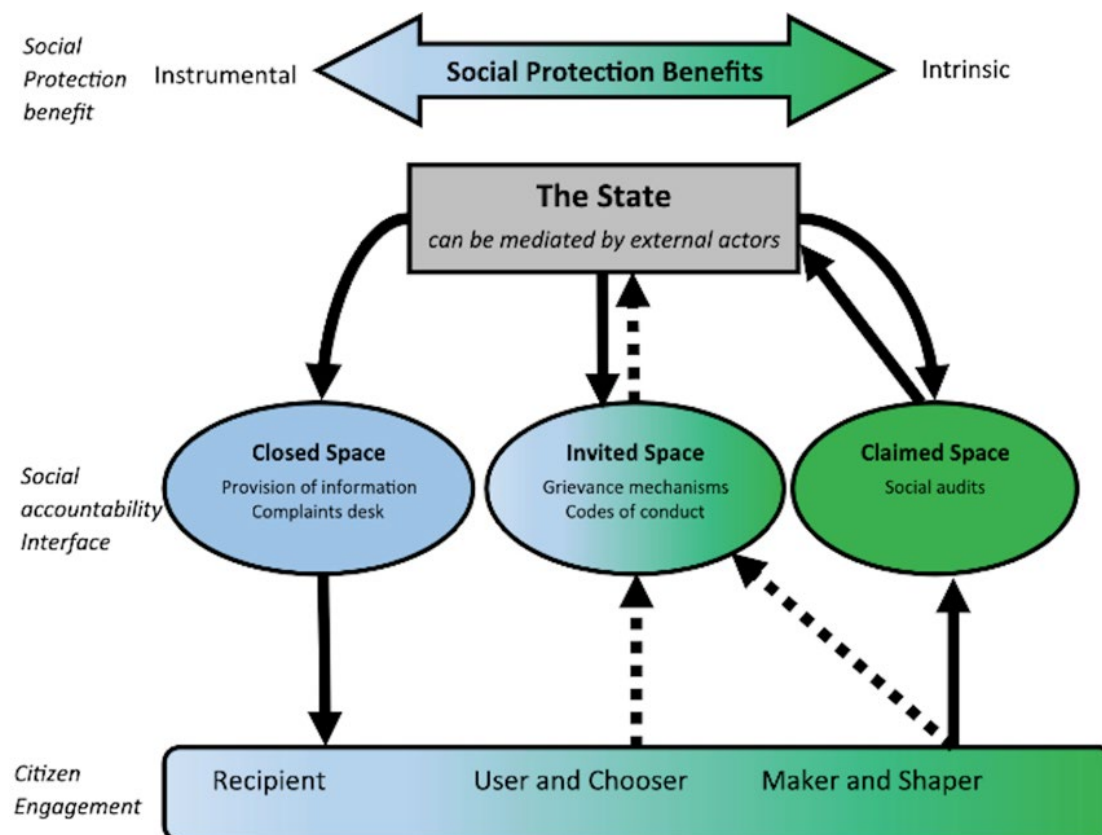
Table 3.1: Citizen engagement approaches

Citizens as...	Approach
beneficiaries or recipients	Citizens as passive beneficiaries receiving services or assistance <i>Example: complaints hotline for short-term cash transfer projects targeting vulnerable groups</i>
users and choosers	Engaging citizens who use grievance and redress mechanisms (GRM) or public information to ensure better delivery of social protection programmes (technical fixes) <i>Example: social assistance GRM to increase transparency and accountability</i>
makers and shapers	Social policies and institutions that foster demand-driven governance and engage citizens as active agents in shaping policies and social assistance design <i>Example: participatory targeting, enabling spaces where the state is held accountable for implementation</i>

Source: Authors' own. Created using information from Sabates-Wheeler et al. (2019).

Social accountability within social protection provision can occur through three main types of interface between citizens and the state, based on the type of citizen engagement (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2019). This includes both direct engagement and mediated action (for instance, through civil society). The interfaces range from 'closed spaces' providing one-way interaction from the state to citizens, who are passive recipients, to 'invited' and 'claimed spaces', where citizens shape social protection programming through more proactive action (see Figure 3.1). Each space contains examples of *de facto* communication channels and accountability activities, such as complaints desks, grievance mechanisms, codes of conduct, and social audits. The framework implies that citizen engagement limited to recipients receiving information through closed spaces is insufficient to reinforce and strengthen accountability in social protection programming.

Figure 3.1: Citizen engagement interfaces



Note: Dotted arrows represent invited action, while solid arrows represent pro-active action.
Source: Sabates-Wheeler et al. (2017). Reproduced with permission.

3.2. Accountability in humanitarian responses

Accountability to affected populations (AAP) emerged from the intersection of humanitarian principles, the centrality of protection (principles such as ‘Do No Harm’),⁵ and the increasing prominence of quality standards in the humanitarian sector. The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) established standards for accountability and quality management in 2007 (updated in 2010), which defined the accountability commitments humanitarian organisations should make and processes that would deliver quality programmes ‘for the people who experience them first hand’ (HAP 2010). The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) used HAP standards to define an operational framework ‘to assist implementing agencies both individually and in groups to find practical entry points for improving accountability to affected populations’ (IASC 2010), thus elevating AAP to an inter-agency commitment.

Accountability to affected populations is **an active commitment to use power responsibly** by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organisations seek to assist.

(IASC 2010: 1)

The IASC definition of AAP recognises the power held by humanitarian organisations in shaping and delivering aid to affected communities, and breaks down the relationship between aid providers and those receiving assistance into three core components, as follows.

- **Taking account** requires organisations to proactively seek inputs to ensure that assistance is needs-based rather than designed around agencies’ capacity, emphasising inclusive consultations.
- **Giving account** centres around two-way communication with communities that is transparent, accessible (culturally, linguistically, technologically), and provides consistent information.
- **Being held to account** refers to people’s ability to provide feedback on the aid they receive, including sanctioning agencies if necessary, invoking a combination of protection (prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse) and accountability principles (IASC 2010).

The term ‘communication and community engagement’ (CCE) is often used interchangeably with AAP, although CCE generally refers to its operationalisation. Broadly, CCE is two-way communication that: provides information about the situation and services to affected communities; gathers information from these communities via feedback, perspectives, and inputs; uses that information to shape and modify the response and to close the feedback loop by informing communities as to how their inputs have been taken into account (Holloway *et al.* 2020; CDAC Network 2019).

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership evolved into the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) Alliance, which embedded accountability principles within quality programming and placed people affected by crisis at the centre of the framework (see Figure 3.2). In particular, ensuring that the response is ‘based on communication, participation and feedback’ (standard 4) and that ‘complaints are welcomed and addressed’ (standard 5) requires organisations to commit to accountability principles in their programming. Although the CHS Alliance concerns organisation-specific self-assessments and commitments, the understanding was that the IASC principles would connect accountability efforts at inter-agency level. CHS Alliance members publish their findings in the *Humanitarian Accountability Report*,⁶ a key metric for gauging sector-wide progress towards AAP commitments.

