BETWEEN THE THEORY AND THE PRACTICE OF HUMANITARIAN ACCOUNTABILITY

"To have a practical application, any critique of the aid system needs to be located not in the ideal world, where disasters incur no victims, but in a historical and concrete reality"
(Brauman and Neuman 2014, 1)

by

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Abstract

This thesis situates the concept of humanitarian accountability within "a historical and concrete reality" (Brauman and Neuman 2014, 1). A preliminary investigation of the academic literature establishes humanitarian accountability as a matter of moral as well as practical concern for humanitarian organisations. Despite this it is also found that the concept of humanitarian accountability has been poorly defined, and research as to its practice is severely lacking. Through the investigation of two distinct humanitarian organisations this research therefore explores the degree to which theoretical standards for humanitarian accountability translate into practice under the multiple constraints faced within the humanitarian sector. The evidence drawn from a qualitative examination of the practice of humanitarian accountability at the World Food Programme and at Médecins Sans Frontières is discussed in a comparative analysis, which reveals that lacunae in the understanding of basic concepts engenders deficiencies in the practice of humanitarian accountability at both organisations. This demonstrates the need for continued academic research in the field of humanitarian aid in order for organisations to pursue an informed course of action and maintain the ability to place the vulnerable individuals in need of assistance at the heart of their endeavours.

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Definitions

Accountability : the quality or state of being accountable

especially : an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions

("Accountability")

Chapter I

Introduction

Every day the lives of hundreds of thousands of people around the world are thrown into turmoil as a result of conflict, natural disasters, political instability, and increasingly complex crises that present as a combination of all of these elements. For these individuals and the communities that they constitute, survival is dependent on their continued ability to access food, clean water, and shelter. It is here that the international humanitarian community steps in, responding to crises around the world in an attempt to alleviate human suffering; it is a prodigious task calling for a tremendous amount of financing, an extensive network, and an ability to intervene at the drop of a hat. In this highly complex landscape multiple organisations and multiple governments may be involved in the same crisis, responding to multiple needs and accounting to multiple sources. It is a sector in constant flux, influenced by international politics, local events, and numerous, often competing agendas (Duffield 2001). In this near permanent state of crisis the immediate pressure to save lives may sometimes appear to supersede the more abstract desire to roll out interventions based on robustly researched techniques, and with no true obligation to provide aid nor any legal framework codifying the provision of assistance, organisations are mostly left to their own devices. These organisations thus effectively become the judge and jury of their own interventions, introducing new methods of assistance as they see fit and adapting them as they go. In this scenario failures occasionally become lessons learned at the cost of the individuals the humanitarian system has set out to protect in the first place, leaving us to question "who guards the guardians?" (Reinisch 2001). This thesis essentially sets out to respond to this ethical dilemma by clarifying and refining the concept of accountability in the humanitarian setting in light of modern developments in the field, with due consideration for the numerous constraints under which the system is currently operating.

The humanitarian system of today bears little resemblance to that imagined by Henry Dunant in the late 19th century. Whilst the goal to aid and protect lives remains the same, the entire humanitarian landscape has developed a complexity that would have been hard to envision back then. It has grown alongside the maturing of the nation state and the expansion of international institutions; it has had to adapt to new forms of conflict, resulting in unseen levels of suffering, and it is confronted with ever more complex crises resulting from climate change and natural disasters. From the creation of the ICRC in 1846, the humanitarian system has now expanded into a vast web of governments, international organisations, and non-governmental organisations all vying to respond to those most in need. As the system has evolved so have the means of providing assistance, with interventions increasingly geared towards complex and long-term models of response. While humanitarian aid has traditionally sought to remain apolitical and distinct from the development sector in order to maintain its primary commitments to neutrality, impartiality, independence, and humanity, the growing number of protracted crises and the increasingly limited available funding has progressively pushed the aid sector to consider new approaches to become more efficient and deliver on long-term results. Simply delivering aid without a long-term vision has come to be seen as both inefficient and unsustainable, and a new paradigm for aid is emerging led by organisations that are committed to bridging the gap between aid and development (Harmer and Macrae 2004). While certain aid organisations remain firm in maintaining a role that is distinct from the pursuit of development objectives, the global trend is towards the integration of aid and development goals, particularly in the context of protracted crises.

As it stands today the humanitarian system is mostly faced with protracted crises resulting from a combination of factors, with the result being that close to 70% of aid is directed towards ongoing crises of 8 years and more. Meanwhile conflict, refugee flows, and natural disasters contribute every year to placing millions more people in need of assistance, and with annual funding falling consistently short of humanitarian needs the global gap between the ability to provide assistance and the level of assistance required is ever growing (Lattimer 2018). Under these circumstances the humanitarian system is stretched to its limit trying to fulfil its role to alleviate human suffering, and donors and aid agencies alike are

questioning the efficiency of the current system of aid distribution. It is within this context that humanitarian organisations are increasingly seeking to conduct operations with a long term perspective that will have a lasting impact. This is a result of the reality on the ground where protracted crises have resisted and at times even been amplified by short term fixes, but also perhaps even more crucially of the reality of funding. Indeed donors are demanding that their funds be spent more efficiently and with demonstrable and lasting results, pushing organisations to model their system for aid provision on traditional business models drawn from the private sector (Davis 2007). In a bid to continue saving lives in an evolving set of circumstances the humanitarian sector as a whole is taking on broader mandates and establishing new partnerships, rapidly moving beyond its original decree of neutrality and independence with repercussions that remain largely unexamined.

In today's complex humanitarian environment, accountability has become somewhat of a catch-all term, one of those feel-good ideas that cannot easily be opposed because it calls on an inexplicit feeling of morality whilst remaining vague enough in definition to avoid being pinned down and dissected (Bovens 2008). This thesis will argue that it is critical to clarify the idea of accountability in the humanitarian context, if the system is to continue to provide the highest level of assistance to those it has set out to protect. As this introduction has briefly highlighted, humanitarian organisations currently operate under multiple constraints, with donors, governments, beneficiaries, and continuously shifting geopolitics all exercising varying amounts of pressure on the system. In this context, organisations are frequently faced with the need to satisfy numerous competing agendas, and it may become difficult for them to maintain a primary focus on their beneficiaries. This is where the concept of accountability comes into play; not as a veneer used to deflect from the real issues, but as a tool to check the balance of power within the humanitarian system (Dubuet 2002).

The question of who (if anyone) is accountable to whom, and under what circumstances, is an issue of both ethical and practical concern for the humanitarian world, and yet surprisingly little research has been devoted to it. In light of the current state of the humanitarian system, this thesis seeks to contribute to this gap in knowledge by answering the following question:

To what extent do theoretical standards for humanitarian accountability translate into practice at the organisational level?

The body of this work will be set out across four sections, in which the first will provide a review of the relevant academic literature and will outline the research methodology employed, the third will consist of two case studies, and the fourth and final chapter will form the discussion and conclusion.

