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HERE-Geneva

closing the gap between policy and humanitarian practice

HERE (Humanitarian Exchange and REsearch Centre) is an independent, Geneva-based non-profit organization. We contribute to closing the gap between policy and humanitarian practice.

Priorities and Commitments in Humanitarian Action

Project description

In recent years, the humanitarian agenda has become extremely broad with the addition of many different priorities. As a result, there is confusion and misunderstanding on what humanitarian action encompasses and tries to achieve. In response to these issues, HERE-Geneva has engaged a project looking at humanitarian priorities. The focus is on humanitarian action in armed conflict and the gaps in response found there.

The objective of this project is to provide purpose and direction to the increasingly broad agenda of humanitarian action.

It will formulate key messages on:

- The goal of humanitarian action
- Existing commitments under international law
- Benchmarks for performance

Three sets of issues will be examined in detail:

- Shared values and principles that underpin humanitarian action
- Protection of people affected by armed conflict and the gaps in compliance with international humanitarian law
- The lack of leadership and accountability for performance (resulting in substandard humanitarian performance)

The project will also look at commitments against which actors can be held accountable.

Accountability: Moving from Rhetoric to Reality

Report¹ on the Working Meeting held on 3 February 2016, Geneva

Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

Overview

Accountability within the humanitarian sector remains elusive despite substantial investment, sweeping calls for reform, wide-ranging initiatives and the Transformative Agenda. To be fair, the quest for accountability has not failed to produce substantial outcomes. Extensive reporting measures to donors, for example, do contribute today to the financial integrity of aid flows. For its part, the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP) has led to the establishment of programme quality standards across humanitarian activities, for example in terms of nutrition, water, sanitation and healthcare. These efforts, however, inadequately address essential issues such as accountability to aid recipients, accountability for the decisions of humanitarian leadership, and accountability for the 'soft' rather than 'hard' technical aspects of aid. Crucially, the accountability agenda has evaded problematic questions such as accountability to populations not reached by aid or for the unintended impact of humanitarian action (e.g., that it may prolong wars, reinforce Western hegemony, or undermine development and foster dependency).

Central to these shortcomings, the sector has carefully guarded accountability as an internal affair, blocking systematic (external) scrutiny or control. Given this state of affairs, HERE deems accountability itself in need of being held to

¹ On behalf of HERE-Geneva, Marc DuBois is the main author of this report.

account. We call for a more honest conversation, to ensure that the humanitarian sector better appreciates the scope of accountability's promise, recognises its false hopes, and deploys it creatively to the most critical areas of humanitarian action.

Accountability involves not only the act of providing an account of decisions, actions, and outcomes. It must involve being held to account as well; hence the responsibility to act, the obligation to answer for both action and inaction, and the potential for judgement or sanction. Humanitarian accountability thus marks a transversal issue, and the gap between its 'talk' and its 'walk' surfaced frequently during HERE's two previous Working Meetings.² In our June discussion on protection, participants signalled the need for greater accountability for those states, aid agencies and individual humanitarians failing to effectively carry out their protection responsibilities and legal or principled obligations. In our October discussion on how to strengthen the application of the humanitarian principles, we identified the absence of any agreed mechanism for the assessment of and accountability for gaps and violations as a key obstacle. We also noted the tell-tale reality that few organisations even monitor their performance in terms of humanity, impartiality, independence or neutrality.

This one-day Working Meeting aimed to generate a more nuanced analysis of the potential and limitations of existing frameworks for promoting accountability, a critical perspective enabling us to close the gap between the 'talk' and the 'walk'. Not wanting to duplicate the efforts of so many others, HERE will focus on gaps in the accountability agenda, paying particular attention to the interrelationship between our three priority themes – the humanitarian principles, protection, and accountability. The February

3rd Meeting was divided into four thematic sessions, each introduced by a set of comments:

1. Critical reflection: What can be learned from an 'honest' look at the state of humanitarian accountability today?
2. How can the tenets and/or mechanisms of accountability help us to improve principled humanitarian action?
3. Where and how might accountability contribute to protection activities, in particular the protection of civilians from violence and abuse?
4. Beyond accountability for the NGOs and agencies delivering aid, how can we improve accountability for (a) the collective outcomes of humanitarian action and (b) decisions made by collective bodies (e.g., UN clusters)?