The Grand Bargain ‘participation revolution’ workstream propelled AAP to prominence in global commitments, going beyond communication and feedback to define meaningful participation in humanitarian responses. In particular, the ‘participation revolution’ outlined commitments to common standards for AAP and building ‘systematic links between feedback and corrective action to adjust programming’, among others (The Grand Bargain 2020). The Grand Bargain, IASC commitments, and CHS Alliance come together to reinforce three core accountability components for all humanitarian responses (see Box 3.1).

⁵ Mary Anderson popularised the principle of [Do No Harm](#) in 1999. Jessica Alexander summarises key events in the history of accountability in humanitarian action for [an article in The New Humanitarian](#) (2021), which considers the Do No Harm Project as a cornerstone of AAP (accessed 2 February 2022).

⁶ The [Humanitarian Accountability Report](#) was last published in October 2020 (accessed 2 February 2022).

Box 3.1: Key components of country AAP strategies

The components became the backbone of many AAP strategies for country operations, such as Nigeria in 2018:

- A. Two-way communication (providing consistent information).
- B. Close the loop between people’s feedback and providing a response.
- C. Engage in meaningful participation (not defined).

Figure 3.2: The Core Humanitarian Standard on quality and accountability



Source: Core Humanitarian Standard (2014). Reproduced with permission.

3.3. Disconnections

There are fundamental disconnects between social protection and humanitarian approaches to accountability, not just in terms of language but how accountability relationships are structured, and the role played by the state as the key duty-bearer. Social accountability theory rests heavily on collective action and citizen engagement, with an inherent focus on rights-based citizen–state relationships (Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2019). The emphasis on citizen capacities in social protection is not mirrored in humanitarian accountability, which concentrates on accountability towards meeting the needs of aid recipients or ‘beneficiaries’, and the concept of the social contract rarely features in AAP policy. Humanitarian approaches to accountability also tend to have blind spots around politics, governance, and rights – given that in many crisis-affected areas, the social contract between the state and its citizens is fractured, distorted, or non-

existent (Ochieng 2010). It can be difficult for humanitarian frameworks to draw upon citizen engagement models when people affected by crisis are not citizens or have been systematically denied a voice and access to systems and services (for example, internally displaced persons or marginalised groups). Although international humanitarian actors do refer to governments as the primary duty-bearers in humanitarian crises, and many adopt rights-based approaches, in practice there is often limited engagement with how to encourage governments to fulfil their responsibilities to assist and protect people in crisis beyond meeting immediate needs (Harvey 2009). Both approaches struggle to connect ‘aspirational’ theory with accountability in practice (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, Al Jeddawy and Holloway 2020). Table 3.2 summarises these key differences.

Table 3.2: Social accountability and accountability to affected populations – comparing and contrasting key components

	Social accountability	Accountability to affected populations (AAP)
Duty-bearer	The state – social protection actors and others in government, or de facto authorities (non-state actors, etc.) (Barca et al. 2021; Grandvoinet et al. 2015; Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2019)	Aid providers – humanitarian agencies (UN, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – often with an emphasis on international actors) (Barca et al. 2021; Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2019; Seyfert et al. 2019)
Rights-holder	The focus is on citizens and their rights to social protection and assistance. This includes via intermediated action (e.g. civil society organisations) (Grandvoinet et al. 2015; Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2019)	The focus is on recipients or ‘beneficiaries’ of humanitarian aid. Although AAP references affected people or populations, the focus remains on needs as opposed to rights-based (on people ‘receiving aid’) (Barca et al. 2021)
Framing principles and standards	Depending on the country, embedded in legislation and/or within sector- or programme-specific service standards and charters (Barca et al. 2021; Grandvoinet et al. 2015; Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2019)	HAP standards – evolved into CHS, valid across humanitarian action (Knox-Clarke et al. 2020)
Language around rationale and objectives	Assistance is framed as a right and states as duty-bearers in fulfilling people’s rights, often alongside protection commitments (Seyfert et al. 2019)	Assistance is framed around need and vulnerability, with aid agencies meeting humanitarian imperatives when states are overwhelmed or unwilling to act (Barca et al. 2021; Knox-Clarke et al. 2020)
Role of the state	State-centric and about the people’s ability to hold the state to account and state duties to provide assistance and inform people (Grandvoinet et al. 2015; Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2019)	Focused on direct accountability between aid agencies and aid recipients, with the state largely absent
Social contract	Social accountability seen as part of a process by which social protection contributes to a social contract between a state and its citizens (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2019)	Social contract language largely absent
Front-line staff	Social workers, programme staff (Barca et al. 2021)	Protection case workers, programme staff (Barca et al. 2021)

Source: Authors’ own. Information sources cited.

The actors in AAP are humanitarian agencies (local and international non-governmental entities such as NGOs, as well as the UN), with predominantly international organisations occupying the AAP/CCE space. The IASC definition of AAP recognises the power these agencies hold, but lacks consideration of the power dynamics inherent in the recipient–provider relationship, and omits the state’s responsibility to assist and protect its citizens as a key component of accountability (UN Resolution 46/182). There is no mention of shifting power, and crucially no acknowledgement of the reality that, given the power dynamics between aid

providers and people receiving assistance, some of the elements of AAP are hard to put into practice. Work by the Inter-Agency Research and Analysis Network (IARAN) on the Voices to Choices initiative addresses these power dynamics by defining participation alongside accountability (Maietta *et al.* 2018). However, AAP frameworks and research generally are from aid providers' perspectives; they do not articulate which decisions or decision-making processes affected populations should be involved in, or how they can participate. This makes it difficult to understand and evaluate precisely how people affected by crisis can hold aid providers to account.

AAP frameworks are defined by humanitarian organisations' sphere of influence – insular accountability focused on aid providers and their responsibilities to the people they serve, often specific to an agency or project but increasingly at inter-agency collective levels, with limited success depending on the context (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy *et al.* 2020). Government or state institutions are conspicuously absent from most humanitarian accountability frameworks, despite rhetorical commitments to the 'primary responsibility of the state to assist and protect' (UN Resolution 46/182). Humanitarian frameworks recognise the state as the primary duty-bearer to uphold rights, but there is a 'lack of trust in the ability of states to deliver effective and accountable relief' (Harvey 2009). Where states are parties to conflicts, they should be held to account for their responsibilities under international humanitarian law⁷ and human rights law to protect and assist civilians. However, international humanitarian actors need to navigate their engagement with states carefully – respecting commitments to neutrality, impartiality, and independence, and endeavouring to provide assistance with accountability, ensuring that people are not put at further risk of violence or abuse, while advocating for states to fulfil their duties to protect and assist. This is seemingly at odds with the insular definition of AAP, which references protection from abuse by humanitarian agencies and recipients' right to provide feedback on the aid they receive (IASC 2010). For example, analysis of humanitarian accountability for Syrian refugees in Lebanon noted a focus on mitigating protection risks associated with accessing cash assistance and meeting needs, which did not systematically consider social service engagement – that is, whether some groups were unable to access complementary or longer-term support (Smith 2019).