Historical context: towards the progressive integration of humanitarian aid and humanitarian development

The evolution of the field of humanitarian aid over the past few decades forms the context within which the question at the heart of this thesis has arisen. This historical perspective on the field is important in explaining how humanitarian standards have evolved and accountability has come to emerge as a form of minimum standard of performance in what has always been a vastly unregulated field of practice. Traditionally humanitarian aid and development aid have remained distinct fields of action, separated ethically and institutionally with the former focused on the provision of assistance intended to save lives in the immediate aftermath of a crisis while the latter focuses on longer term structural development goals. The provision of aid has historically been based upon the principles of neutrality, impartiality, humanity, and independence while steering clear of politics in order to maximise access to populations in crisis, whilst the longer-term perspective of development aid has always required a more politicised form of involvement (Fox 2001). There is a very apparent theoretical clash between these approaches, and yet the boundaries between the two sectors have become increasingly blurred over the past decades in line with the evolution of global politics and crises. Indeed the principles of neutrality and impartiality which are in direct contradiction with any form of political involvement were established historically to allow organisations to demonstrate their non-partisan stance and provide aid to non-combatants on either side of a given conflict. This is humanitarian action in its most primary form, as it was conceived in response to the late 19th and early 20th century inter-state conflicts and legally supported by the conventions of international humanitarian law (Nan 2010). However crises have since evolved in ways that would have no doubt seemed unimaginable to the actors present at the time of the birth of humanitarian action, and humanitarian emergencies tend to now be far more extensive, long lasting, and complex than the ones that humanitarian action was originally designed to deal with (Nascimiento 2015). Crises are now frequently caused and exacerbated by a combination of elements including

population displacement, climate emergencies, and conflict, and in this context a strict adherence to the original principles of humanitarian aid risks in fact fueling the very issues that it intends to resolve (Duffield, Mark, Joanna Macrae, and Devon Curtis 2001).

"A new humanitarianism" (Fox 2001)

In light of these changes, humanitarian organisations have found themselves forced to reconsider their involvement on the ground and the nature of the assistance that they provide (Buchanan-Smith and Maxwell 1994). In order to avoid fuelling the humanitarian crises that they set out to resolve, aid organisations are increasingly merging their work with development objectives, assessing the long-term impact of their interventions and determining when and where assistance should perhaps be withdrawn (Rieff 2002). From the perspective of the populations in need of assistance this evolution towards a more sustainable form of aid has taken on two forms. The first has been the development of more extensive partnerships between humanitarian organisations and the private sector in order to develop new methods of providing aid, with the onus being increasingly placed on affected communities to take an active role in their recovery in the hope of achieving long term solutions to crises ("Scale Of Humanitarian Crises Demands Partnerships With Private Sector To Deliver Lasting Solutions" 2020). The other change connected to the merging of development objectives with aid has been the promotion of a human rights-based approach to assistance, which is part of the basis upon which accountability frameworks have been developed ("HRBA Portal"). This slow paradigm change is in essence the emergence of what has sometimes been called the "new humanitarianism" (Fox 2001). The theoretical and practical implications of this shift are central to this thesis. On the one hand the emergence of accountability frameworks based on a human rights narrative provide a theoretic and academic backbone to what has largely been an under-regulated and an understudied field of research (Lohne and Sandvick 2017 & Sandvick et al 2014). On the other hand the changing patterns in delivering aid and the growing responsibility being placed on the beneficiaries of assistance constitute the changing reality against which to examine the practical relevance of these accountability frameworks. The following chapter will thus start

with examining in further detail the origins of the theory and practice of accountability, before delving into the literature surrounding the issue of accountability as it currently stands within the field of humanitarian aid. Following this in-depth review of existing academic literature and a chapter outlining the research methodology, the focus will be on assessing to what extent humanitarian accountability standards translate into practice under changing structures of aid delivery.

Chapter II: Literature review and Methodology

Literature review

The following chapters consist in a literature review followed by two case studies to produce a suitably robust academic analysis of the posed research question. Research is driven by trends, and studies focusing on humanitarian issues are no exception. This can be seen in the recent flurry of literature on the question of accountability in humanitarian aid, a concept which is a relative newcomer to the scene. However, one of the first difficulties encountered in the research conducted for this thesis is the fact that very little of this literature meets the rigorous standards of academic research. This is an issue which is not specific to the subject of accountability, but apparent across the humanitarian field. Indeed, most research in the humanitarian domain is conducted with a strong eye on policy making, and little attention is dedicated to the scholarly research value of specific issues within the field (Barnett 2005). Robust academic research is thus conspicuously lacking across various issues specific to the humanitarian field, resulting in a dearth of knowledge that is unfavourable to scholars and practitioners alike. In order to overcome at least some of the lacunae in the literature on humanitarian accountability, this review draws upon research conducted in the related field of political science, where the question of public accountability has been extensively studied. While the concept of public accountability as it is formulated within political science research cannot be wholly assimilated to that of accountability within the humanitarian field, this thesis will endeavour to show that it provides a critical frame of reference against which to assess the existing research on humanitarian accountability. Indeed while specific contextual elements may differ, it is possible to draw upon certain general reflections on public accountability and the relationships it encompasses to understand how current standards for humanitarian accountability are defined and assessed. This literature review will thus take a broad, interdisciplinary approach to existing research on the concept of accountability in order to reach a comprehensive overview of the theory on humanitarian accountability.

The theory of accountability in political science

    In the field of democratic governance public accountability is a tool of democratic control, by ways of which citizens who have voluntarily given up a certain degree of their individual sovereignty maintain a level of control over the state to whom they have surrendered their power. It is characteristic of a certain type of social relationship between two entities, in which "an actor feels an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct to some significant other" (Bovens, Schillemans, and Goodin 2014, 184). Democratic governance is thus an implicit premise to public accountability since repressive regimes, as their name suggests, rely on repression more than on voluntary consent to maintain power over their population (Adsera, Boix and Payne 2003). Indeed the idea of accountability relates to the very foundation of democratic rule, whereby there is a voluntary submission of power both on behalf of the government and of its citizens. Citizens submit certain powers to their government, in exchange for which the government provides certain services. In addition the government submits itself to a certain degree of supervision, through which citizens can ensure that it is fulfilling its duty. The notion of public accountability is thus central to this democratic relationship. However this is not to say that democratic governance necessarily goes hand in hand with public accountability; public accountability is a product of democratic governance, but democratic governance does not automatically engender public accountability. Simply evoking public accountability does not bring it into being, for it to be truly operational, authors agree on a minimum of three components (Bovens, Schillemans, and Goodin 2014). First is the sense of obligation felt by the government to inform its citizens about its behaviour and in certain cases justify its performance; this obligation does not have to be legally formalised in order for it to be effective. Second there must be a possibility for citizens to exchange with their government and question their actions and the information that it has provided. Finally, public accountability requires some form of enforcement mechanism whereby negative performance can be penalised; here again, as with the sense of obligation, this does not have to be a formal mechanism to be effective. Bovens cites the example of politicians having to publicly repent for wrongdoing, which may potentially be detrimental to the public image

upon which they rely (Bovens, Schillemans, and 'T. Hart 2008). At the core of public accountability is access to information; without access to timely and sufficient information about government performance there is little possibility for citizens to question it or to enforce formal or informal sanctions. Access to information alone however is clearly insufficient to constitute accountability (Cameron 2004). It is a fundamental piece of the puzzle, but without concomitant possibilities for questioning and contestation it remains little more than futile knowledge.

