

Implementing collective accountability to affected populations

Ways forward in large-scale humanitarian crises

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Key messages

- Collective accountability to affected populations (AAP) has been enshrined in policy through high-level commitments over the past few years, such as the Grand Bargain and the terms of reference for Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs). In practice, collective AAP is not yet happening.
- Blockages to implementing collective AAP include a lack of shared understanding of what it entails, a lack of buy-in at the leadership level, failure to fully involve local actors in all phases of the approach and a lack of dedicated funding.
- Humanitarian Coordinators and HCTs are not delivering on their responsibilities on collective AAP and must go further in ensuring it is fully embedded into responses. This means having a clear strategy and objectives, integrating collective AAP in a structured way across the humanitarian programme cycle and ensuring it is adequately funded.
- HCTs and other key stakeholders should establish collective AAP that builds on existing capacities and structures, instead of developing complicated or overly ambitious new systems. It is critical to understand what local actors can bring to the table and place them firmly at the centre of this process.
- Collective AAP is cheap, yet most donors have so far failed to invest in it adequately. Donors can support collective AAP by funding it predictably, at scale and across the humanitarian programme cycle. They can also strengthen the work of collective AAP by demanding more systematic implementation, using funding mechanisms that support collective action and avoiding concentrating too much power in the hands of lead agencies.

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Introduction

Accountability to affected populations (AAP) in humanitarian crises requires aid actors to provide people with accurate information, listen to and respond to their feedback and include them in decisions that affect their lives. At programme or agency level, AAP is an essential part of good humanitarian programming. However, it does not necessarily lead to an accountable response as a whole. People do not live in silos: their needs and priorities regularly cut across different mandates or programme focuses, and they should not be expected to navigate a labyrinth of fragmented systems to register feedback or ask questions. Collective approaches to AAP seek to close this gap by putting people rather than projects at the centre, and focusing on the overall response rather than complementing the work of individual agencies.

A collective approach to AAP is a multi-actor, multi-service initiative that encompasses the whole humanitarian response, rather than a single agency or programme. It focuses on two-way communication: providing information about the situation and services to affected communities; gathering information from these communities via feedback, perspectives and inputs; using that information to shape and modify the response; and closing the feedback loop by informing communities as to how their input has been taken into account. The goal of a collective approach to AAP is the increased accountability to and participation of affected communities in their own response

(Holloway et al., 2020).¹ It is important to remember that a collective approach is a set of complementary mechanisms and processes, dependent on the context of the response. It cannot and should not be distilled into a single activity, such as a common hotline or a community engagement working group.

Collective AAP has been enshrined in commitments made by key stakeholders in the international humanitarian system since the mid-2010s. Signatories to the 2016 Grand Bargain agreed to enact ‘common standards and a coordinated approach for community engagement and participation’, and this ‘collective approach’ to AAP became one of four mandatory accountability commitments laid out in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s (IASC’s) terms of reference (ToRs) for HCTs since 2017 (IASC, 2016; 2017). Yet despite the presence of extensive technical guidance and a growing body of experience in different contexts (Peer 2 Peer Support, 2017; CDAC Network, 2019), efforts to implement collective AAP have so far proved sporadic and inconsistent (Holloway et al., 2020).

In light of this ongoing gap between commitments and practice, this policy brief focuses on the key blockages that continue to impede the realisation of successful collective AAP within the international humanitarian system,² and points to the actions needed to overcome them. Aimed at senior decision-makers such as Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) and their country teams, heads of sector/ cluster lead agencies and donors, it draws on recent HPG research on collective AAP

1 This definition has developed over the course of HPG’s research project, and thus is different from the one that appeared in the case studies underpinning the project and in the synthesis report (Holloway et al., 2020). The only change from the synthesis report is the switch from communication and community engagement (CCE) to AAP, which reflects a broader decision to use ‘collective AAP’ rather than ‘collective CCE’ for this policy brief to align with the language used in HCTs’ ToRs. The five country contexts explored in the larger project are Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Indonesia, Mozambique and Yemen.