The 'sphere of influence' approach by humanitarians also means that accountability is in relation to the aid provider, who is a decision maker but not the duty-bearer (which is the state); there is little to no focus on citizen–state engagement on accountability, which distorts or fragments the concept of the social contract (Ochieng 2010). Accountability to affected populations is often project-based and focused on 'our' beneficiaries, leaving a fundamental gap to recognise the authority of organisations beyond project implementation, with few (if any) repercussions if they 'get it wrong' (Fox 2016). There is also a lack of clarity on what constitutes accountability beyond delivery, because the responsibility of aid providers usually ends once they hand over the assistance (Knox-Clarke *et al.* 2020).

Social protection systems and humanitarian responses both tend to focus on project-oriented, sector-specific accountability initiatives. Systems thinking is still limited by finite, project-based funding, and the desire to connect aid recipients directly with providers, who may concentrate on single-sector initiatives. Despite movement towards collective approaches to AAP, the focus on project- or agency-specific community engagement and communication channels persists. In Yemen, for example, humanitarian donors invested in a common CCE platform in 2016, accompanied by a detailed accountability framework endorsed by the Humanitarian Country Team that same year (Olielo and Hofmann 2019). Yet the collective mechanism was at odds with the underlying humanitarian response still based on emergency interventions, short-term funding, and agency-specific programmes. As is common in large-scale crises, collective humanitarian accountability mechanisms span across sectors but may not connect with or include social protection accountability mechanisms or even systems (Holloway *et al.* 2020; Kukrety pers. comm. 2021).

3.4. Technical approaches and linkages

Despite using distinct frameworks and different approaches to accountability in FCAS, social protection and humanitarian approaches rely on similar language and mechanisms when referring to communication, community/citizen engagement, and the participation of crisis-affected people in the assistance they receive. Social protection mechanisms refer to 'interfaces' while humanitarian mechanisms consist of communication channels and community engagement activities, but both seek to engage citizens and affected people

⁷ See International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) [Rule 149, on Responsibility for violations of International Humanitarian Law](#) (accessed 2 February 2022).

throughout the programme cycle. There are many ways in which they are categorised and analysed for social protection and humanitarian accountability, and we outline the main approaches below.

The foundation of accountability rests on the provision of reliable and accurate information to citizens and other groups (CDAC Network 2019). Both social protection and humanitarian accountability approaches emphasise communication with communities using channels or interfaces that are ‘multiple and preferred’ (Smith 2019), although many social protection frameworks consider communication beyond its accountability function (Barca *et al.* 2021). Best practice underlines the importance of two-way communication rather than one-way information provision from providers to recipients, as well as investment in proactive engagement, in addition to reactive mechanisms such as feedback and complaints mechanisms (CDAC Network 2019; Ground Truth Solutions 2018; Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2019).

Communication channels are usually used for multiple purposes and are often combined to form a more comprehensive accountability mechanism – for example, for feedback and complaints. Broadly, there are four categories of communication channels used for accountability mechanisms in both social protection and humanitarian responses (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3: Social assistance communication channels in fragile and conflict-affected settings (social protection and humanitarian)

Category	Description	Examples
Face-to-face Two-way communication	In-person interaction between provider and recipient (state/citizen, aid organisation/affected community, etc.) Preferred interface for many people in crisis-affected places (Ground Truth Solutions 2019a) No literacy or technology required, though many require mobility and the ability to participate (Ground Truth Solutions 2019a; CDAC Network 2019; Chirchir and Barca 2020; Smith 2019)	Outreach (social/case workers) Assessment/survey Helpdesk/community centre Meetings/group discussions Committees or advisory groups Workshops Performances (theatre, etc.)
Telecommunications One-way and two-way communication	Phone-based mechanisms that enable large-scale communication Require access to a phone, basic literacy, and often phone credit (Smith 2019)	Hotline/call centre Phone survey or interview SMS WhatsApp/signal
Internet-based platforms One-way and two-way communication	Internet platforms that enable voluntary (usually public) engagement and information-sharing (e.g. feedback, rumour tracking) Require access to a device, basic literacy (for some platforms, in multiple languages), and an internet connection (Chirchir and Barca 2020; Smith 2019)	Facebook Twitter Ourloop.io
Mass media One-way communication	Primarily for information provision and awareness-raising Can be digital or analogue Some channels require literacy, others access to a device (CDAC Network 2019; Chirchir and Barca 2020; Seyfert <i>et al.</i> 2019)	Radio Loudspeakers Posters Television

Source: Authors' own. Information sourced cited.

Face-to-face is the category with the widest range of channels and activities, and is generally preferred by communities affected by crisis, regardless of their culture of participation or degree of trust in the system (Ground Truth Solutions 2019a). One of the crucial interfaces is between citizens/affected people and front-line social service engagement networks, in the form of social workers, outreach teams, and the like. They form a 'web of interaction' with communities and recipients of social assistance. In social protection programmes, social workers play this important role, while in humanitarian responses it is often outreach teams or protection case workers. Community members are usually part of this network of front-line aid providers and may play active roles in promoting accountability through committees or other consultative bodies (de Wijn, Motlagh and Commins 2018; Kukrety pers. comm. 2021). However, communities in crisis-affected areas are likely to meet a wide range of aid actors, not all of whom are aware of or responsible for information provision or accountability initiatives.

Social protection and humanitarian approaches to accountability both place great emphasis on grievance and redress mechanisms (GRMs), also referred to as complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFM).⁸ The mechanisms are multi-channel interfaces that enable people receiving assistance to provide feedback, register complaints, and resolve issues related to eligibility, entitlements, and related processes. Traditionally, these mechanisms were agency- and sometimes project-specific, with one or more typical communication channels (complaint boxes and hotlines) supplemented by informal, face-to-face interaction that may pick up complaints or feedback. In humanitarian responses, the mechanisms are increasingly multi-channel, inter-agency initiatives, referred to as collective services, which more closely resemble 'community engagement ecosystems' (CDAC Network 2019; Barbelet 2020). For social protection, the shift is towards more integrated GRM approaches across social assistance programmes, including 'integrated delivery systems' (Lindert *et al.* 2020). However, researchers noted that GRMs are largely 'underused and underperforming' because of stumbling blocks on both the demand and supply sides, as outlined in Table 3.4 (Barca 2016).