Varying relationships of public accountability

The concept of public accountability as it relates to a government being accountable to its citizens is based on a reasonably straightforward relationship in which the locus of power is quite clearly defined; this can be referred to as a vertical accountability relationship. However not all forms of accountability are the same, as they may emerge out of a variety of relationships and power differentials. A second commonly defined accountability relationship is one in which there is no clearly defined power centre, or in other words two centres of equivalent power where both sides can be viewed more or less as equals; this is horizontal accountability and can apply to the relationship governing two sets of government institutions for example. Lührmann, Marquardt, and Mechkova expand upon these spatial understandings of public accountability by describing a third kind of potential relationship. They expand upon the notion of diagonal accountability, which they view as a product of the relationship between government institutions and civil society. In their view civil society does not have a formal capacity to directly impact upon the performance of a government but can nonetheless reach it through informal means, thus resulting in a somewhat looser yet still effective form of accountability (2017, 6-8). This conceptualisation of a different kind of accountability relationship is interesting to consider in view of the object of this research. The concept of vertical accountability described by the above mentioned authors refers to a specific relationship in the public arena, namely that between a government and a broadly defined civil society. It thus remains a specific angle of approach

to the more general concept of public accountability, and cannot be indiscriminately applied to understanding accountability relationships in different fields of study. This being said it remains nonetheless a pertinent viewpoint from which to further understand potential accountability relationships within the field of humanitarian aid. The notion of diagonal accountability explicates the idea that in a situation where a given entity X is acting in a way that impacts upon a second given entity Y, X can be held to a certain degree accountable for its actions by Y on account of their common humanity even though Y does not have what might be considered the formal means to do so. This idea is particularly relevant to the field of humanitarian aid, in which relationships are defined by immense power imbalances, a lack of formal regulatory structures, and one on one relationships between humanitarian worker and beneficiary. In such a context humanitarian accountability exists where the humanitarian worker chooses to hold herself accountable. Humanitarian accountability is clearly not borne of formal account holding mechanisms, nor can it be assessed against the same standards as an area in which such mechanisms exist. The theory of diagonal accountability is therefore helpful in that it provides some insight into ways in which accountability may emerge from less formal channels.

The theory of accountability in the field of humanitarian aid

Set against the backdrop of the theory of public accountability, humanitarian accountability may seem like little more than feeble posturing, a buzzword used to generate enthusiasm and support but with little measurable impact or theoretical content. It is certainly evident when browsing the academic literature that while public accountability has been extensively researched and debated, humanitarian accountability has drawn far less attention on behalf of academics than it has on behalf of policy makers within the field (Manilla Arroyo 2014). This being said it certainly remains possible to gain an extensive appreciation of the current state of the theory of humanitarian accountability, particularly when approaching academic research from a historical perspective. It is necessary here to recall the evolution of the field of humanitarian aid recounted in the first chapter of this

research; in particular the broad shift that occurred across the field whereby a large number of humanitarian organisations have slowly begun to integrate more development style objectives in their aid operations. Understanding this ideological shift is crucial to seeing not only how the theory of humanitarian accountability has come to emerge as an academic and practical concern within the field, but also to seeing how the historical background of the idea has shaped its conceptual outlines. Indeed in moving from a philosophy of conducting apolitical, neutral, and short term interventions to an approach that integrates more sustainable long term objectives humanitarian organisations have modified their responsibilities and helped redesign the complex web of power relations that shape the humanitarian landscape. These changes are central to how the practice of humanitarian accountability has been developed and the theory can best be understood.

Humanitarian accountability as a conceptual outcome of contemporary evolutions within the field

With the shift in humanitarianism that began following the crises of the early nineties the purpose and motivation for distributing aid has evolved, as has the field's perspective on the relationship between organisations and the beneficiaries in need of their assistance. With the realisation that humanitarian assistance as it was being deployed could potentially do more harm than good came the idea that involvement may need to be implemented on a longer timescale in order to be effective, and may require a much deeper engagement than that permitted within the strict standards of neutrality, impartiality, and independence as they were originally conceived (Fox 2001 and Barnett 2005). This has entailed not only rethinking the means and methods of humanitarian engagement, but has also resulted in a far larger onus being placed upon the mobilisation of the response capacity of local communities being assisted (Hilhorst 2018). This increasingly complex and drawn out form of humanitarian engagement and its numerous repercussions has generated a growing demand for transparency and accountability of humanitarian action from the perspective of donors and beneficiaries alike. This stems from a requirement for humanitarian action to prove its effectiveness, but also from the view that "humanitarian organisations have

obligations, particularly towards those they aim to help" (Stobbaerts and de Torrente 2008, 46). This essentially formulates the idea that beneficiaries are more than passive recipients of whatever assistance is sent their way and that humanitarian organisations have a responsibility to render themselves accountable to those they profess to assist. The historical evolution of the humanitarian sector is inextricably linked to the emergence of the concept of humanitarian accountability, and it is indicative as to the moral imperative upon which it is built. This in turn is crucial in understanding how and why humanitarian accountability is defined and assessed.

Common criteria for defining humanitarian accountability identified within the literature

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

"Accountability is the process through which an organization actively creates, and formally structures, balanced relationships with its diverse stakeholders... with a view to continuously improve the organization's delivery against its mission." One World Trust (London, United Kingdom)

As cited in Tan and von Schreeb 2015, 266

The definitions of humanitarian accountability are as abundant as the number of organisations involved in the humanitarian domain. However as it has been previously outlined, the concept has not necessarily benefited from the same level of academic scrutiny as the concept of public accountability. As a result it is possible to identify a proliferation of definitions and uses of the term 'humanitarian accountability', often employed more as a buzzword than as an accurately defined theoretical concept (Tan and Von Schreeb 2015). The conceptual vagueness that the casual use of buzzwords engenders is amplified by the fact that the term does not directly translate outside of english, an issue that is particularly

problematic given the international context within which it is employed (Tan and von Schreeb 2015, 268). For example in french the term accountability is most commonly translated as "responsabilité", in other words responsibility. However when unpacking the idea of accountability it becomes apparent that responsibility is only one aspect of the concept rather than an analogous term. Similarly the ideas of transparency, effectiveness, and participation are sometimes used interchangeably in reference to the idea of humanitarian accountability, when here again these are simply aspects of what constitutes a conceptual whole (Klein-Kelly 2018). Indeed humanitarian accountability is best understood as a compound concept which is made up of varying proportions of these three principal components. The first of these is the element of responsibility, whereby an organisation not only takes responsibility for its actions, good or bad, but also allows itself to be held responsible for them. Second is the element of effectiveness, whereby actions must be in some way measurable in order to be assessed. Finally is the element of transparency, whereby the processes of responsibility and effectiveness *must be demonstrable externally* in order to constitute a process of accountability (Klein-Kelly 2018). Thus the ideas of responsibility, effectiveness, transparency, each of these elements reflect an aspect of what has come to be understood as constitutive of humanitarian accountability. The idea of transparency however is identified as the pivotal element in the process. While certain definitions retain an even greater number of elements, the apparent consensus is that a blend of responsibility, effectiveness, and transparency reflects the minimum standard by which humanitarian accountability may be defined (Tan and Von Schreeb 2015).

