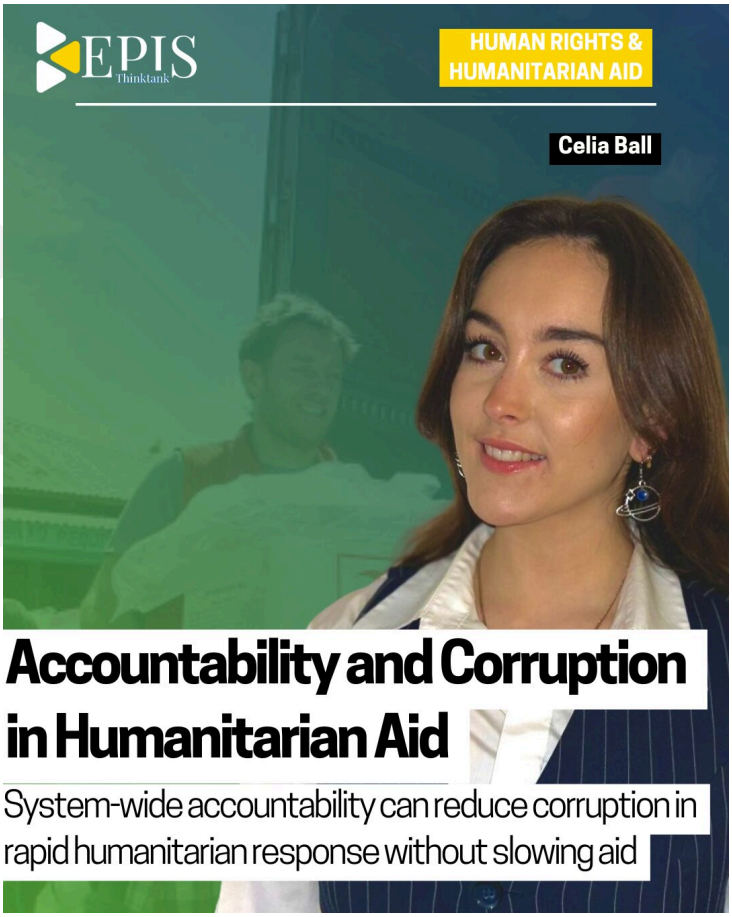
Accountability and Corruption in Humanitarian Aid

19 FEBRUARY 2026

Celia Ball



Accountability and Corruption in Humanitarian Crisis Response

Introduction

Humanitarian aid plays a vital role in crisis contexts such as armed conflict, natural disasters, and pandemics. In these situations, humanitarian actors are tasked with delivering lifesaving assistance under conditions of extreme urgency, insecurity, and uncertainty. While the moral imperative to save lives has long been the defining principle of humanitarian action, increasing attention has been paid to how aid is delivered, monitored, and held accountable. Accountability in humanitarian action presents itself as

a glaring issue, as it appears within sector reform agendas, underpins programme-level improvements, and is central to debates about the meaning and performance of humanitarianism. Only after the adoption of the Code of Conduct for humanitarian agencies in 1994 did accountability begin to receive systematic attention. This essay argues that effective accountability mechanisms, particularly those that operate at a system-wide level, are essential to mitigating corruption in rapid-response humanitarian operations, without undermining the imperative to act quickly.

The Anatomy of Corruption in Crisis Response

Corruption in humanitarian contexts can be understood across financial, political, and operational dimensions. It includes the misappropriation of funds, manipulation of beneficiary selection, abuse of power, and collusion between aid actors and local elites or authorities. As Hilhorst et al. (2021) argue, accountability was historically neglected, particularly in relation to affected populations; while upward accountability to donors and headquarters structures was well established, downward accountability to crisis-affected communities remained weak and underdeveloped. Acknowledging this distinction helps avoid overgeneralisation and highlights how prevailing accountability practices prioritised financial and reporting compliance over responsiveness to those receiving aid.