This report provides a summary of the day rather than a direct reporting of its ranging, interwoven discussions. It finishes with HERE's Reflections on the Day. As with the two previous Working Meetings, our goal was to generate critical analysis and diverse perspectives, not to mould consensus. A number of key themes nonetheless emerged:

- Accountability should be seen as the product of not one but a multiplicity of actors and mechanisms acting complementarily (e.g., media, civil society, local government, trustees, sector-wide mechanisms, donor institutions).
- Accountability initiatives need to better differentiate among the various levels of humanitarian action – project, context, sector and individual, organisational, collective. Similarly, distinct fields of action (e.g., emergency

² Summary reports from our October 2015 discussion on the implementation of the humanitarian principles and our June meeting on

protection can be found on HERE's website, at <http://here-geneva.org/our-products/>.

assistance, resilience, advocacy) require approaches well-tailored to their specificity.

- A broad accountability gap exists, one that can only be plugged by an independent body(ies), empowered to assess the performance of humanitarian actors, individually and as a collective, across the various levels of an intervention.
- Forward progress requires avoiding the obstacles that have undermined accountability efforts in the past, hence a greater sensitivity to the incentives, architecture, political dynamics, and culture which governs the ecosystem³ of humanitarian aid.

Session 1: Accountability: time for a more honest discussion

Background: Where has the ‘three-lane accountability highway’ (rights-based, ethics/principles-based and standards/results-based) of accountability taken us? Efforts have been substantial and time-consuming, and yet it remains difficult to identify where in humanitarian work there are consequences for poor decisions, neglect of core principles, or ineffective interventions. Where have accountability initiatives been successful? Where and why have they failed? Can we develop a more realistic understanding of accountability’s limitations? Can we unpack some of the complexity surrounding accountability?

There is no small degree to which accountability has been viewed as a silver bullet, freighted with expectations beyond its remit. Across the humanitarian sector, we have asked accountability to relieve our deepest concerns: to reduce power imbalances, increase the

effectiveness of aid, and safeguard the integrity of the enterprise. We continue to confuse accountability with other concepts, such as quality assurance and local participation. If we are to move from aspiration to realisation, an honest conversation on the potential of accountability must embrace conceptual limitation, and as well must reflect the difficult political landscape of aid. The appeal of accountability as a concept has too often collided with the underlying structures, incentives, culture and political dynamics of the aid world: top-down or supply-sided provision of aid, financial dependence on institutional donors, and the highly skewed power differential between aid agencies and recipient communities, to name but a few.

Discussion and Key Messages

Being the first session of the day, much discussion concerned the scope of accountability, and the aims of such an ambitious meeting. As a matter of drawing boundaries on the discussion, HERE felt it best to avoid two key areas of accountability: (a) the question of improving the accountability of individuals within the system, particularly in terms of decision-making by leaders, and (b) the knotty issue of humanitarian work that involves promoting compliance by states and armed groups with international humanitarian and human rights law.