In essence the three basic elements of responsibility, effectiveness, and transparency serve to define the idea of humanitarian accountability in relation to the questions of "to whom, for what, why, and how to demonstrate it". The question posed by Klein-Kelly of "why?" accountability is instrumental in uncovering the roots of the idea and consequently understanding its theoretical core (Klein-Kelly 2018, 291). It is perhaps surprising that throughout the literature this question is for the most part only addressed in a very indirect manner, if at all; it seems to be mostly assumed that humanitarian accountability ought to be, and therefore is. However, questioning why the concept has come to be seen as necessary in the first place is essential in understanding the grounding of the core of the theory. Indeed

the rationale of humanitarian accountability is articulated as much around a moral action and ethical duty to 'do good' as it is around a more pragmatic necessity to show continued operational success. This bivalent rationale goes both to the very raison d'être of humanitarianism, which can be encapsulated in the moral imperative to alleviate human suffering, and also to the very concrete reality of humanitarian organisations having to continuously demonstrate success in order to continue receiving financial support and moral approval for their operations. In other words it is as much of a practical as it is a moral concern within the humanitarian field (Ebrahim 2003). Not only why, but also for whom accountability is held is an important question to consider when establishing conceptual boundaries. There is a tendency within the literature to draw a neat distinction between the accountability humanitarian organisations hold for their donors and the accountability that they hold for the beneficiaries of their actions; these are respectively termed upwards and downwards accountability according to the perceived power differential to which they apply (Raynard 2000). It would be erroneous to consider the one without the other, though there has been a disproportionate amount of focus placed upon upwards accountability until now (O'Dwyer and Unerman 2010). Indeed as it is indicated in the definition offered by One World Trust humanitarian accountability is about "balanced relationships with its diverse stakeholders", with diverse stakeholders here meaning donors and beneficiaries. This highlights the fact that humanitarian accountability cannot be understood in terms of a single type of relationship, as in the case of the accountability owed by a government to its citizens, but must rather be viewed relative to the network of relationships that are constitutive of humanitarian action. The power differentials within the field are certainly very real, and in this sense upward accountability is a more straightforward process than that of downward accountability. Bluntly put, donors are the ones holding the purse strings and certainly have the power to require and enforce accountability on behalf of the organisations to which they provide their support. On the flip side, beneficiaries by nature of their situation do not hold anywhere close to a comparable amount of power (Tan and Von Schreeb 2015). The very essence of humanitarian accountability is that organisations choose to hold themselves accountable; in this sense it should therefore not be necessary for beneficiaries to have the power to enforce accountability. As the theory of public accountability has shown the means for downwards accountability to be genuine in such an

uneven situation do exist, and are essential to consider in tandem with those of upwards accountability in order to understand the system of humanitarian accountability as a whole. Indeed in such a complex environment humanitarian accountability does not exist independently of each stakeholder, but rather exists somewhere at the point of equilibrium where the requirements of all stakeholders meet. The terms of why and to whom humanitarian accountability is articulated are thus the foundation upon which the concept can be further defined.

Implementation of humanitarian accountability

The previous paragraphs have concerned themselves with the conceptual essence of humanitarian accountability as it has been described throughout the literature; this, in a way, may be seen as the soul of the matter. What then of the body? How does academia consider that the essence of humanitarian accountability can be articulated into practice? This practical articulation of humanitarian accountability is best explained in light of the existing mechanisms whereby it is brought into being as described within the literature. Ebrahim identifies a few key mechanisms in the specific case of NGOs, namely "reports and disclosure statements, performance assessments and evaluations, participation, self-regulation, social audits" (Ebrahim 2003, 815). Of these, reporting on results and participatory mechanisms are the principal methods that come back throughout the literature (Klein-Kelly 2018 and Raynard 2000). The need to report on results has been particularly emphasised across humanitarian organisations, with a disproportionate focus on demonstrating financial efficiency versus value and quality of action. This is reflective of the relative importance granted to demonstrating upwards accountability rather than downwards accountability (Ebrahim 2003). Mechanisms of downwards accountability meanwhile remain woefully understudied and undervalued, in spite of their utility in achieving a balanced outlook on the practice of humanitarian accountability. The principal tool of downwards accountability identified throughout the literature is that of participation, or participatory mechanisms. For organisations this means engaging "in downward accountability processes with their

beneficiaries so that they can become aware of, and assess how responsive they are to, the core needs of these beneficiaries" (O'Dwyer and Unerman 2010, 4). The key element here is that of responsiveness. Indeed if participation is understood merely as an organisation distributing information in a form of self sufficient monologue, it does not fulfill its role in establishing accountability. The ability of beneficiaries to access information is certainly a key component of establishing humanitarian accountability, however much as in the case of public accountability it is insufficient if beneficiaries do not have the attendant ability to question and contest what is being shared with them. The issue comes back to the immense power differential that separates organisations giving aid from those receiving it. As has been clarified in the theory of public accountability, account holding mechanisms do not necessarily have to be formal in order to be effective; in a situation of great power imbalance accountability emerges through informal channels which are nonetheless rooted in certain key principles, or basic elements. In the case of humanitarian accountability these are the elements of transparency, effectiveness, and responsibility, and the identified mechanisms of implementation are grounded in these principles. This comprehensive overview of the current state of academic research on the question of humanitarian accountability has shown that its system of ethics may be firmly anchored in academic analysis. However as far as the implementation of humanitarian accountability goes there is a significant dearth in knowledge as to the variety of mechanisms that exist and more importantly their relevance in establishing accountability. The following methodology section will outline how this thesis addresses this gap in the literature.

Methodology

This thesis is an investigation into theory and translation of humanitarian accountability into organisational practice. In doing so it seeks to contribute to academic knowledge within the humanitarian field, where true academic research that is not policy orientated appears lacking. To this end a qualitative research design has been determined to be the most appropriate for the collection of information relevant to the analysis. The nature of the question being studied does not lend itself well to quantitative, statistical analysis. Indeed as it has been outlined throughout the literature review, the concept of accountability is not one that can be accurately measured in numerical data. A qualitative approach based upon a comparative case study however allows for the acquisition of "concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world subject" ("How To Do A Case Study Examples And Methods" 2020). This is the most relevant method available in light of the research question being addressed in this thesis. The review of academic literature conducted in Chapter II has provided a solid theoretical background to understand the fundamental components of humanitarian accountability for the purpose of this research. The following step is therefore to choose case studies that are highly relevant to the problem at hand and allow for an in-depth exploration of humanitarian accountability in practice. The stated research question is:

> To what extent do theoretical standards for humanitarian accountability translate into practice at the organisational level?

A case study relevant to this question must therefore consist of an organisation with a stated objective to deliver humanitarian assistance, and who explicitly engages with the concept of humanitarian accountability. Humanitarian organisations were therefore screened for their apparent engagement with the subject of humanitarian accountability, and for their relative prominence within the field. The choice was made to focus on organisations that are considered leaders within the field, on the assumption that they have both the motivation and the means to engage with the practice of humanitarian

accountability. A second equally important point is that larger organisations tend to make access to essential documents such as reports and governing structures open to the public, a key requirement for this research. A further consideration is that the humanitarian field is vast, and a number of very different organisations operate within its boundaries. For the purpose of this research it was decided to focus upon two of the main actors within the field, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs). Private sector organisations operating with a humanitarian purpose were excluded from the analysis on the basis that their means and motivations are assumed to diverge too much from those of NGOs and IGOs to provide a suitable point of comparison. NGOs and IGOs meanwhile are assumed to operate under sufficiently different constraints so as to make a comparison valuable, while not diverging so much as to make it irrelevant. The final decision was therefore made to select one IGO and one NGO based upon the criteria of size, relative influence, and apparent engagement with the theme of humanitarian accountability.