Humanitarian crises create what can be described as "high-risk environments" for corruption. Urgency, chaos, and weakened oversight structures reduce the ability of organisations to perform thorough checks and controls. The pressure to respond rapidly can result in fewer verifications and a slackening of standard procedures. There are high levels of risk that community members, authorities, and aid staff collude to exploit known weaknesses within individual organisations, and the humanitarian system overall (Henze, Grunewald and Parmer, 2020). These dynamics are particularly pronounced in large-scale emergencies where multiple actors operate simultaneously with limited coordination.

Common channels of corruption in crisis response include procurement fraud, favouritism in aid distribution, ghost beneficiaries, misuse of funds, and local elite capture (Mabece et al, 2022). The risk of misappropriation of aid during implementation is a highly considered concern. Practices such as distributing aid to non-eligible recipients, withholding assistance, or reducing distribution quantities while pocketing the difference are widespread. These practices are facilitated through the manipulation of registration processes, insertion of non-existing beneficiaries, or interference during distribution. Registered recipients may receive less aid than intended, no aid at all, or be forced to pay bribes. Pressure to include non-eligible individuals can come from local authorities, armed groups, host community members, or aid staff themselves, often involving collaboration among multiple stakeholders to conceal wrongdoing (Henze, Grunewald and Parmer, 2020).

Dissecting Accountability in Humanitarian Aid Corruption

History of Accountability

Since the 1990s, accountability in humanitarian aid has featured prominently on policy agendas. Despite this attention, for a prolonged period accountability remained largely limited to single-agency frameworks, with minimal emphasis on systemic or collective accountability. More recently, there has been a rhetorical shift towards recognising the importance of systemic accountability. However, this shift has not yet translated into widespread or consistent practice.

Gaps in Accountability

Despite widespread recognition of these risks, accountability mechanisms in humanitarian action often fail. As Hilhorst et al (2021) asserts, humanitarian organisations must be accountable and transparent to credibly uphold the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Yet accountability gaps persist at multiple levels. Beyond local dynamics, corrupt practices are also rooted in systemic conditions that underpin humanitarian aid delivery. There are continuous examples of government interference in the everyday realities of aid, mostly in displacement contexts, shortening humanitarian space. This is through withholding permissions and other means. Within this space, humanitarian operations are frequently shaped by pre-designed response plans, short funding cycles, and an overarching emphasis on rapid delivery. While these characteristics are intended to facilitate swift assistance to those in need, they can also compromise the quality of aid provided. The prioritisation of speed may result in reduced scrutiny and limited oversight, making it easier for corrupt practices to emerge unnoticed. Short funding cycles often lead to pressure for quick disbursement and implementation, which in turn diminishes the opportunity for thorough checks and balances. This environment fosters conditions where collusion can occur along the entire aid value chain, involving actors at multiple levels. This spans from procurement and logistics to local distribution. The combination of rigid, pre-designed plans and the drive to act quickly not only undermines delivery standards but also enables corruption schemes that exploit the vulnerabilities inherent in humanitarian response systems.

The Sphere ProjectThe Sphere Project, formally established in 1997, aimed to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance by defining a set of universal minimum standards (De Grasse, 2025). The aims of the Sphere Project are based on two integral views (Reed, 2017). Such beliefs include "those affected by disaster or conflict have a right to life and dignity and, therefore a right to assistance; and all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster or conflict" (Reed, 2017, pg.5). These standards have provided an important foundation for accountability and have significantly influenced how humanitarian aid is planned and delivered. By setting shared benchmarks, Sphere contributed to greater clarity around expectations of performance and responsibility within humanitarian action.

Inter-agency Coordination and Systemic AccountabilitySystemic accountability refers to humanitarian actors holding one another to account through formal and informal mechanisms, including inter-agency collaboration to provide communities with shared complaints and feedback systems. Its importance lies in the interconnected nature of humanitarian interventions, which rely on complex organisational structures, extended implementation chains, and are experienced by affected communities collectively rather than in isolation. While partial initiatives exist, such as inter-agency feedback mechanisms and pooled funding arrangements, these efforts remain insufficient to ensure robust systemic accountability. As Hilhorst et al. (2021) note, the reputation or failure of a single agency can undermine the credibility of the entire humanitarian sector. Nevertheless, progress remains slow, largely due to weak inter-agency coordination and the persistence of fragmented accountability practices.