Both planned omissions sparked opposition. While maintaining a focus on institutional and collective action, we recognised that **accountability initiatives will continue to lag if they fail to focus on the performance and decisions of individuals, particularly leaders.** And while sidestepping the discussion of accountability for violations of IHL and IHRL, we accept that it **is integral to the performance of humanitarians, especially where assessing the**

³ Rather than view the humanitarian community as a coherent system, or as a ‘menagerie’ (as one participant suggested), HERE prefers the term ‘ecosystem’, denoting a community of individuals

and entities interacting with one other and with their various (contextual, political, financial, ideological, etc.) environments.

application of the principles and protection work. It was also important to remember that the focus for the meeting was the work of humanitarians, and so did not directly relate to accountability for violations of IHL and IHRL.⁴ These early exchanges marked a theme that would arise throughout the course of the day, and for which there were differing perspectives in the room. Some participants argued that accountability should focus only on those areas of work where humanitarians hold control over outputs and outcomes (i.e., where they control the power necessary to achieve their goals), while others contended that humanitarians often have a responsibility to act even where they lack control over the outcomes of their actions.

To date, most accountability frameworks concentrate on either financial probity or project level activities. The extensive accountability work on beneficiary feedback mechanisms, for example, does not address feedback to the political and systemic level. The need is to expand upon this base, to **bridge the disconnection between the project and the broader humanitarian intervention**, for instance, to identify gaps in aid that do not relate to the work of any single agency. **Can accountability be applied to the contextualisation of responses, to the roles and responsibilities of different actors, or to complementarity?** In complex, dynamic, and highly compromised contexts such as South Sudan, Syria or Somalia, does it make sense to locate accountability within a paradigmatic success/failure framework? Or should we think of accountability **more in terms of how the humanitarian community adapts itself, how it navigates these inhospitable contexts?**

One obstacle to accountability is that many **incentives within the system – a fear that funding will be cut off, individual job security – produce false reporting**, which in turn undermines learning from mistakes/failures or

managing adjustments in the course of aid delivery. This observation relates to the culture of aid, which is seen as inimical to accountability (e.g., overly defensive, collusive and closed). As one participant pointed out, **humanitarians often find it embarrassing to exercise accountability**, even when it is plainly obvious whose work is ineffective. Somewhat paradoxically, the frustrated call for accountability – for ‘heads to roll’ – disregards the reality that informal sanctions already shape the industry, giving rise to false and/or incomplete reporting and the fear of pointing a finger. Without a culture of accountability, and **a culture in which the exercise of accountability is an accepted norm**, the insertion of formal mechanisms and procedures will struggle to produce more than a tick box approach.

Beyond the sector, the functioning of governance, writ large, contributes to accountability in a diffuse fashion, beyond bilateral implementer-donor or implementer-beneficiary relationships – for example including the scrutiny of media, state authorities, or local civil society and institutions, meaning **no one mechanism can be seen as the ‘solution’**. During the meeting, the **paramount role of donors drew special attention during the conversation**, as the only actors with the actual leverage to effect change in the system. The newly announced **‘Grand Bargain’** promises funding to humanitarian agencies that enhances responsiveness and contextualisation, and a more whole-of-context assessment of needs and determination of programming. With regard to funding, however, any analysis needs to recognise the extent to which donors too are subject to a set of sanctions and incentives. While welcoming the Grand Bargain, **the humanitarian community should not predicate progress on accountability upon donor reform** without a better appreciation of why previous

exploitation of beneficiaries, was also seen to be better addressed in a separate discussion.

⁴ The important topic of accountability for misconduct by humanitarians, such as sexual

comparable attempts fell far short of their promise (i.e., the Good Humanitarian Donorship Agreement). **This is but one example; the overarching need is to ensure as much as possible that accountability initiatives will succeed despite the prevailing power dynamics** (incentives and disincentives) of the humanitarian ecosystem.

Session 2: Accountability and principled humanitarian action

Background: Accountability inheres in the principle of humanity, forging a potent relationship between accountability and the core humanitarian principles, and linking accountability to the humanitarian identity identify itself. Major accountability initiatives such as The Sphere Handbook or CHS have incorporated the core humanitarian principles into their commitments, but have not established clear guidance on their application. Though vital to the effectiveness and definition of humanitarian work, the sector rarely assesses its performance in this regard. It thus comes as no surprise that HERE's October Working Meeting on the humanitarian principles concluded that a pronounced lack of accountability within the sector contributes to gaps in principled practice.