For each case study a careful review of grey literature consisting mainly of organisational reports and policy documents relevant to understanding their individual guidelines and standards with regards to humanitarian accountability was conducted. This was then followed by a review of grey literature relevant to their actual practice of accountability, and included internal reports and blogs. Finally a comparative analysis of these findings was conducted to answer whether and how humanitarian accountability emerges within the practices of these organisations. The literature review conducted in this chapter has shown that there is a dearth in academic knowledge on the question of humanitarian accountability, particularly with regards to the mechanisms whereby it is brought into practice. This research strives to respond to this need for further understanding on this issue by carefully examining the practice of two organisations operating under different constraints, and analysing it in light of the theoretical framework that has been developed in the previous section. The theory shows that the notion of humanitarian accountability is grounded in the ethical foundation of the humanitarian endeavour, providing a compelling reason for why it is a subject of practical and academic interest. However the reality of the humanitarian endeavour is that organisations face multiple, frequently conflicting constraints; any research must therefore be grounded in the reality of

these conditions if it is to be of any value. This thesis is motivated by this fundamental need to continuously strive to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the humanitarian sphere. Without this there is a significant risk that theory may diverge so far from reality so as to become a purely rhetorical exercise, while practice may devolve into a simple box checking exercise with no solid theoretical grounding.

Chapter III: The practice of humanitarian accountability

A brief overview of system wide standards and principles on humanitarian accountability

Over the past few decades and ever since accountability has emerged as a cross-cutting theme throughout the humanitarian sector, there have been various attempts at establishing a system wide standard to which all organisations may refer. This has often been hindered by the very nature of the humanitarian system, in which organisations are not legally bound to follow any given standard, but also by what has at times been perceived as diverging interests between different types of humanitarian organisations. As a result multiple standards and commitments have evolved over the years, catering to the individual inclinations of those at the helm. These have included most notably the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership Standard in Accountability and Quality Management and the Sphere Handbook on minimum standards, both of which were consolidated within the Core Humanitarian Standard in 2014 (Alliance C.H.S 2014, Humanitarian Accountability Partnership 2010 and Sphere Association 2018). These projects have attempted to outline a certain minimum of system wide standards to which humanitarian organisations may choose to adhere, and indeed various organisations do refer to these projects as providing guidelines for the development of their own organisational strategy. There is a clear lack of clarity and consensus among organisations over which standard to use, with equal reference being made to each. What this does make quite clear is that these various projects appear to function more as aspirational guidelines than as functional standards that can be directly operationalised by organisations, who must each adhere to numerous and frequently differing constraints. Examining these system wide projects is therefore insufficient in understanding the enactment of humanitarian accountability, which is only truly operationalised at the level of individual organisations. It does however allow for a deeper insight into the global matrix upon which the practice of humanitarian accountability has evolved.

Case study I - The World Food Programme: The practice of humanitarian accountability within an IGO

Operational context

      The World Food Programme (WFP) is one of the largest humanitarian IGOs, providing food assistance around the world. Established in the early 1960s by the UN, WFP is now the largest humanitarian organisation with a mandate to fight hunger ("Overview" 2020). As an IGO WFP's mandate is determined externally and falls in line with the broader humanitarian agenda as it is designed within the sphere of the UN. The organisation is also bound to follow numerous formal processes that are externally elaborated to ensure that it conforms to UN requirements. Government funding accounts for a majority of WFP's financial support, followed by corporate donations. Private, individual donations meanwhile only account for a small amount of funding ("Funding and Donors"). The nature of this institutional and financial arrangement clearly indicates that WFP operates under certain political constraints that do not affect NGOs in the same way. WFP first intervened in response to crises, however already in these early stages the organisation also implemented development programmes. Over the years and with the evolution of crises and global needs the organisation's focus has slowly shifted from "food aid" to "food assistance", epitomising the dissolution of the aid/development divide that is being pushed by the UN in its so-called global agenda for sustainable development. Thus under UN stewardship WFP has adopted a broad approach to food assistance, introducing the distribution of cash or vouchers as a complement or an alternative to the delivery of aid in-kind ("History" 2020). The organisation's intention is to grant more power to the beneficiaries of its assistance by enabling them to make decisions as to what their needs are, but in doing so it is also shifting the burden of responsibility for success onto already vulnerable populations that it aims to assist (Tong 2004). It is within the context of these varying constraints and operational choices that the practice of humanitarian accountability at WFP must be examined.

Strategy for humanitarian accountability at the WFP

        The practice of humanitarian accountability at the WFP transpires as a purely technical standard, the implementation of which is determined by a number of strategy and policy documents. The variety and complexity of these documents is reflective of the organisation's nature as an IGO, with documents often having to be redrafted to fall in line with evolving external policies. Since the purpose of this section is to develop a better understanding of the practice of humanitarian accountability at WFP, it is important to briefly outline the key elements set forth in each of these documents which have a bearing upon this matter. Since 2017 the organisational strategy of the WFP has been laid out in the Strategic Plan, a document outlining the organisation's strategy for 2017-2021 and aligning itself with the SDGs and the broader UN development agenda (World Food Programme 2017). This Strategic Plan is underpinned by the Corporate Results Framework and the Financial Framework, outlining the assessment of management performance and the measurement of financial effectiveness. These three documents form the basis for the WFP's strategy as an organisation, and accountability is identified throughout as a cross-cutting theme. In addition a fourth strategy document specifically addresses the WFP's Strategy for Protection and Accountability to Affected People (World Food Programme 2019). Each of these documents has been examined in turn in order to create a full outline of the practice of humanitarian accountability at the WFP.

The Strategic Plan 2017-2021:

        The WFP Strategic Plan 2017-2021 outlines the organisation's strategy to fulfill its mandate and align with the UN's development agenda; it is intended as an overarching document broadly highlighting the key objectives and policy of the organisation. The strategy explicitly situates the organisation's work and mandate at the nexus of development and aid, with a strong emphasis on focusing assistance on "the people in greatest need" (World Food Programme 2017, 2). Accountability to affected populations is referred to

throughout the document, as a commitment to be met and integrated across WFP operations. Thus "WFP is committed to greater transparency, participation of and accountability to affected populations and acting in concert with other actors, on the basis of its core strengths, to achieve collective results" (World Food Programme 2017, 10-11). This statement can also be found phrased as "In addition to its commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, WFP will work to integrate humanitarian protection concerns and accountability to affected populations in all its activities" (World Food Programme 2017, 25). These statements serve two purposes. The first serves to place the issue of accountability to affected populations at WFP in relation to the organisation's engagement with other humanitarian actors; the second places the issue in the same category as the organisation's commitment to "gender equality and women empowerment". These are important rhetorical devices used to underline the organisation's approach to accountability to affected populations.

Finally the strategic document defines the WFP's understanding of accountability to affected populations. Thus as stated on page 50 of the 2017-2021 Strategic Plan: "WFP is accountable to affected populations, both for achieving results in addressing hunger and for the manner in which programmes are implemented. This requirement calls for the systematic and meaningful engagement of people, including the most marginalized, in all stages of the project cycle, to ensure that people have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. Basing programmes on feedback from affected communities helps to ensure that needs are correctly identified and understood and that programmes are modified as appropriate, ultimately resulting in more effective programmes" (World Food Programme 2017, 50). In this definition WFP renders itself accountable to its beneficiaries for delivering on its commitment to alleviate hunger as well as for the means by which it strives to deliver upon this commitment. Crucially however WFP reduces the attainment of these aspirations to a simple technical measure, the integration of feedback from its beneficiaries into programme design and delivery. In doing so WFP effectively limits the scope of its commitment to accountability to a single technical standard, a point revealed in the literature to be no more than one element in a much more complex whole.