2 This paper focuses specifically on responses led by the international humanitarian system where the HCT plays a leading role, such as large-scale or protracted crises. It does so because of the stark contrast our research showed between the strength of commitments around collective AAP in these contexts, and their realisation in practice. However, internationally led responses are far from the only spaces in which collective AAP can be implemented. In many cases, nationally led efforts spearheaded by governments and local civil society working at the intersection between emergency preparedness and disaster response are likely to be more effective and sustainable, especially in contexts with frequent natural hazard-related disasters. This focus on internationally led responses is also a recognition that, while there is an aspiration to shift power and enable a humanitarian response system that is locally led, the current reality means that most decisions about the strategic direction of humanitarian responses to complex crises still lie with international actors and the traditional humanitarian system. These issues are discussed in greater depth in the project’s synthesis report (Holloway et al., 2020).

across multiple contexts, as well as extensive secondary evidence.³

The added value of collective AAP

Collective approaches to AAP add value to a humanitarian response by providing people with better quality and more consistent information. Such approaches mitigate language and cultural barriers to information uptake, reduce over-burdening and assessment fatigue, improve understandings of people's priorities and strengthen analysis and advocacy. On the backend, collective approaches can add value for humanitarian organisations and agencies. They do this by reducing duplication and filling gaps, reducing costs by collaborating on common services, providing multiple channels of communication to increase inclusivity and effectiveness while also improving programming through aiding understanding of cross-cutting issues and trend analysis throughout the response. Improved programming can lead to improved humanitarian access, security and acceptance by affected people, since 'acceptance-based access strategies require a solid and up to date understanding of the perceptions of affected people' (STAIT, 2017: 1).

Without collective AAP, humanitarian action is less likely to be relevant and effective for affected people. It is thus essential rather than being an optional 'nice to have'. Underpinning these practical benefits, collective AAP is also a critical factor in meeting rights-based commitments that put affected people and their needs at the centre of any response.

Blockages and ways forward

There are four main reasons why collective AAP has failed to take hold. First, collective AAP is not understood in the same way by all stakeholders. Second, there has been a lack of buy-in at the leadership level. Third, collective AAP is not always effective because it fails to adequately involve local government and non-governmental actors, in all stages of the approach. Finally, there has not yet

been enough predictable funding for collective AAP to allow it to function at scale or be delivered in ways that strengthen collective action.

Lack of shared understanding of collective AAP

Currently, there is no consensus on what collective AAP means. The variance in terms, such as communication and community engagement (CCE), community engagement and accountability (CEA) and communicating with communities (CwC), is based more on organisations and agencies creating new acronyms than any real significant differences in meaning. All are used to support AAP as an outcome and increase participation by using effective two-way communication with people affected by crisis to inform, shape and modify the humanitarian response. The definitional argument over CCE/CEA/CwC/AAP has occasionally prevented it from being done well, because it creates misunderstanding and confusion (Austin, 2017). These difficulties have been further compounded in public health crises by the introduction of risk communication and community engagement (RCCE). As the Covid-19 pandemic continues, it is more important than ever for RCCE activities to complement rather than duplicate pre-existing AAP measures, as previously observed in the DRC Ebola response (Dewulf et al., 2020; Lough and Holloway, 2020).

This confusion is amplified by the introduction of a 'collective'. Despite commitments to collective AAP in the humanitarian sector, many interviewees for this study were not clear on what was meant by a 'collective approach' and focused more on coordination and common services than accountability across the response (Holloway et al., 2020). There is little agreement in crisis responses on what collective AAP looks like, who is responsible for it or how it should be managed.⁴

Lack of buy-in at the leadership level

For AAP to work as a collective as well as individual endeavour, it needs buy-in and visibility across the humanitarian response. This is hard to achieve if senior leadership actors are missing in

3 See Barbelet, 2020; Dewulf et al., 2020; El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2020; Holloway and Fan, 2020; Holloway et al., 2020; Lough and Spencer, 2020; and Lough et al., 2020.

4 There have, however, been clear policy commitments and guidelines since 2016 on what works in practice (OCHA, 2016; Austin, 2017; CDAC Network, 2019; Holloway et al., 2020).

action when it comes to their AAP commitments. Worryingly, evidence suggests a persistent lack of understanding among HCs and HCTs about their responsibilities around collective AAP (Holloway et al., 2020). The absence of clear guidance from the response leadership on the structures and focus of collective AAP can result in disjointed approaches that struggle to identify and fill service gaps and fail to capitalise on the complementary strengths of different actors. Expectations for what objectives collective AAP is working towards, along with how they should be achieved and by whom, should be set out from the onset of a response by the HC and the HCT. Examples of good blueprints have been developed in Nepal (Nepal HCT, 2015), Indonesia (Indonesia HCT, 2018) and CAR (Barbelet, 2020), but these are currently exceptions rather than the rule. The IASC Results Group 2 on accountability and inclusion is currently developing a Collective Accountability and Inclusion Framework to ‘set out the core commitments and building blocks’ for HCs and HCTs. This should help HCs and HCTs better implement collective AAP – and be held accountable for doing so – by setting out the key actions needed throughout the humanitarian programme cycle, as well as establishing clear metrics for success (IASC, 2020).