This session aimed to better understand how accountability might help to improve the implementation and assessment of the humanitarian principles. How might we capitalise upon existing accountability initiatives? Is it realistic to believe that the sector could reach agreement on minimum standards or best practice guidelines for humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence?

Discussion and key messages

At the theoretical level, participants broadly supported the idea of holding humanitarian actors accountable with regard to the core principles. A more pragmatic focus, though, raised significant concerns. Put simply, the

nature of the principles themselves renders it problematic to assess compliance.

- Existing frameworks might permit assessing principled action at the project level, but complexity mounts when the analysis shifts upwards, to the context of global levels.
- In humanitarian crisis contexts, a degree of compromise is unavoidable – a purist approach towards the principles might lead to working nowhere. That said, these compromises should be open to scrutiny.
- Evaluation along the lines of the principles will always entail more of an art than a science, a potentially subjective judgement that cannot be reduced to formulaic certainty.
- The calculus – how far to compromise – proves even more complex in the midst of crisis (the 'frog in boiling water syndrome'), or a context which is in rapid flux. Furthermore, future impact of decisions (on people, or to the principles) often defies calculation.

Even with those difficulties, **a majority at the meeting found merit in the idea of an independent assessment of principled practice.** That could take the form of agency rankings/indices, a UNSG-appointed special advisor, or some type of authorised body. Back to the ombudsman model, initiated in the 1990s but then downsized, ultimately transmuted into HAP? Should there be a single authoritative voice? Or better a series of checks and balances? In any case, it will be necessary to take stock of the work currently in place, **to see how far accountability for principles can be integrated into existing mechanisms.**

The field of **human rights provides a useful model**, where independent working groups of experts have been able to elaborate standards to be met in observance of concepts as equally complex as the humanitarian principles. When,

for example, is detention arbitrary? As with the principles, such matters resist tick box approaches. Importantly, **assessment of principled performance would not necessarily follow the right/wrong model of identifying violations to be sanctioned, but could work more on the basis of ensuring that the principles were central to a learning process, with compromises documented and deliberated.** The 'obligation' of a humanitarian organisation is not to be absolute in its application of the principles, but to ensure that principles guide decisions, and hence accountability in this regard must look at relationships, responsibilities, and procedures rather than focus on output. **Humanitarian actors must be more honest about how trade-offs are weighed and how the principles are balanced in decision-making.**

Participants **identified existing exercises as useful elements upon which to build on, such as OPRs (Operational Peer Review) and RTEs (Real-Time Evaluation).** These exercises can contribute to accountability, yet were seen as lacking meaningful independence, and insufficiently focused on the application of the principles. Other potentially interesting examples were raised, such as the Mine Action Centre, which functions (in the field of demining operations) as a funding 'clearing house' and hence as a coordinating body with some degree of control over the independent agencies. Another is the Strategic Monitoring Unit that existed years ago in Afghanistan, which possessed the vital capacity to step back from operations to examine the bigger picture. More research is needed to understand the lessons these experiences offer for accountability.

Session 3: Accountability and protection

Background: Throughout HERE's June Working Meeting on protection, the theme of the accountability of states and organised armed groups for violations of IHL and IHRL surfaced often. That meeting also issued a strong call for more inward-looking accountability by humanitarians in terms of their own

performance with regard to their protection work. This session took up that call, and hence was designed not to focus directly on holding to account states and other actors. How do current accountability frameworks address protection, and how can we hold to account humanitarian institutions and/or leadership for the significant gaps, poor performance and failures of humanitarian protection?

When it comes to protection, various humanitarian actors hold obligations derived from their mandates, mission statements and contractual responsibilities (e.g., UNHCR, UN HCTs, or an NGO funded to produce an advocacy report on a given protection issue). More generally, protection work has evolved over time, and there are now standards of practice in the delivery of assistance as well as in core protection work. Would it be useful to create a framework for accountability for protection? Or do we need a different approach for some protection work, given for instance the difficulty in measuring both efforts and outcomes? What aspects of protection might be more feasibly dealt with through existing accountability approaches?