Mechanisms for Integrity and Oversight

The Problem

This accountability challenge is closely linked to a persistent paradox in humanitarian action. The paradox entails that intended lifesaving aid can also create opportunities for corruption. Early warning systems, alerts, and needs assessments are exposed to medium to high levels of corruption risk. The provision of false or manipulated information is facilitated by inadequate triangulation, incomplete assessments, and insufficient coordination among humanitarian actors. Such weaknesses can distort decision-making at the earliest stages of response, shaping entire interventions around inaccurate or deliberately falsified data (Henze, Grunewald and Parmer, 2020). Donor fragmentation, weak monitoring systems, lack of transparency, and heavy reliance on implementing partners further complicate accountability. Trust deficits between aid organisations, communities, and authorities are both a cause and consequence of corruption. Moreover, programme relevance plays a crucial role, when assistance is perceived as inappropriate or irrelevant, communities may be more inclined to engage in or tolerate corrupt practices. Henze, Grunewald and Parmer (2020) highlight that corruption risks increase when time constraints reduce the ability to conduct due diligence and implement anti-fraud mechanisms, particularly in emergency aid contexts.

The tension between speed and scrutiny is therefore central. Fraudulent systems often embed themselves throughout the project cycle, demonstrating that corruption is not incidental but systemic. Addressing it requires sustained and creative approaches rather than isolated controls.

A New Hope?

Despite these challenges, several accountability mechanisms have shown promise. Third-party monitoring can enhance independence and credibility by providing external oversight, particularly in high-risk or inaccessible contexts, although its effectiveness may be limited by access constraints and reliance on donor-defined indicators. Digital tracking of funds and

supplies improves traceability and reduces opportunities for diversion, yet it depends heavily on technological infrastructure and can exclude low-connectivity settings. Beneficiary feedback loops strengthen downward accountability by enabling affected communities to report concerns and influence programming, but they are often undermined by power asymmetries, fear of retaliation, or weak follow-up by agencies. Whistleblower protections can deter corruption and abuse by encouraging internal reporting, though their impact is constrained when organisational cultures do not genuinely support transparency. Finally, open data initiatives promote transparency and collective learning by making information publicly accessible, but they remain limited by inconsistent data quality, lack of standardisation, and low uptake by practitioners (Tsutsui, 2025).

However, their effectiveness depends on contextual adaptation. Organisational policies and training often address corruption in general terms but fail to reflect local realities. Audits alone are insufficient, especially in complex environments where corrupt practices are sophisticated and deeply embedded. According to Henze, Grunewald, and Parmer, (2020), organisations that invest in dedicated, context-driven anti-fraud and risk management mechanisms have improved detection and response.

Local actors and affected populations play a critical role in ensuring accountability. Accountability and participation are closely related practices, as seen in participatory evaluations (Hilhorst et al, 2021). Yet accountability is often framed as a "gift" provided by agencies rather than as a right of affected people. Deeper accountability would acknowledge communities' right to influence decisions and shape assistance. At the same time, it would be cautionary that accountability technologies can also be used to control and discipline recipients, enhancing governmentality rather than empowering agency (Hilhorst et al, 2021). Participatory mechanisms can strengthen community control, but they are also vulnerable to manipulation by elites or facilitators, requiring careful design and oversight.

Adaptive accountability frameworks are therefore essential. These frameworks must balance flexibility with control, allowing rapid response while maintaining integrity and participation.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

To address corruption effectively, both organisational and systemic reforms are required. While individual organisations play a critical role in managing integrity risks and are increasingly aware of these challenges, strategic change and collective action are necessary to achieve lasting systemic impact. Key policy reforms should include coordinated donor transparency platforms, shared risk analysis, and harmonised reporting mechanisms to reduce fragmentation and improve oversight across the humanitarian system.