Table 3.4: Stumbling blocks for social protection grievance and redress mechanisms⁹

Demand (citizens – that is, rights-holders)	Supply (social protection systems – that is, duty-bearers)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Lack of information about the programme and entitlements (including knowledge of GRMs); ● Not feeling entitled to redress for poor programme performance (feeling ‘grateful’ or ‘embarrassed’); ● Concerns about the repercussions of giving negative feedback; ● Scepticism about the credibility of the GRM and whether complaining changes outcomes; ● Limited access to GRMs: time/resource constraints, literacy barriers, stigma and/or lack of trust; ● Reluctance to challenge the authority of decision makers (government staff and/or other community members) due to unequal power dynamics.” (Barca, 2016) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Lack of a standardised process to collect and respond to feedback; ● Lack of communication between different levels of programme implementation; ● Inadequate training on standard solutions to common grievances; ● Inadequate communication strategy to inform people on GRMs; ● Existing processes to collect grievances that are not designed for the target population (e.g., complaints boxes for illiterate people); ● No incentives to respond and act on grievances; ● No system to monitor the collection and addressing of grievances.” (Barca, 2016)

Source: Authors' own.

In social protection systems, unless civil society plays an accountability role, GRMs exist on paper and are not fully functioning because of a lack of incentives – for example, if the government cannot expand the caseload due to budget constraints (Kukrety pers. comm. 2021). There is also an inherent contradiction in using GRM (CFM) for monitoring and evidence on closing the loop. In Niger, for example, people did not use GRMs linked to social assistance, so there were few complaints and little data to inform programming

⁸ See Barca (2016) on grievance mechanisms for social protection programmes, and Bonino *et al.* (2014) for humanitarian feedback mechanisms.

⁹ While these stumbling blocks are equally relevant for humanitarian GRMs, Barca (2016) focuses on social protection accountability systems.

decisions (Mohamed *et al.* 2021). At best, feedback captures concrete improvements people want to see. Even if they are used, people might make suggestions that are not operationally feasible or at odds with donor policy and best practice, such as proposing individual household visits to determine eligibility and explain services and benefits, or forgoing vulnerability-based targeting in favour of universal coverage (Smith 2019; Armstrong and Jacobsen 2016).

Practitioners and researchers underline the need to go beyond reactive GRMs and consider interfaces and activities that reinforce accountability more broadly (Barca 2016; Kukrety 2016; Sattler and Davey 2021). Table 3.5 therefore compares the main activities deployed in social protection and humanitarian programming that can reinforce accountability at all stages of the programme cycle.

Table 3.5: Activities that contribute to accountability across the programme cycle

Accountability activities across the programme cycle: social protection and humanitarian approaches		
Programme cycle phase	Social protection	Humanitarian responses
Programme design Assessment and consultation	Participatory design Community consultations	Needs and vulnerability assessment Community consultations
Registration/eligibility	Community-based targeting Community validation/participation	Household visits Community-based targeting
Entitlements (process of receiving assistance)	Helpdesks Home visits	Helpdesks Home visits
Feedback and complaints/ grievance mechanisms (reactive feedback)	GRMs, e.g.: Hotlines Helpdesks Committees	CFMs, e.g.: Hotlines Suggestion boxes Helpdesks
Monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and broader accountability	Community scorecards Citizen report cards Social audits and oversight Open budget initiatives Parliamentary oversight Supervisory bodies Ombudsmen and channels for legal redress Data transparency and decision-making transparency Routine M&E, quantitative and qualitative – including community consultations (focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs))	Routine M&E, quantitative and qualitative – including community consultations (FGDs, KIIs) Post-distribution monitoring Community consultations (FGDs)
Community engagement and participation (proactive feedback)	Perception surveys Citizen groups Town hall meetings	Perception surveys Committees/advisory groups (usually formed by aid providers)

Source: Authors' own. Created using information from Barca *et al.* (2021); Grandvoinet *et al.* (2015); Lindert *et al.* (2020); Barbelet (2020).

There are also examples of accountability complementarity and reinforcement, where programmes support different vulnerable groups through the same system. In Turkey, the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) for refugees (predominantly Syrian) and social protection programmes designed for Turkish citizens are both

implemented by the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Services and the Turkish Red Crescent (Smith 2020; Little, McLean and Sammon 2021). From an accountability standpoint, the targeting approaches are consistent and anyone receiving social assistance can access support via the Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation (SASF) community centres throughout the country, which absorbed refugee caseloads and adapted services to their needs (such as offering services in different languages or new locations). In Lebanon, the Social Development Centres are the main channel through which social development policies are implemented, and there are 220 such centres throughout the country. They provide services for Lebanese and non-Lebanese populations alike, focusing on health, training, and education. However, responding to increasing demands from the Syrian refugee population amidst the multi-layered socioeconomic crisis in Lebanon has put considerable strain on their capacity (Bastagli, Holmes and Jawad 2019).

Within this and other alignment initiatives, operational accountability mechanisms such as outreach and complaints mechanisms offer key intersections for collective accountability across programmes. In Yemen, the Cash Working Group has been active since 2017, coordinating humanitarian cash efforts as well as identifying operational linkages with social assistance payments. The linkages focus on technocratic/operational harmonisation such as targeting, payment systems, and including accountability mechanisms – with an emphasis on communication channels. Despite these coordination efforts, recent reviews labelled humanitarian cash programming as ‘fragmented’, with weak coordination between humanitarian and social protection systems, and recipient caseloads that are ‘likely to overlap’ (Nimkar 2020; Smith 2020).

Given that there is no ‘definitive global benchmark regarding AAP commitments in CVAs and an absence of global guidance tailored to large-scale cash delivery,’ humanitarian cash programmes are likely to maintain their own accountability mechanisms (Smith 2019). Moreover, the focus on elements in the delivery chain lacks the systems approach promoted in some social accountability and humanitarian AAP collective service frameworks.

One of the inherent tensions between project-based, technocratic approaches and their ability to strengthen accountability is that they are designed with the engagement purpose in mind (registration, information provision, feedback, etc.), rather than ease of use by people who want to access clear information, give feedback to service providers, or participate in social assistance processes more broadly. When viewed from the perspective of citizens and communities affected by crisis, it can be difficult to see how a needs assessment and registering a complaint via a hotline are connected to their ability to influence the aid they receive – especially if each communication channel is proprietary to a project or agency, and those with whom populations interact may not be able to provide information about other programmes or entitlements. It is no surprise, therefore, that people prefer face-to-face interaction with social protection and humanitarian programmes (Ground Truth Solutions 2019b; Barca 2012).