Discussion and key messages

An honest 'conversation' on this session itself: as a group we struggled to discuss accountability in relation to humanitarian protection. One well-identified issue is the degree to which the quality of protection activities must be judged not by the quantity of outputs (e.g., number of reports published or roundtables organized) but by their outcomes, which are as difficult to quantify as they are to attribute back to the work of aid agencies. Moreover, the success or failure of protection activities – and here the focus was on activities related to violence and abuse of civilians – is often dependent upon the conduct of other actors, such as governments, military forces, or non-state armed actors. Humanitarians do not hold the power to stop violence and abuse.

As one participant lamented, ‘Where do we even begin when it comes to protection?’ In different ways, **participants underscored the difficulty in discussing accountability for protection work given the confusion (‘conceptual complexity’) surrounding protection itself.** The question must be asked: Is there a clear enough understanding of protection within the humanitarian community to allow for an accountability framework to be put in place? As our June Working Meeting on protection concluded, ‘the disengagement of humanitarians themselves from protection is disturbing’ and is in part the consequence of an ‘insufficiently clear understanding of the underlying purpose of humanitarian action or of its core principles and IHL.’⁵

Further compounding these conceptual and computational issues, there is a tension between expert-led protection programming on the one hand and mainstreamed protection activities on the other. **Where should accountability efforts be prioritised? At project level? Or should we focus on the disregard for protection at the level of both humanitarian leadership and state power?** Several participants critiqued the degree to which current assessments of protection work comprise discussions on process, organisational turf and procedure (a focus on organigrams, tick box exercises, and the protection architecture itself) rather than on action. Perhaps, as one participant suggested, the term ‘protection’ should be dropped in favour of talking about what is being done.

Despite the obstacles, suggestions did arise. **In terms of safe programming, it is easier to employ more traditional accountability approaches,** such as a quality standard that requires latrines to have security latches (although, it was noted, performance is lacking even on such ‘easy’ protection measures, and

donors regularly choose to fund more assistance over safer assistance). **With regard to protection activities that respond to violence, again the idea of an independent body(ies) or process was put forward,** aimed at the level of leadership and strategy. **Rather than focus on outcomes, the challenge would be to establish accountability for the quality of the strategy:** What is the analysis upon which the protection activities are based? What causal logic undergirds the strategy, leading from the activities of the humanitarian actors to some diminution of the threat of violence?

In terms of approaches that might hold promise, one example mentioned was the recent experience in CAR, where **a decision to declare the primacy of one protection issue led to a significant part of the ‘system’ acting in concert,** even though not by centrally planned design. There, many civilians were living in (or had been displaced to) attack-prone locations, so the prime objective was to prevent violence against civilians by relocating them. This clarity of purpose allowed agencies to examine and align their own programming and expertise in order to contribute to that goal. This approach increases the likelihood of many organisations working towards the same objective in relatively complementary fashion, without the necessity of an agreed grand plan. Actors were left free to address other protection issues as they saw fit, but at least held a shared objective to deal with one key problem. There is a **need to further explore protection as a collective outcome,** which raises the question of how collective accountability might contribute towards enhancing accountability for protection.

Session 4: Beyond institutional accountability: what about the collective?

⁵ *Setting Priorities to Protect Civilians in Armed Conflict*, p 3. HERE notes that while protection may not be well understood, clear obligations and standards have been established, the IASC

Principals’ statement on the centrality of protection (2013), the Professional Standards for Protection Work, ICRC (2009 and 2013 rev.), and the Sphere Handbook Protection Principles (2010).