The Corporate Results Framework

The Corporate Results Framework of the WFP outlines the means by which the organisation can measure its performance. It is therefore an important part of the organisation's practice of humanitarian accountability, as the Strategic Plan has revealed that the organisation views it as an essentially technical standard. As stated within the document, the performance measures have been elaborated with an eye on "meeting the highest standards of accountability and transparency" (Executive Board "Revised" 2018, 2). Under the section for cross-cutting indicators, WFP indicates the following goal and associated indicators for accountability:

C.1 Affected populations are able to hold WFP and partners accountable for meeting their hunger needs in a manner that reflects their views and preferences
Mandatory: All indicators are required for interventions with household transfers.
• Proportion of assisted people informed about the programme • Proportion of activities for which beneficiary feedback is documented, analysed and integrated into programme improvements

(Executive Board "Revised" 2018, 20)

The practice of humanitarian accountability at WFP is thus essentially a technical standard, whereby the organisation must on the one hand ensure that all beneficiaries are adequately informed about the programme from which they are receiving assistance, and on the other hand it must ensure that any feedback given by beneficiaries is taken into account and acted upon as required. This is the element of participation previously raised in the literature review. The important point to reiterate is that the literature review makes clear that participation must effectively be a two way street if it is to play a part in establishing accountability (Cameron 2004). Thus it is not only about informing people about the organisation's activities, it is equally important for those people to have the ability to question that information and engage in a true dialogue with WFP. Unfortunately the 2018 Annual Performance Report reveals that at that time only a little over half of country

programmes were able to fulfill the first indicator relative to the provision of information. The second, pivotal indicator in the pursuit of accountability, was only *documented* in 27 programme countries, not even half of all of WFP's programmes. Of those 27, 20 reported positively on its attainment (Executive Board "Annual performance" 2018, 64). Thus even by WFP's own measure of accountability, practice is lagging far behind. This conclusion is echoed in the organisation's 2019 Annual Evaluation Report, where it is underlined that "accountability to affected populations was inconsistent" (World Food Programme "Annual Evaluation", 24).

The 2019-2021 Strategy for Protection and Accountability to Affected People

WFP's Strategy for Protection and Accountability to Affected People was drawn up with the intention of creating a distinct framework to bring into practice the accountability aspirations set forth in the Strategic Plan. The WFP framework notes amongst others the positive impact of the IASC Commitment, but indicates that in the opinion of the organisation such broad commitments are insufficient to create any true impact. The framework focuses on two points, on the one hand the implementation of minimum standards that can be applied across country programmes, and on the other the development of innovative methods that will ensure a scalable approach. Practically speaking however the document offers little in terms of concrete steps that the organisation can implement in order to achieve these goals. Statements such as "WFP will ensure that analytical tools and frameworks enable programme formulation and adjustments to ensure that the most vulnerable can participate and benefit from WFP assistance" (World Food Programme 2019, 5), or "WFP will enter new and strengthen existing partnerships for field implementation of protection and AAP..." (World Food Programme 2019, 6) carry a certain rhetorical power but do not point to any practical measures that may or must be taken, nor to any benchmark against which achievements can be objectively assessed. A number of key deliverables are indicated, mainly in terms of further policy documents and tools to be produced; however this does little to show the concrete changes that can be expected from the point of view of WFP's beneficiaries. WFP expresses at numerous points that it is the beneficiaries of its assistance

who are central to their strategy, yet their own measures of their performance frequently eschew showing any tangible evidence that this is indeed the case (Executive Board "Annual performance" 2018, 64 and World Food Programme "Annual Evaluation", 24). This is problematic *because* of the fact that WFP has defined its practice of accountability in terms of a technical measure; in doing so the organisation has set itself up to consistently fall short of the mark, since humanitarian reality cannot be quantified.

Implementation of the WFP's humanitarian accountability strategy

The various strategy and policy documents analysed in the previous paragraphs have shown how WFP defines and approaches the issue of humanitarian accountability as an organisation operating at the nexus of development and aid. This analysis has shown that WFP's implementation of a humanitarian accountability strategy has been highly influenced by the political developments of the SDGs, and has drawn only marginal elements from existing system wide standards such as the CHS or the IASC Commitments. As a UN organisation it is unsurprising that WFP aligns its policy with goals developed within the UN system. This has meant that WFP has fully embraced a system in which the traditional aid paradigm has been set aside in favour of methods that purport to merge development and aid to the presumed benefit of those in need of assistance. In this context strategies meant to ensure humanitarian accountability have been set forth as a form of quality measure whereby the beneficiary of assistance is framed as the most important judge of WFP's performance.

However, a close analysis of all relevant documents shows that this intention struggles to go beyond rhetorical statements, with the entirety of WFP's humanitarian accountability strategy being based upon the broadly articulated requirements of informing beneficiaries as to the programmes with which they are involved and collecting and using beneficiary feedback to improve on those programmes. There are two points here to be noted with regards to this strategy. The first is that while participatory methods are indeed

identified throughout the literature as one of the main mechanisms for 'downwards' accountability, the literature also points out that such mechanisms are not sufficient in and of themselves in creating accountability. The other point to note is that the two indicators for accountability found in the Corporate Results Framework are phrased in extremely broad terms, allowing a great degree of latitude in the judgement of whether they have been attained. WFP refers to the "proportion" of beneficiaries who have been informed about programmes, or the "proportion" of feedback that has been received, analysed, and integrated into programming; conspicuously lacking here is any indication as to *what* proportion is required or considered adequate. Furthermore one of the WFP indicators simply is "proportion of assisted people informed about the programme". This leaves a lot of room for interpretation of what may consist of being informed and thus makes it impossible to objectively assess. To a degree this is a necessity for the strategy of an organisation that carries out such a variety of programmes in such a variety of settings, where what may be feasible and relevant in one context may not be in another. But it also renders the role of the indicator objectively useless beyond the provision of anecdotal information.

Case study II - Médecins Sans Frontières: The practice of humanitarian accountability within an NGO

Operational context

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is one of the five largest aid organisations currently operating within the humanitarian system. It is an NGO composed mainly of volunteers and is expressly focused on the provision of emergency medical aid to those in need, only occasionally providing other support that remains related to this principal purpose (Brauman and Neuman 2014). Founded in the early seventies, the organisation has experienced many of the same historical events and evolutions that have occurred throughout the world of humanitarian aid as WFP; however MSF's chosen mission and trajectory in response to what have been many of the same circumstances has been radically different to that chosen by WFP ("Who we are"). This stems precisely from its choice to accept minimal financial aid from governments and intergovernmental organisations, a tactic that not all NGOs pursue. It is exactly this that makes the comparison of MSF and WFP so poignant to this analysis of humanitarian accountability, with the former claiming independence even to the degree of rebellion and the latter bound to the internal standards and global political agenda as it is set forth by its keepers. Thus whilst both organisations have the same essential goal of saving lives, one by fighting hunger and the other by providing essential medical aid, their approach is radically different. Indeed MSF has built its organisational ethos in rebellion against many of the institutional constraints that organisations such as WFP have embraced, particularly in terms of political pressure. MSF rejects the idea of falling in line with any global agenda, and while it upholds the humanitarian principle of neutrality it has evolved its own interpretation of it, adding the obligation to bear witness to its working principles ("Who we are"). This means that MSF is vocal about situations it views as inhumane in a way that NGOs accepting governmental finance and IGOs such as WFP are not, and simply cannot be. It also means that while the organisation strives to be sustainable in its approach, it has not embraced the idea of operating somewhere within the nexus of development and aid and remains firmly

entrenched within a more traditional aid paradigm. A final point of interest for the purpose of this research is that in addition to its work on the ground MSF is at the forefront of organisations actively conducting humanitarian research; the organisation actively engages with the topic of accountability not only through its operations but also through the studies that it conducts. MSF is therefore an interesting case study to examine in comparison to WFP, providing evidence as to the applicability of theory to the practice of humanitarian accountability within such a diverse humanitarian landscape.