3.5. Evidence of effectiveness: themes and gaps

Social assistance accountability generally struggles to demonstrate evidence of the concrete connection between feedback and improving programming. Rhetoric on connecting communities/recipients to decision makers is prominent in accountability policies and frameworks across humanitarian aid and social protection, reflecting best practice of connecting community engagement with decision-making, but there is not much evidence in practice (Knox-Clarke *et al.* 2020; Barbelet 2020). There is little examination of the power or authority delegated to front-line workers, who are the ‘face’ of social assistance programmes and are often embedded in communities. Moreover, upwards accountability may disincentivise front-line workers from reporting issues to their managers, or engaging in dialogue with communities, lest they raise issues that up-end the current system. Some approaches go beyond the rhetoric to define meaningful dialogue (see CashCap 2020), but are still building the evidence base.

Many accountability policies in crises also conflate accountability with participation, predominantly in humanitarian responses but also for social protection programming in FCAS (Grandvoininnet *et al.* 2015; Sattler pers. comm. 2021). Much of the engagement language and definitions for external aid in FCAS associate accountability with participation in decision-making, ‘people choosing their own solutions’, and, in some cases, creating pathways to power redistribution (CDAC Network 2019; Maietta *et al.* 2018). The conflation of participation with engagement (or, in many strategic documents, CCE) means this dialogue is

about providing consistent information through preferred channels, soliciting feedback from communities, and closing the feedback loop. The term ‘participation’ is therefore misleading, as this engagement does not include empowering people to make their own decisions, as citizen engagement and participatory action stipulate (Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2019;¹⁰ Sattler pers. comm. 2021; Dindabo 2003). For example, several AAP strategies refer to the creation of representative committees as the way to operationalise participation in humanitarian responses, such as in Nigeria and Yemen. However, there is little evidence to suggest that committee formation enables affected communities to influence decision-making and shape humanitarian assistance across projects, and there are documented problems with elite capture and one-dimensional analysis of and engagement with communities (Suleri *et al.* 2017). Likewise, in social protection systems, there is often a ‘misplaced technocratic emphasis’ on reactive accountability mechanisms to foster participation, such as hotlines or community meetings, although these mechanisms do not lead to the desired ‘citizenship empowerment’ (Hickey and King 2016; Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2019). The disconnect between policy and practice makes it difficult to understand whether people affected by crisis can and want to actively participate, how best to engage them in social assistance, and what mechanisms or approaches are most appropriate in specific crises based on power dynamics, the social contract, and the culture of participation.

3.5.1. Power, inclusion, and participation

Power is inherent across accountability approaches, framed by the state–citizen or authority (service provider)–recipient engagement present in both social protection and humanitarian accountability (Ayliffe *et al.* 2017). Social protection programming identifies culture and context as key principles to contextualise social accountability (CDAC Network 2019; Grandvoinnet *et al.* 2015; Ayliffe *et al.* 2017). This includes providing accessible information given people’s language and level of literacy, investing in culturally relevant communication channels and community engagement activities, as well as analysing the culture of participation and power dynamics within a particular context (who might be excluded, intentionally or inadvertently). This analysis becomes complex and potentially fraught with contradictions when applied in crisis-affected contexts where there is mistrust or a fragmented notion of the social contract (Ochieng 2010).

In particular, there is a lack of systematic analysis that could aid understanding of different cultures of participation, people’s willingness or ‘unwillingness to complain’, courtesy bias towards service providers, the opportunity costs of participating, and even whether people mistrust outcomes (Barca *et al.* 2021; de Wijn *et al.* 2018; Khan *et al.* 2015). This plays an important part in understanding how engagement might take shape in a particular crisis, and what mechanisms or tools are more likely to bring about stronger accountability outcomes. In Lebanon, for example, the compounded socioeconomic effects of protests against the government, an economic crisis and devalued currency, and the 2020 explosion in Beirut port, further devastated its central infrastructure. Yet throughout, demand for social assistance remains high, and the Lebanese citizens surveyed hold the government responsible for caring for poor people, even if they are not satisfied with the current response (see Box 3.2).

Box 3.2: Citizens’ expectations in Lebanon

According to perception surveys carried out in 2011 and 2013, a large majority – approximately 80 per cent – of Lebanese citizens interviewed believe the primary responsibility to help poor people rests with government. An equally large majority agreed with the statement that their government should provide social safety nets to the poor. Moreover, of countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Lebanon has the lowest level of citizen satisfaction with government assistance to poor people. Lebanese citizens show high levels of demand for and expectation that the government should intervene (Silva, Levin and Morgandi 2013; Bastagli *et al.* 2019).

¹⁰ Table 3.1.1, earlier in the paper, depicts the types of citizen engagement outlined by Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* (2019). Citizens as ‘users and choosers’ implies engaging citizens who use grievance mechanisms or public information to ensure better delivery of social protection programmes.

In north-east Nigeria (Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states), 96 per cent of respondents in a Cash Barometer perception survey said they preferred receiving information about access to assistance through their community leaders and responded positively to the information they received (Sagmeister and Miles 2020). However, for many people, community leaders are the only trusted channel of information, so it may be less about their preferred channel and more about the default option (Barbelet 2020). Without analysing the culture of participation and customary information flows, it is difficult to encourage equitable engagement across crisis-affected groups.

The issue of social exclusion is embedded in these power dynamics and addressing it through 'greater citizen participation is at the core of social accountability' (Sen 1999; Ayliffe *et al.* 2017). The inclusion of marginalised or excluded voices is high on both humanitarian and social protection agendas. The approaches prioritise the identification of groups likely to be excluded, which identify similar groups across crises – women and girls, particularly those who are head of a household, people living with disabilities, and minority groups (Bastagli *et al.* 2019). While there is a growing body of evidence on gender and disability inclusion in social assistance (Barca *et al.* 2021), there are few examples of how to engage contextually to improve accountability, beyond 'outreach' and 'gender-responsive design' (de Wijn *et al.* 2018; UNICEF 2019).

Many fragile countries in crisis, such as Nigeria and Niger, encompass several contexts where the realities of social accountability, civic engagement, the enabling environment, and trust often vary. This makes it difficult, for example, to compare or link social accountability initiatives in southern Nigeria with community engagement by humanitarian actors in north-east Nigeria, where conflict and the social contract look very different from one state or even local government area (LGA) to the next (Ikelegbe 2013). Traditional structures – while important vehicles for localisation – may not be inclusive and can 'perpetuate existing patterns of exclusion' (Grandvoinet *et al.* 2015). This has played out significantly in crises around the world.

The Social Welfare Fund in Yemen offers an example of leveraging existing structures and knowledge of power dynamics to mitigate exclusion. Social protection systems often have greater embedded trust, with local representatives or social workers travelling to their communities as part of a greater web of interaction (Barbelet pers. comm. 2021; Kukrety pers. comm. 2021). Prior to the escalation of conflict in Yemen in 2015, development actors such as the World Bank facilitated social accountability initiatives – through the National Dialogue/Change Movement – to reinforce citizen–state engagement through community mobilisers, predominantly youth, perceived as more neutral facilitators. The network of council members was another important interface, with the added complication of tribal leaders as 'gatekeepers to access certain groups or deliver assistance in particular areas' (Grandvoinet *et al.* 2015: 301). When UNICEF temporarily took over management of the Social Welfare Fund, they maintained the previous structure. The Fund's social welfare officers were trusted by communities, local authorities, councils, and security forces; their role was crucial to secure acceptance of the programme among tribal groups and to obtain access from security forces (European Commission 2016).