Background: Accountability initiatives have overwhelmingly focused on the organisation, and in particular on (a) standards which ensure the quality of aid delivered or, more recently, (b) commitments and processes that yield an accounting to and being held to account by crisis-affected communities. While not new, ideas around collective accountability have coalesced in the WHS consultation process.

The notion of collective accountability rests upon two characteristics of the humanitarian response to crisis. The first is the degree to which the total response should be greater than the sum of the parts. Added one to another, the decisions and actions of the individual agencies should meet the most urgent needs across sectoral (e.g., WatSan, health, etc.) and geographic areas. It is that totality which gives meaning, or not, to the impartiality of humanitarian aid at the context level. Should we not, therefore, conduct an assessment of the collated aid efforts within a given context? How would such an accountability look from a pragmatic perspective? Would an independent body be required to make such an assessment? Should, and how could, crisis-affected communities participate in such an accountability exercise?

A second area of concern reflects the growth of collective action within humanitarian interventions, for instance through common decision-making platforms and inter-agency bodies (e.g., clusters, IASC) or where a crisis management system (command and control centre) has been empowered. As above, one key question is whether or not, and how, one might construct accountability at this level, especially given the difficulty in articulating clear obligations and responsibilities. Further, there is a major risk that such a framework dilutes accountability, and might allow individual actors to hide behind the decision of the collective.

Discussion and key messages

Collective coordination bodies such as clusters take decisions that have an impact on aid, for example deciding to prioritise certain sectors or geographic areas, or in setting a standard to be met within a given sector. While the organisations delivering aid will be seen as accountable to the recipient communities for their operations, accountability for fulfilling the cluster's decision seems more problematic. **In function, the cluster is accountable only to its members, like a secretariat, and even there this accountability probably does not include being held to account or sanctioned.**

Accountability for collective decisions did not generate further discussion, and the session shifted its focus to accountability for the ensemble, the collective of humanitarian action within a given context. Work within DFID, OCHA, and the UNSG's WHS report all point towards an increasing weight being placed on the collective endeavour. Even in this regard, participants highlighted a number of transversal considerations that merit considerably more attention:

- How might looking at the collective response – the big picture – affect the drive for more effective contextualisation?
- Aid recipients as a whole should also be seen as greater than the sum of their parts: so we need accountability not just to individuals but to local communities, institutions (civil society) and leadership.
- Accountability should include the *indirect* impact of humanitarian relief, such as the effect on local markets. That seems particularly conducive to a collective approach, yet poses difficult questions as to attribution.
- How might accountability at a collective level deal with local aspirations and needs not served by humanitarian action, such as development, good governance, or land rights?

- A tension exists between compliance with collective decisions and institutional independence. Might NGOs/agencies dodge responsibility in a scenario where they are 'following orders' issued by the collective?

Participants recognised that system-level accountability cannot function effectively if conceptualised as an exercise (e.g., such as an OPR) that weighs the performance of the components. **System-level accountability must be built into decision-making processes from the beginning.** For that to happen, as a start, the main donors need to rally behind the idea and the significant changes necessary for its implementation. For example, one prerequisite for this form of collective accountability is **being able to gather and merge and compare data from across a wide body of intervenors.** Easier said than done – the experience of one major INGO points to surprisingly stubborn complications at the technical level of collating data even within the same organisation. Another risk is that collective accountability represents yet another complexification, whereas the system desperately needs simplification.

Being able to collect and merge the necessary information is one obstacle; **employing that information to achieve change poses another challenge.** Once again, however, aid's systemic structure and incentives do not line up well with ambitions. For example, during the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone the NGO Ground Truth conducted a series of surveys of local populations (both aid recipients and not) and circulated the results to the international community. The experience showed that **local perspectives will not automatically spark change, though, without a person or platform to champion change.** Put more broadly, if mechanisms are put in place to gather and provide feedback, then there must be corresponding mechanisms for corrective action and response.