Strategy for humanitarian accountability at MSF

Unlike WFP MSF has not chosen to devote a distinct set of strategic goals and policy documents to the specific cause of humanitarian accountability. Nonetheless accountability is central to the organisation, one of the five working principles upon which all of its work is based ("Who we are"). Indeed accountability at MSF transpires as an underlying principle rather than a metric of performance. This is an explicit decision that was made by the organisation in the early 2000s, when it decided to retire from the Sphere project which was at the origin of what is now the CHS. MSF rejects the idea that accountability must be linked to a set of technical standards in order to be effective. This is a very different approach to that of WFP, for whom accountability can essentially be equated to a few indicators relating to participation. MSF argues that while such standards are useful, there is a risk that putting too much focus on defining them will not allow enough space for the wide variety of situations occurring in the humanitarian context and may simply devolve into a box ticking exercise (Stobbaerts and de Torrente 2008). In essence, MSF is arguing that accountability goes beyond what is proposed by system wide standards such as the CHS. MSF further points out the risks that can be associated with putting emphasis on participation as a chief standard for accountability, which they view as potentially running counter to the principle of neutrality as well as placing an undue burden of responsibility on affected populations to define their needs in situations where they may not be able or free to do so (Tong 2004). The strategy for humanitarian accountability at MSF thus comes forward not as a narrowly

defined standard set forth through its strategy and policy documents but rather as an underlying principle, the details of which are expanded upon in reports, blogs, and research papers carried out by the research units of MSF.

The principle of humanitarian accountability at MSF and its implementation

At MSF humanitarian accountability is implemented as a core principle rather than as a form of technical standard. Its implementation runs along two principal lines, one of which is in its relationship with donors and the other which is in its core working principles which are rooted in the MSF Charter and its complementary documents. In the Chantilly Principles notably accountability and transparency are linked under the following terms:

> "Faced with populations in distress, MSF has an obligation to mobilise and develop its resources.
>
> Aiming at maximum quality and effectiveness, MSF is committed to optimising its means and abilities, to directly controlling the distribution of its aid, and to regularly evaluating the effects.
>
> In a clear and open manner, MSF assumes the responsibility to account for its actions to its beneficiaries as well as to its donors." (Médecins Sans Frontières "Chantilly Principles", 3)

In the first sentence of these terms MSF links accountability to the humanitarian imperative, raising the idea of the "obligation to mobilise" (3). In the second sentence it is the idea of effectiveness and the principle of independence which are raised. Finally MSF draws in the concept of transparency, which it directly links with "the responsibility to account for its actions" (3). Thus effectiveness, independence, and transparency are the central tenets of the principle of accountability at MSF.

Independence at MSF is largely linked to its philosophy surrounding funding. As an NGO MSF has a high degree of freedom in selecting donors from whom they are willing to accept funds. Thus governments for example only account for a minute amount of total donations and MSF refuses funding from a number of countries with whose policies they do not agree. This critical approach to funding extends to the private sector, where funds are not accepted from companies who do not fall in line with MSF's philosophy ("Reports and finances"). While MSF is financially entirely dependent on donors for its existence, the organisation has paradoxically found a way in which to derive from them the source of its independence. Indeed in being selective about the source of the funds that it accepts and prioritising small private donations MSF is able to retain a large amount of freedom in choosing what it considers to be the best application of these funds. As is stated in the foreword of the 2018 Financial Report, "Whether it fits the political agenda or not, we will continue to offer all people in distress the most appropriate, effective medical assistance we can" (Médecins Sans Frontières "International Activity Report" 4). This desire to remain independent from any global political agenda is motivated by a refusal "to subordinate the humanitarian cause to some overarching goal" ("Humanitarian action"). This is the danger that is identified by MSF if independence is lost in favor of falling in line with an externally driven mandate. MSF is principally able to operate independently from any global political agenda because of the way in which it has managed to establish a certain degree of financial independence, which in turn allows the organisation to respond to populations in distress in the way it considers most effective. In this way MSF mobilises the principle of independence to achieve effectiveness, both equally considered components in its implementation of accountability.

While independence and effectiveness are key components of accountability as a principle at MSF, it is the final tenet of transparency which is most crucial to understanding the actual implementation of accountability at MSF. In the La Mancha agreement, a complementary document to the MSF Charter and the Chantilly Principles, it is stated that: "MSF is accountable and actively transparent to those we assist, our donors and the wider public. Accountability to those we assist may be difficult to achieve in certain situations, but *the minimum requirement is that we are actively transparent about the choices made and the*

limits of our ability to assist. This external accountability is also essential to improving the quality of our interventions [emphasis added] (Médecins Sans Frontières "La Mancha Agreement", 4). MSF recognises the challenge in achieving accountability under the numerous constraints present in humanitarian action, and has therefore made the choice to emphasise transparency towards donors as well as populations in need of assistance as a bare minimum upon which to base its approach to implementing it as an underlying principle. Thus rather than set forth specific initiatives or indicators relating to the achievement of humanitarian accountability MSF has opted to set the goal of active transparency as a baseline for its conduct, which is underpinned by a philosophy of striving to always be better while being realistic about the limitations that the humanitarian context entails (Stobbaerts and de Torrente 2008).

Chapter IV: Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The two case studies of the previous chapter have brought to light evidence in response to the question:

To what extent do theoretical standards for humanitarian accountability translate into practice at the organisational level?

In this final chapter the evidence from these case studies will be comparatively analysed in light of the theoretical framework developed through the literature review. The literature review revealed that there is a significant need for further academic understanding of humanitarian accountability. While there has been abundant research devoted to the question of public accountability, little time has been devoted to the question of accountability in the humanitarian field, particularly insofar as it concerns its implementation. A brief overview of research conducted in the field of public accountability has shown where certain parallels may be drawn with humanitarian accountability, both in terms of key components as well as in terms of the forms of relationships to which the notion of being accountable may apply. This is important because it has provided a point of academic reference against which to examine the theory relating to humanitarian accountability. The main points drawn from this interdisciplinary literature review were that accountability does not have to be enacted through what may be considered formal channels in order to be valid, and that participation is valuable as a mechanism for accountability but cannot stand alone nor simply be equated with accountability. There is a distinct lack of understanding as to the mechanisms of humanitarian accountability and the means by which it is brought into practice, an issue that this thesis seeks to address. The fundamental principles upon which humanitarian accountability rests however are broadly agreed upon throughout the literature, and are rooted in the ethical essence of humanitarian action. These principles of responsibility, effectiveness, and transparency, form a sort of

baseline for humanitarian accountability agreed upon within the literature, and this thesis has examined two distinct humanitarian organisations in turn to determine how such principles are being translated into practice within their respective constraints.