3.5.2. Data and social accountability

The use of data in social protection and humanitarian responses, particularly when programmes are linked, is a rich and evolving evidence base (see BASIC Research programme's digital theme). For social protection systems, many countries are developing information systems that support the functions of identifying potential beneficiaries for support (via social registries) and delivering benefits and services to them (via recipient registries and so-called management information systems), as well as enhancing monitoring and evaluation (M&E). These are evolving from being programme-specific to serving a wide range of programmes in an integrated manner (Chirchir and Barca 2020). From the humanitarian side, individual agencies have developed their own proprietary information systems, serving organisation-specific needs in terms of supporting their aid delivery to the populations they serve.

In terms of linkages across sectors, there are very few cases where these systems are compatible – or developed in a coordinated manner. On the one hand, there are only rare examples of social protection information systems being designed to serve the needs of and share data with humanitarian actors. For example, in Niger, the government social registry, supported by the World Bank, was not designed with the main humanitarian agencies providing cash assistance, so they are reluctant to link their existing systems to the new registry (Mohamed *et al.* 2021). On the other hand, humanitarian systems are rarely designed

alongside government actors, with a clear vision for transitioning ownership. This means they do not consider their information management needs and capacities, or the technical requirements needed for standardisation and data-sharing. In certain contexts, this is understandable because of humanitarian principles; in other contexts, it risks undermining the long-term provision of social protection (Kukrety pers. comm. 2021; Raftree and Kondakhchyan 2021; Barca pers. comm. 2021).

Broadly, there are three ways that this 'digitisation' trend, including its focus on digital data, can be used to operationalise accountability. First, data for information management ensures that organisations can provide reliable and transparent assistance to recipients and other community members through standardised eligibility, enrolment, and entitlements. Second, ICT (information and communication technology) is used to log communication and process feedback, such as hotlines and complaints mechanisms – although the extent to which feedback is logged and analysed depends on the context and programme, including its scale. Third, data enables engagement through platforms such as social media, as well as the proliferation of bottom-up data that people can use to amplify their 'unfiltered voices and narratives' (Maietta *et al.* 2018).

While the focus is on strengthening programme quality and coherence, data integration has a direct impact on social accountability, particularly with regards to data rights and protection. Operations are far outpacing the legislation and the guidance, particularly at the national level, with potentially huge ramifications for people that are part of and registered in these systems – people whose data are collected, managed, and shared (Longhurst pers. comm. 2021). Nigeria's National Identity Management Commission issued a general multi-purpose identity card in 2007, aiming to issue more than 1 million of the e-cards in 2014 (Sepúlveda Carmona 2018). This digital ID contains demographic and biographical data, as well as 'MasterCard branded prepaid functionality' and other applications. Concerns over the government using it as a means of surveillance or 'social sorting' ignited civil society debates, which remained concentrated in the more digitally connected areas of Nigeria (*ibid.*). The discussions did not consider infrastructure and digital literacy of target groups in marginalised, crisis-affected areas of the country, such as the north-eastern regions.

From an end-user perspective, data-driven development and its use in social accountability presents several challenges, from data awareness to protection. The concept of informed consent is well established in both social protection and humanitarian guidance, but the rights of data subjects involve increasingly complex processes – what happens when front-line support cannot explain rights and redress mechanisms (Wagner, Ferro and Enabling-Digital.eu 2020)? There is also limited knowledge in terms of how to reconcile social protection registries and certain groups or individuals' right to remain hidden (ICRC 2021; Maietta *et al.* 2018). The ICRC's data guidance is a pragmatic but principled approach to the minimal amount of data protection to ensure that people's data remain safeguarded. Sometimes parallel systems exist for a reason – for example, in areas where the government has little presence, control, or legitimacy, and may use data for other purposes, such as targeting voters; in these cases, an integrated social registry run by the state may not be the best way to manage data (Mohamed *et al.* 2021). However, there is little reflection on how data siloes may affect the social contract in the longer term, and little documentation of widespread consultations with affected people to better understand how they view the risks and if they are in a position to give informed consent.

The digital divide also poses significant risks to widening exclusion. This is particularly pertinent for digital mechanisms in place to prevent fraud and to promote awareness and use of these mechanisms across the digital divide. Lebanon is a small and relatively well-connected country, yet phone ownership for Syrian refugees (which requires phone credit) is not equitable across groups more likely to be excluded (such as women, people living with disabilities, and older people). Aid organisations rely on telecom communication channels such as SMS or call centres to establish two-way communication with people receiving assistance, given the large caseloads. While these mechanisms are widely used and 'appreciated', there are widespread issues accessing the call centre and varied satisfaction with how feedback is handled (Smith 2019). International actors are exploring how using ICT-enabled platforms to capture citizens' voices can increase the reach of social accountability mechanisms, while 'ensuring that the use of such technologies does not negatively affect inclusion' (de Wijn *et al.* 2018; Mebur 2021).

Finally, there is a broader question about data and trust in social assistance, and therefore the use of data to strengthen and operationalise accountability. On the one hand, the proliferation of information and access to various channels renders it difficult to distinguish between rumours, misinformation, and real sources. On the

other, trust is also undermined if social protection data are used for other purposes – for example, counter-terrorism measures could lead to distrust of the system and deter eligible participants from applying for much-needed programme support (Sepúlveda Carmona 2018). While some literature unpacks these questions (from actors such as the International Labour Organization and Transparency International, among others), it is rarely linked to social accountability or AAP with direct feedback from people receiving assistance.

3.5.3. Upwards accountability to donors

Evidence from humanitarian responses notes the imbalance between upwards accountability to donors (through due diligence and reporting processes, for example) versus accountability commitments to citizens and aid recipients, which contributes to the ‘projectisation’ of accountability and responsibility (van Zyl and Claeys 2019). The incentive structure is geared towards ‘financial growth and programmatic protectionism,’ with few ‘if any’ punitive mechanisms for not meeting commitments to crisis-affected people and local actors (Maietta *et al.* 2018). Upwards accountability continues to outweigh accountability to affected populations but is usually framed as an entirely separate consideration – programmatic compliance and due diligence based on funding requirements (operational, administrative), versus humanitarian ‘best practice’ for accountable responses (programmatic). There is little evidence in practice of any trade-offs faced by humanitarian actors between donor compliance and accountability to the intended aid recipients. There is a performative element of AAP mechanisms designed to meet donors’ increasing requirements for people-centred, protection-oriented, accountable, and participatory aid. Good programming risks becoming ‘tick the box accountability’ when needs assessments are considered sufficient participation in programme design, a hotline is the sole communication channel for a complaint mechanism, and post-distribution monitoring is the only community consultation (Barbelet pers. comm. 2021).