Just as feedback alone will not foster change, even agreement to change is insufficient. Even if collective responsibility has support at the conceptual level, the Transformative Agenda was already designed to usher in some of its elements, such as the utilisation of shared contextual analysis and overarching goals or objectives within a given humanitarian crisis. These ambitions appear to have been defeated by the architecture (e.g., the top-down or supply-sided structure of aid), inter-NGO/agency competitiveness and (dis)incentives in the ecosystem.

The risk of collective accountability leading to deferred or a diffusion of accountability prompts **the need for collective decisions or objectives to be further broken down, to allow for clearly defined responsibility at the level of individual agencies** (a model of progressive accountability). We must think of accountability not just in terms of performance, but in terms of the **legitimacy of the decision-making process** (i.e., a focus on the procedural functioning of the collective).

As one participant noted, waiting to build the perfect system is useless. In a system that functions more truly as a landscape or ecosystem of actors, **arriving at shared analysis, shared objectives or shared priorities will be dauntingly difficult, exacerbated by actors' relationships to resource allocation and the inescapable fact that contexts (i.e., needs) are neither static nor easily measured.** Collective accountability, hence, will have to be both politically nimble and rapid in its decision-making, which points to the significance of more **highly-skilled leadership.** Finally, our discussion did not adequately broach the troublesome issue of how to generate a collective analysis and a collective set of objectives/priorities for humanitarian intervention that is at once independent of the local political context and yet avoids becoming a foreign imposition. There are, after all, functioning governments in almost all humanitarian contexts, and **in the WHS process**

the ‘global south’ has made the formidable claim that their perception of their needs is often different from the West’s perception.

HERE’s Reflections on the Day

The day of discussion confirmed the fundamental necessity, promise and challenges of accountability. Our position begins by locating the concept within the core principle of humanity, in humanitarians giving account and being held to account by crisis-affected communities because human dignity dictates as much. HERE will thus work to strengthen accountability for its own sake. To improve and preserve the degree to which aid is both effective and humanitarian in character, HERE will also employ accountability as a means to strengthen the implementation of the humanitarian principles and the work of humanitarian protection. Accountability must therefore reflect a much broader set of stakeholders, from donors in the West to the local authorities to the people receiving the aid, and so must be based on an expanded set of relationships than at present. Any such work must be mindful of the risks that accountability consumes valuable resources, imposes heavy bureaucratic processes, or becomes a meaningless tick box exercise.

HERE aims to develop a position and strategy on accountability that reflects a number of factors raised during the day’s discussion:

- There is a danger that we ask too much of accountability, invest too much and for too long in developing an overarching ‘magic bullet’ of accountability that addresses the plethora of humanitarian ills, everything from poor quality latrines to the starkly inequitable power differentials between aid giver and crisis-affected people.
- Accountability can best be thought of as multi-pronged, as residing not in one

grand initiative but in multiple, diverse locations: donor reporting, agency/NGO trustees, internationally agreed standards, civil society, media, whistle-blowing and active the level of individuals (especially leadership), institutions and the collective body comprising any given intervention.

- We must better understand the culture, drivers, and structures of the aid ‘system’ in order to avoid idealised solutions that cannot be (and often have not been) implemented in practice. Accountability is a case in point – lack of neither effort nor intention is responsible for the gap between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk.’ Rather than wait for transformation of the ecosystem, we need an accountability that is better designed to avoid the underlying obstacles.
- We believe accountability can be improved by working within the humanitarian community, but that it should not and cannot be construed as a concession, granted by the powerful humanitarian machine to crisis-affected populations. HERE’s efforts will focus on the system that we know and are part of, yet we fully endorse the notion that others, working at the local level, must initiate and claim an accountability that is indigenous rather than foreign.