Lack of access to decision-making forums for AAP actors is another common issue: too often, feedback from communities generated by collective AAP mechanisms trickles up to leadership level in an ad-hoc or selective manner, if at all. When it does so, mechanisms for translating feedback into action and closing the ‘feedback loop’ by informing communities about what has been done are weak (Holloway et al., 2020). More broadly, actors implementing collective AAP often struggle to secure buy-in and engagement from key players and decision-makers in a response, facing the perception that their work is a nice-to-have, secondary priority to life-saving activities. Again, changing this mindset and creating mechanisms for implementing AAP commitments starts at the top. As a recent HPG report on collective AAP in the DRC’s Ebola crisis summarised, ‘a top-down commitment from the response leadership is critical for bottom-up feedback to be accepted, owned and acted upon’ (Dewulf et al., 2020: 30).

Failure to fully involve local actors

For collective AAP to be truly collective, it should be multi-actor and involve all stakeholders. Yet, one group that is consistently left out of this collective – whether directly or indirectly – is local actors (Holloway et al., 2020; Lough and Holloway, 2020). There is growing consensus that local actors play a unique role in engaging communities (CHS Alliance, 2018). To date, however, AAP remains mired in humanitarian jargon, and the community engagement activities of local organisations often go unrecognised because they are not labelled as ‘engagement’ (Holloway and Fan, 2020). The exclusion of local actors impacts the effectiveness of the collective approach to AAP, especially when AAP practices are not informed by community and conflict dynamics that may exclude or marginalise certain groups or individuals. At the global level, recent commitments to AAP should be linked more closely to commitments to localisation. The ‘participation revolution’ workstream and the localisation workstream of the Grand Bargain should support one another to ensure that local actors are at the heart of collective AAP.

Lack of long-term, predictable funding at scale

Collective AAP is cheap, generally accounting for well under 1% of appeals or response plans in contexts where it has been implemented. Despite this, it regularly struggles to access sources of good-quality, predictable funding. Lack of common understanding and commitment surrounding collective AAP also has major implications for the current funding landscape, which remains limited to a small number of donors and fragmented according to their specific understandings of what the scope and focus of collective AAP should be. Some remain sceptical of the evidence base, while others have yet to buy into it as a priority given competing commitments and limited capacity. While it is relatively inexpensive, its small scale means that collective AAP can be challenging for donors to fund without relying on extensive sub-granting processes (Lough and Spencer, 2020).

This lack of resources negatively impacts the effectiveness of collective AAP in a number of ways. In new crises, funding is often slow to come onstream, missing the critical first few months of an emergency. Support is often focused on pilots that

struggle to achieve response-wide impact because they do not have the resources to function at scale. Even in protracted crises, multi-year funding for collective AAP is almost unheard of, inhibiting consolidation and economies of scale, as well as limiting its ability to feed into decision-making across the full humanitarian programme cycle. The lack of medium-term support also precludes joined-up approaches that link preparedness, response and recovery. In our research, continuity pre- and post-disaster was widely seen as a missing component in ensuring that collective AAP could be effective in areas vulnerable to frequent natural hazard-related disasters.

Rather than simply providing adequate resources, it is also important to think about *how* different funding modalities can support the various needs of a collective approach. Bilateral funding can support stable activities at scale, but it can be slow to negotiate and does not necessarily support collective action. Funding that uses UN agencies as intermediaries can reduce transaction costs for donors and ensure links to high-level decision-making. However, it is also expensive compared to channelling funding through non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It can also foster hierarchical and monopolistic – rather than collaborative and open – ways of working and impinge on approaches’ perceived neutrality if they are felt to be ‘owned’ by the agency hosting them. Newer approaches – such as the Humanitarian to Humanitarian (H2H) Network, or flexible funding mechanisms piloted by the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network – have aimed to strengthen collective action by encouraging shared ownership on funding decisions and by separating the functions of grant holding and coordination or leadership across different organisations. However, these currently represent the exception rather than the rule.

Conclusion and recommendations

The blockages discussed above need to be addressed through concerted efforts by a range of actors across the humanitarian system. The following recommendations highlight how different stakeholders can translate current commitments on collective AAP into more effective practice.