Donors have required considerable accountability on financial and legal compliance but have not demanded similar levels of accountability for including people in decision-making.
(Maietta *et al.*, 2018: 23)

Supplanting of taxes by aid, misdirecting of accountability and legitimacy away from the government, and the subsequent disengagement of government have negative effects on governance despite the aid regime’s claims to the contrary.
(Ochieng, 2010: 2)

Although accountability in social protection is embedded in citizen–state engagement and the social contract, there are similar disconnects in social protection programmes with external donor support, which is a common feature of these systems in FCAS. Some analyses consider that foreign aid in any form contributes to the ‘systematic undermining of social contract development between states and the people they purportedly represent’ (Ochieng 2010). While donors and practitioners might counterargue that their support to social protection will reinforce the social contract (van Zyl and Claeys 2019), evidence suggests that despite their best efforts, governments or civil society will feel accountable to these sources rather than to the people – even more so in crisis-affected contexts with concerns about ‘security, trust, and intra-society relationships’ (Grandvoinet *et al.* 2015). This accountability of convenience may actually suit overextended states, as governments find it easier to ‘control, satisfy, or replace’ donors than their own citizens, because it is certainly simpler to accept large aid grants than establish robust taxation systems in places where populations are not used to paying taxes or mistrust how public funds are spent (Ochieng 2010).

But upwards accountability can also positively affect humanitarian and social protection linkages. In Yemen, donors are especially key players in ‘driving the necessary coordination’ due to the highly political dynamics of the conflict and the implications for coherent, accountable social assistance (Smith 2020). In Lebanon, the high level of donor influence on systems building and strengthening reduced duplication of humanitarian cash programmes and encouraged linkages and learning between social protection payments and humanitarian cash transfers, thus improving the coherence of aid for Syrian and Lebanese recipients (Bastagli *et al.* 2019; World Bank 2021). However, donor pressure without clear benchmarks could further contribute to the disconnect between investments in accountability capacity and concrete improvements in social accountability outcomes (Smith 2019).

The actor(s) or organisation(s) that operationalise AAP have implications for responsibility to communities, and ultimately whether or not a humanitarian response is accountable. The increasing prominence of ‘nexus’

policy and programming can also put humanitarian and social protection accountability initiatives in stark contrast with each other. While humanitarians tout donor-friendly AAP mechanisms, social protection systems may have more embedded trust – for example, with local representative networks built over time (Barbelet pers. comm. 2021).

The specialisation of AAP can streamline community engagement across projects and organisations by independently assessing to what extent affected people feel engaged and able to hold aid providers to account (van Praag 2020). However, without follow-up by the duty-bearers, independent initiatives may be unable to embed accountability in the humanitarian system, further distancing affected people from decision makers. Compartmentalising accountability into agency mandates and sector priorities adds layers of interaction between affected people and aid providers on how AAP is operationalised. If protection staff are the ‘social service frontline’ of a humanitarian response, they should be able to act as a resource for communities seeking information on different programmes or wanting to engage in assistance design and processes (Smith 2019). Insular accountability means that each agency (or even project team) is only

Box 3.3: Multiple cash programmes and accountability implications in Lebanon

In Lebanon, the plethora of cash transfer programmes predictably has a direct impact on accountability, whether related to reactive feedback mechanisms or recipient engagement more broadly. Multiple communication channels are in place but are generally programme-specific (World Food Programme, Red Cross, UNHCR, etc.). The same communication channels are used by different aid providers, which means that a family receiving assistance from two different programmes will receive two different messages. Moreover, communication on eligibility does not include the information used to determine this eligibility (target), for fear that ‘revealing variables could lead to fraudulent claims of assistance’ (Smith 2019). Front-line aid workers may not be able to answer recipients’ questions about entitlements or complaints, and meaningful participation in aid decisions is difficult to streamline across interventions.

responsible for their sphere of influence, which is project- or mandate-based, such as health, shelter, or education. Often consultations focus on satisfaction and adequacy of aid, or the relevance/comprehension of information provided (such as the inter-agency multi-purpose cash indicators), which are actionable in terms of programme adjustments but do little to inform design and improve participation in decision-making. Given the disconnect between accountability to donors versus accountability to citizens and aid recipients, it becomes difficult to shift incentives away from donors’ priorities and towards social accountability (Deloffre 2021).

4. Conclusions and future research

There is clear evidence of disconnects, both when comparing social protection and humanitarian approaches to accountability, and between policy and practice in protracted crises, which impede the ability to strengthen the social contract and put accountability principles into practice. But there is also evidence that the mechanisms to operationalise accountability (consultations, GRMs/CFMs, community representation structures, etc.) look similar across projects and sectors, and there are attempts to tackle these disconnects by linking humanitarian and social protection approaches. However, these efforts risk remaining insular, project-based, and technocratic, rather than dealing with the fundamental issues around human rights, humanitarian principles, social contracts, and how to relate to and engage with multi-layered states in FCAS. While much of the literature highlights the challenges and inherent contradictions between the social contract and fragile states, there is little by way of nuanced analysis or alternative conceptualisations of the social contract (or multiple contracts) in protracted crises. This makes it even more difficult to strengthen social accountability in FCAS, in order to hold states and other aid providers to account and maintain upwards

accountability to donors; it also makes it more difficult to safely and realistically engage citizens in concrete decision-making on social assistance.

Instead of asking **if** social accountability works, it may be more fruitful to ask **how** and **through what processes**, social accountability is working in a given context. (Ayliffe *et al.* 2017: 22)

Key informants highlighted the overabundance of frameworks that are presented as evidence without analysing the implementation and effectiveness of those frameworks. This review has revealed a wealth of learning from evaluations and literature reviews (predominantly from social protection programmes, though also for humanitarian projects), but also a gap between best practice and people's lived experiences of accountability in action. Few studies feature accountability initiatives in crisis contexts, and most require 100-plus pages of reading, making the evidence inaccessible or cumbersome for many practitioners and decision makers to use. Also, few analyses approach accountability from the perspective of populations affected by crisis; those that do so¹¹ struggle to offer concrete connections between people's feedback and decision-making in social assistance in ways that could build trust, increase transparency and participation, and strengthen the social contract.

It is therefore recommended to continue reviewing and unifying existing frameworks and to build a practical evidence base that focuses on accountability outcomes, ideally from the perspective of crisis-affected populations – 'telling stories' about what worked or did not, whether these initiatives mean anything to people on the ground, who should be responsible in practice, and how to foster ownership of social assistance programmes (see Box 4.1).