The struggle to develop and implement accountability frameworks which address the power differentials in aid attest to the formidable interests at play, and point decisively to the coming of age of an ‘old’ idea, the creation of accountability capacity that is independent. Evidently, HERE will need to further develop its thinking around the precise contours of such a body(ies) – composition, remit and methods – but is convinced that no institution can effectively monitor itself. One key issue is that of scope. Accountability efforts

must be better contoured to the different levels of humanitarian action, and to the specificities of its various forms (assistance and protection). HERE believes that being held accountable implies a clarification of responsibilities, and hence an approach focused on deliberations/decision-making in cases where humanitarians do not have control over the outcomes of their efforts. Protection work, in this regard, must not escape accountability simply because humanitarians cannot force states or armed actors to adhere to the law. Rather, we must shift our attention to the responsibility of humanitarian actors to challenge violence against civilians and abuses of power.

The day's discussions raised a number of interesting points around which to orient our research. First, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Helpful models exist in other fields and there are a number of measures within the humanitarian sector that can be taken apart and used (e.g., OPRs, RTEs). We are particularly intrigued by the approach in the human rights sector, where quasi-judicial bodies have provided guidance on the meaning of key obligations over time and through practice, rather than attempting to codify everything at the outset. An independent body might also be given responsibility for ensuring that whistle-blowers within humanitarian circles are protected, and feel confident in their ability to come forward.

HERE believes that the voluminous work behind the development of current accountability initiatives has insufficiently responded to the specific requirements of principled humanitarian action and protection work, or to 'soft' issues such as complementarity and contextualisation. As discussed in our report of the October Working Meeting, we believe it is possible to develop a number of standards that guide in part the implementation of the

principles, such as clearer 'red lines' and standards of best practice. As was recognised in the discussion, within certain boundaries (that require definition), the responsibility for humanitarian actors is to ensure that the principles play an active role in shaping both decisions and strategy, requiring a focus on processes and relationships rather than output.

On protection, we aim to address the role of humanitarian leadership – there must be more robust accountability where the humanitarian community sidesteps contentious yet crucial matters of protection. Humanitarian action cannot be reduced to the delivery of assistance.⁶ As was clear from the day's difficult session on protection, progress on accountability will require skilfully circumventing the conceptual confusion around protection itself.

In moving forward on accountability, HERE is further convinced of the need to expand accountability thinking beyond the heavy focus on outcomes. Right/wrong performance standards may be quite useful at the level of project activities but prove a poor fit for protection work and the application of the principles. There, we must recognise the dilemmas inherent in humanitarian action, and formulate an accountability that concentrates on the quality of decisions, strategy and causal logic of any given course of action.

Finally, and continuing in this vein, HERE would like to explore the potential of an accountability focused less on reports and judgements and more on a public exchange among stakeholders. The UK Parliamentary Question Time comes to mind. Can we develop an opportunity for donors, agencies, local authorities, media, communities, etc. to discuss and challenge the performance of the humanitarian community on a regular basis and within a structured format? The point is for

⁶ Further on this point, the push for accountability in terms of local engagement and even control raises little-discussed concerns specific to protection work,

where the involvement of local communities poses risks to the neutrality of the work and the security of the communities.

leaders to give an account of decisions and be subjected to a critical questioning; in other words, to debate dilemmas and difficult decisions rather than adjudicate or conceal them.

Accountability has all the potential to improve and even transform humanitarian action by strengthening its effectiveness, reducing its power differentials and safeguarding its identity and integrity. At the same time, the two decades spent developing and implementing actual accountability for humanitarian performance exemplifies a marked underperformance itself. We are concerned that the talk of accountability has also functioned to divert us from the work, and from the need for more far-ranging discussions of humanitarian responsibility. So we need a better 'walk' *and* we need a better 'talk'. The day's honest conversation on accountability needs repetition, one that strengthens rather than jeopardises donor support, both from institutions and the public. Accountability efforts suffer no shortage of good intentions, and yet fall victim to the power dynamics and political realities governing the ecosystem of humanitarian aid. HERE hence sees the call for accountability as two-sided, as taking aim at the system in its objectives and yet being system-proof in its methods.