To Humanitarian Coordinators, Humanitarian Country Teams and response leadership

- Collective AAP is simpler than you think; try not to overcomplicate it. Collective AAP involves the whole response and focuses on its quality. The response should be adapted based on feedback given by affected people.
- Focus on context of the response and build on what is already in place. Collective AAP does not require new and complex programming or the deployment of expensive technology to be successful. Indeed, overly ambitious approaches can hamper collective action as much as they support it.
- Ensure that commitments to collective accountability are fully embedded in humanitarian response planning and monitoring processes. The IASC’s Results Tracker for monitoring collective accountability and inclusion will provide a strong roadmap on the minimum required steps and should be adopted as standard.
- Invest political capital in fully embedding collective AAP in the response. Advocate for uptake and buy-in among senior colleagues, both within the HCT and in the response more broadly. Make sure flagship activities feature prominently in situation reports, donor visits and media exposure. Mobilising this kind of moral support has already been extremely effective in bringing efforts to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse to the fore.
- Advocate for collective AAP activities to be properly funded. In particular, ensure that they are included in country-based pooled fund (CBPF) allocations to strengthen legitimacy and buy-in, reinforcing the sense that collective AAP is a priority for the overall response.
- Create structured opportunities and reporting systems for joint analysis of community feedback. This could involve cross-cutting compilation and analysis of data by AAP or assessment working groups, followed by presentation and discussion at inter-cluster and HCT level as a standard agenda point. Such analysis should also form a specific component of Humanitarian Needs Overviews and other response-level review, evaluation or monitoring processes.

- Take decisions based on the feedback that is gleaned from collective AAP processes. Explain these decisions to the community to close the feedback loop.
- Require meaningful national co-leadership of collective AAP and invest in mapping out existing contributions by local actors to AAP. Hold meetings in appropriate languages and in a manner that encourages local organisations to take part. This would also ensure more permanent and sustainable two-way channels of communication between people affected by crises and those responding. To achieve this, adequate partnerships and funding modalities that can effectively reinforce rather than replace local humanitarian action and local leadership are required.

To regional and country-level heads of agencies, international NGOs and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

- For larger agencies, allocate a dedicated proportion of funding to collective AAP to ensure that activities are resourced regardless of specific donor interest, as well as demonstrating commitment through leading by example. For all agencies, make sure that agency-level AAP staff understand and engage with collective approaches.
- Ensure senior leadership is held accountable for supporting response-wide commitments to collective AAP, for example in terms of specific responsibilities in ToRs coupled with structured training processes.
- Recognise and harness local capacity to engage affected populations and learn from them. Local organisations often have pre-existing knowledge of community and conflict dynamics. They also tend to know the communication preferences of affected people, which can be used to contextualise the collective approach from the outset, rather than using a standardised, cookie-cutter approach, undertaking a lengthy assessment or resorting to a trial-and-error process.

To donors

- Fund collective approaches to AAP in the same manner as other life-saving activities: predictably, flexibly, at scale and across the entire humanitarian programme cycle. This will ensure that actors on the ground begin to view them as essential to a response, rather than as an add-on to other programmes.
- Improve inter-donor coordination on how collective AAP is funded, where and by whom. This should include efforts to strengthen coherence and common understandings of concepts and objectives, as well as commitments on priority thematic or regional focuses. The Donor Cash Forum provides a useful blueprint here (DG ECHO et al., 2019a; 2019b).
- Demand more systematic collective action on AAP. Donors can use their position of relative power to influence response leadership and heads of agencies to put commitments around collective AAP into action, following the framework that is under development by the IASC Results Group 2.
- Focus on funding mechanisms that enable collective action. At the global level, this could include supporting the H2H Network, ensuring that an integrated package of services from specialist providers can be consistently deployed. At country level, this could involve working through a mixture of advocacy and funding to ensure collective approaches are prioritised for inclusion in CBPF allocations, fostering buy-in across the response.
- Avoid funding models that risk fostering unaccountable hierarchies. In most circumstances a single agency should not be responsible for coordinating the collective, managing and sub-granting its funds and playing a direct operational role in its implementation.
- Support the effective participation and leadership of local actors in collective AAP. This includes ensuring that more funding flows to local actors so that collective approaches to AAP are built from the ground up, and complement rather than replace existing work and capacity. In this respect, CBPFs again represent a rare source of good-quality funding for local organisations.

From collective AAP to participation?

Ultimately, responses will be more accountable to the people they serve when they put decision-making power and resources firmly in the hands of crisis-affected populations. So far, however, the traditional humanitarian system has struggled to let go of its position of control (Bennett et al., 2016). The ‘participation revolution’ envisioned by the Grand Bargain has so far proved to be more technocratic adjustment than a genuine

upending of the status quo, and community-led responses are far from becoming the norm (Holloway et al., 2020). With its efforts currently focused on feedback and course-correction rather than the transfer of power, collective AAP will not by itself achieve more meaningful participation. However, it has a critical role to play in building the foundations for doing so in the coming years, as humanitarian actors seek to chart a course beyond the end of the Grand Bargain and into a post-Covid-19 world.

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