Box 4.1: Linking theory with practice

Linking theory with practice in future research on accountability

- a) *Social contract* between government and the people as it relates to the provision of social assistance: How is it understood in country x? What should the government be doing for its people? Is aid part of that?
- b) *International partners*: To whom are they accountable, ultimately? What are the core accountability lines between donors, government, other aid actors, and communities (that may operate somewhat in parallel) – beyond the rhetoric, in reality.
- c) *Individual mechanisms* (e.g. communication channels) within a programme: What exactly and how much do they contribute to accountability outcomes? To what degree are they integrated into a broader accountability system across humanitarian and social protection programmes? What is the lived experience of the people using them?

4.1. Key themes for future research

Accountability, although it has an intrinsic value, is instrumental in ensuring more effective and sustainable social assistance during crises. The opportunities and challenges around **accountability and localisation** represent an under-researched area. According to practitioners and researchers, the humanitarian community is just starting to scratch the surface when it comes to international organisations becoming more accountable and transferring power to local actors (Deloffre 2021). There is also a risk that being locally accountable contradicts inclusion, and should be explored (Barbelet pers. comm. 2021). This is even less researched for communities where social protection systems and humanitarian responses intersect.

Moreover, **power dynamics**, **inclusion**, and the inherent heterogeneity of communities and the state are not often reflected in the evidence, even though the concept is well reflected in social accountability frameworks (Grandvoininnet *et al.* 2015). Much of the engagement language and definitions for external aid in FCAS associate accountability with participation in decision-making, 'people choosing their own solutions', and, in

¹¹ See, for example, perception surveys from Ground Truth Solutions or the social protection case studies from Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* (2019).

some cases, creating pathways to power redistribution (Maietta *et al.* 2018; CDAC Network 2019). However, many of the approaches tend to establish engagement objectives and use mechanisms that situate participation towards the middle of the ladder or spectrum, such as ‘consultation’ on Arnstein’s ladder, ‘involve’ on the spectrum, or ‘user and chooser’ (Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2019).¹² The disconnect between policy and practice makes it difficult to understand whether people affected by crisis can actively participate and want to do so, how best to engage them in social assistance, and what mechanisms or approaches are most appropriate in specific crises based on power dynamics, the social contract, and the culture of participation. Very few studies or analyses explore the obstacles/barriers to understand who cannot participate, and why (Barbelet pers. comm. 2021).

- What does the relationship between accountability and localisation look like within national social protection systems: who is accountable to whom, and how do different actors participate?
 - How do these accountability pathways relate to humanitarian accountability systems?
- What is the relationship between accountability for social assistance in crises (including the more niche AAP) versus **accountability to donors**: where are the tensions and what are the trade-offs?
- What does ‘locally accountable’ mean in fragile states or places where the government and/or local actors participates in exclusion/conflict?
- How does civil society play a role in accountability between communities and service providers in FCAS, and what are the implications for localisation?
- Are there examples where accountability mechanisms have been shared across sectors (e.g. national social protection systems taking on refugees as caseloads), and if so, what learning has emerged from these case studies?

A crucial case study will be the social welfare system in Yemen, which UNICEF is currently running and will hand over to a national entity in 2022 (Kukrety pers. comm. 2021).

Broader **accountability ecosystems** also require stronger evidence of humanitarian/social protection complementarity to reinforce accountability systems or networks (as opposed to focus on mechanisms), across projects and programmes. This necessitates an examination of the intended **accountability pathways** (and theories of change) and their effectiveness in achieving the stated outcomes, particularly for humanitarian accountability and contexts prone to distorted/fragmented social contracts. Key questions include:

- What are the causal links and the assumptions behind different accountability approaches (social protection versus humanitarian) in a given context? (Many reviews cited the lack of causal pathways to greater accountability.)
 - Whose social contract is it, and with whom? (Smith pers. comm. 2021)
 - What is meaningful participation? Which processes or decisions should be participatory?
 - What is the role of different tools, particularly collective mechanisms (e.g. scorecards referenced in Ayliffe *et al.* 2017), in contributing to those causal links?
- What are the practical implications of using data to strengthen accountability in social assistance programmes (linked to the BASIC Research programme digital theme)?

Context-specific case studies could involve the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) in Turkey, the Social Welfare Fund (SWF) in Yemen, the roll-out of social protection payments in north-east Nigeria in partnership with humanitarian organisations, or collective approaches to accountability across nexus programming in Somalia, the Central African Republic, or Burkina Faso.

Finally, many of the **research gaps identified by the Development Pathways** literature review (Ayliffe *et al.* 2017) are still relevant, and the evidence published since then seldom includes contexts with both AAP and social accountability considerations. These gaps include:

- state response to citizen voice in social protection programming;

¹² Table 3.1.1, earlier in the paper, depicts the types of citizen engagement outlined by Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* (2019). Citizens as ‘users and choosers’ implies engaging citizens who use grievance mechanisms or public information to ensure better delivery of social protection programmes.

- variations by social protection programme function and design feature (targeting, payments, delivery of complementary services, exit, etc.);
- social accountability to marginalised and socially excluded citizens (ODI will be contributing on the humanitarian side with its integrated research programme on Inclusivity and Invisibility in Humanitarian Action 2019–2021, which includes Nigeria);
- civic mobilisation and the costs of engaging with GRMs;
- complaint data being used to inform/improve programme design.

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Annexe

Table A1: List of interviewees

	Name	Organisation	Date of interview
1	Nick van Praag	Ground Truth Solutions	22 March 2021
2	Nupur Kukrety	UNICEF (New York): social protection	19 March 2021
3	Rachel Sabates-Wheeler	Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC)/ Institute of Development Studies (IDS)	11 March 2021
4	Gaby Smith	Independent researcher (CaLP)	11 March 2021
5	Meg Sattler	Ground Truth Solutions	11 March 2021
6	Valentina Barca	SPACE (Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19: Expert Advice)	5 March 2021
7	Veronique Barbelet	ODI	5 March 2021
8	Daniel Longhurst	BASIC (now WFP)	2 March 2021
9	Zehra Rizvi	UNICEF (Amman): humanitarian + social protection	15 March 2021
10	Liz Hendry	CAMEALEON (Cash Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, Learning Organizational Network) Lebanon	8 March 2021

Acknowledgements and Disclaimer

This document was developed by the Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research programme. BASIC is implemented by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the University of Sussex and the Centre for International Development and Training, funded by UKAid from the UK government. The views expressed in this document are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent views or policies of the UK governments official policies.

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Published by IDS.

Suggested citation

Seferis, L. and Harvey, P. (2022) *Accountability in Crises: Connecting Evidence from Humanitarian and Social Protection Approaches to Social Assistance*, BASIC Research Working Paper 13, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/BASIC.2022.013](https://doi.org/10.19088/BASIC.2022.013)