Investing in accountability capacity before humanitarian crises occur is particularly important given the current global political climate and the evolving nature of humanitarian emergencies. Humanitarian space is

increasingly shrinking as governments impose tighter controls on civil society organisations, restrict access to affected populations, and criminalise certain forms of humanitarian engagement (Mishra, 2025). At the same time, rising authoritarianism in many crisis-affected contexts reduces transparency and increases the risk of corruption, while also limiting avenues for redress for affected communities.

These pressures are compounded by donor fatigue, driven by protracted crises, overlapping emergencies, and competing global priorities. As funding becomes more constrained and politically conditional, humanitarian actors face stronger incentives to demonstrate effectiveness, integrity, and value for money. Without pre-existing accountability systems and capacities, organisations are more likely to rely on ad hoc or reactive measures during crises, which are often insufficient to prevent or address corruption and abuse.

Pre-crisis investment in accountability capacity, including staff training, inter-agency coordination mechanisms, and community-based feedback systems, enables humanitarian actors to respond more credibly and consistently when crises erupt. It also helps safeguard trust with affected populations and donors alike in environments where scrutiny is intensifying and tolerance for failure is diminishing. In this context, accountability should be understood not as a technical add-on, but as a core component of humanitarian preparedness and resilience.

Context-sensitive compliance models, longer and more flexible funding cycles, and incentives for inter-agency collaboration can strengthen oversight without undermining the speed of response (De Grasse, 2025). Ethical and operational imperatives must be aligned, recognising that integrity is not merely a compliance requirement but a core humanitarian principle. This requires continuous adaptation of control measures, routine information sharing, comparative analysis across organisations, and adequate resourcing to ensure these efforts are sustainable.

Overall, policy reforms should prioritise system-wide accountability while preserving the rapid response capacity essential to humanitarian action. Accountability mechanisms must be embedded throughout the project cycle, adequately resourced, and tailored to context, with investments made proactively rather than reactively (HADRI, 2025). Meaningful participation of affected communities should be recognised as a right, supported through trusted local feedback and reporting mechanisms. Strengthening integrity in this way is essential to maintaining trust, protecting vulnerable populations, and ensuring that humanitarian assistance reaches those it is intended to serve.

Conclusion

Accountability and rapid response are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, accountability is crucial for the legitimacy and effectiveness of humanitarian service provision (Hilhorst et al, 2021). Without it, humanitarian action risks losing the trust of affected populations and failing in its core

mission. Effectively tackling corruption calls for adopting a comprehensive, integrity-driven approach to humanitarian practice that acknowledges the interconnected roles of all stakeholders, values the contributions of local communities, and upholds the ethical principles underlying humanitarian work. Therefore, only through such systemic change can humanitarian aid fulfil its promise of saving lives without causing harm.

References

De Grasse, R. (2025). 'Ensuring Accountability in Humanitarian Efforts: Best Practices and Strategies', HumInet.

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Institute: HADRI. (2025). 'Humanitarian ethics in complex crises', HADRInsitute. Available at: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Institute. Enabling the global community to prepare, respond and recover from disaster. 18/12/25.

Henze, M., Grunewald, F. and Parmer, S. (2020). 'Operational review of Exposure to Corrupt Practices in Humanitarian Aid Implementation Mechanisms in the DRC', Adam Smith International.

Hilhorst, D., Melis, S., Mena, R., and Roanne van Voorst. (2021). 'Accountability in Humanitarian Action', Refugee Survey Quarterly: Oxford.

Mabece, S., Ojomo, E., Petherick, A. and Williams, S. (2022). 'Crisis responses and corruption in vulnerable sectors', Centre for the Study of Corruption: University of Sussex.

Mishra, V. (2025). 'Humanitarian system at breaking point as funding cuts force life-or-death choices', United Nations.

Reed, B. (2017). 'Disaster Response: The Sphere Project', Loughborough University. Page 5.

Tsutsui, M. (2025). 'A mirror and a map for the next generation of Accountability Mechanism', Accountability Counsel.

Accountability and Corruption in Humanitarian Crisis Response Visualization 1
Pathways to Integrity

Accountability and Corruption in Humanitarian Crisis Response Visualization 2
Policy Reforms