WFP is an IGO established under the UN system, and thus bound to fall in line with the UN agenda. It is a highly bureaucratic organisation whose operations are constrained and guided by numerous strategy and policy documents, in an extremely complex and often opaque administrative structure. The analysis of this grey literature to tease out the practice of humanitarian accountability at WFP is a substantial task with documents containing numerous cross references, occasionally to documents that are still in preparation. Thus while much of their documentation is publicly accessible, it is possible to argue that they are developed under such a burdensome bureaucratic procedure so as to make information provided within them far from transparent. A close analysis however of the principal documents relevant to the practice of humanitarian accountability at WFP revealed a few key insights for the purpose of this research. The first point of note is that the practice of accountability at WFP has been defined in the terms of the organisation's position as an IGO operating under the sphere of the UN. Thus throughout the organisation accountability is addressed as a technical standard which is designed to increase effectiveness and transparency in alignment with WFP's pursuit of UN defined goals (World Food Programme 2017). While the term accountability is frequently used throughout WFP documents and WFP beneficiaries are always placed at the forefront of this rhetoric, a close examination of WFP's practices reveals that its choice to reduce accountability to a technical standard has limited the scope of its engagement to the sole attainment of two indicators. Both these indicators relate to the element of participation, a point shown in the literature to be key to accountability but insufficient in and of itself. Crucially participation also requires an active dialogue between the organisation and the beneficiary to be a constituent of accountability, a point that has been found to be lacking at WFP. Indeed WFP's performance is suboptimal on both of its chosen indicators with only a little over 50% of beneficiaries being informed as to the operations affecting them and barely a quarter of country programmes engaging in an active dialogue with beneficiaries (Executive Board "Annual performance" 2018, 64). WFP thus approaches humanitarian accountability as a technical standard to be attained in

the pursuit of increased effectiveness and transparency, with the ultimate goal of being of greater benefit to those in need of its assistance. However, in defining its practice of humanitarian accountability as a purely technical standard WFP sets itself up to fall consistently short of the mark since technical measures will always fall short of capturing the humanitarian reality (Stobbaerts and de Torrenté 2008, 49).

The second case study of this research, MSF, is an NGO operating under vastly different constraints than an IGO such as WFP. MSF rejects the idea of aligning with an externally driven agenda, fiercely guarding its independence by maintaining a focus on the provision of aid and selectively approving donors to ensure a wide spread of funding sources ("Who we are" and "Reports and finances"). As such MSF's approach to the practice of humanitarian accountability is purely internally driven, and is not influenced by the need to align with any external agenda for development as is the case at WFP. Contrary to WFP, MSF has made an explicit choice not to define accountability as a technical standard, but rather to draw it in as an underlying core principle throughout all of its work. For MSF it is their very course of action that renders them accountable to those they seek to assist, and as such accountability holds the same weight as the principles of independence and neutrality in the philosophy of the organisation ("Who we are"). Thus accountability is defined within MSF's Charter rather than within a strategy document, and is expressed as a responsibility arising from the humanitarian imperative (Médecins Sans Frontières "Chantilly Principles", 3). The organisation further expresses that its practice of accountability emerges from a drive for effectiveness, independence, and transparency. MSF therefore expresses all of the key constitutive elements of accountability identified within the theory and rooted in the ethical motive of aid. While the organisation chooses not to frame accountability in terms of a technical standard, it does nonetheless set a minimum requirement for its implementation which is active transparency towards donors and beneficiaries alike. This decision is made to account for the fact that for MSF humanitarian action can never be perfect, but must always be a choice of best-worst case scenarios (Médecins Sans Frontières "La Mancha Agreement", 4 and Stobbaerts and de Torrenté 2008, 49).

The approach of MSF to the practice of humanitarian accountability appears to be in complete contrast to that of WFP, where it is implemented as a technical standard rather than an underlying principle. Indeed where one organisation has chosen to implement accountability as a technical practice with no conceptual essence, the other has chosen to highlight the essence of the idea while setting aside any technical measure. However the literature review conducted in Chapter II revealed that these two approaches are not contradictory but rather each play a role in a conceptual whole. Thus the examination of the practice of accountability at MSF in light of the theoretical framework has served to reveal the deficiencies in the practice of WFP, and vice versa. Indeed on the face of it WFP and MSF appear to have two very different and perhaps even contradictory approaches to putting humanitarian accountability into practice. However when examined in light of the literature it becomes clear that each approach has its grounding in theory and that they are in fact mutually reinforcing rather than opposing outlooks. Indeed the academic literature revealed that humanitarian accountability does not necessarily have to be borne of formal mechanisms, and that tools such as participation are important but do not function alone. Humanitarian accountability is rather a compound concept in which measurable indicators such as participation are simply one method by which the key elements of responsibility, effectiveness, and transparency can be assessed. Thus MSF and WFP are each operating on complementary elements of humanitarian accountability, drawing upon their individual strengths and limitations as organisations. Ultimately the question of how to translate a theoretical idea of humanitarian accountability into practice is an ethical dilemma that must be situated within the real world constraints of humanitarian aid, and this is the key point that emerges from the examination of the practice of accountability at WFP and at MSF. Each organisation has evolved a certain practice of accountability within the boundaries of their individual limitations, but ultimately reality means these practices will always fall short of any theoretical standard. At the same time this also brings to light the continued need for academic research in the field of humanitarian aid, as deeper comprehension allows organisations to pursue enlightened courses of action. In summary a major contribution of this thesis is to highlight that both the literature and the pragmatic aspect of practice must aim to ensure that the ethical grounding of accountability and the optimisation of

humanitarian action it seeks to engender are not lost through a poor understanding of basic concepts.

Conclusion

This thesis has addressed the question:

To what extent do theoretical standards for humanitarian accountability translate into practice at the organisational level?

Two case studies were conducted of humanitarian organisations operating under different constraints to shed some light on this question. Both case studies revealed that theoretical standards for accountability translate into practice to a limited degree and in distinct ways depending on individual constraints faced by organisations. The case of WFP revealed that as an IGO operating under the aegis of the UN the practice of humanitarian accountability has been reduced to the attainment of a technical standard, with an apparent marginalisation of the deeper humanitarian roots. By contrast MSF as an NGO with a self imposed policy of funding maintaining almost complete independence of governmental and intergovernmental organisations free themselves of any global agenda. This has allowed them to choose not to focus on the technical aspect and rather maintain and integrate the practice of accountability as a core principle throughout their work. These are two very different approaches motivated by the same aspiration, to always place the vulnerable people in need of assistance at the centre of the humanitarian endeavour. Yet when examined in light of the theory it becomes clear that both organisations fail to fully translate humanitarian accountability into practice. MSF recognises this, and points out that no humanitarian action can be perfect (Stobbaerts and de Torrenté 2008, 49). This is certainly true in the same way that no model can be perfectly representative of reality, and yet this is why academic research on the subject of humanitarian accountability is so desperately called for. By nature of the conditions under which they operate, humanitarian organisations do not have the luxury of detachment offered by research and risk in all good faith developing practices that run counter to their fundamentally ethical aspiration. This thesis has endeavoured to make a step in the direction of demonstrating the application of theory to practice in the field of humanitarian aid and vice versa. Thus WFP and MSF were found to

have apparently distinct yet in reality complementary approaches in their practice of humanitarian accountability, which brought to light the theoretical aspects from which each organisation can learn. The question of how humanitarian aid is accountable to its beneficiaries has been identified as a fundamentally ethical dilemma that must be situated "in a historical and concrete reality" in order to be correctly addressed (Brauman and Neuman 2014, 1). Likewise the question of just how humanitarian aid is made accountable to its beneficiaries is identified in this thesis as a fundamentally moral dilemma that must similarly be understood in context. Ultimately it is the vulnerable populations in need of assistance who are at the heart of any humanitarian endeavour, and further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of how humanitarian accountability practices impact upon them.

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