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Child Accountability in Humanitarian Contexts: A desk review



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The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (the Alliance) supports the efforts of humanitarian actors to achieve high quality and effective child protection interventions in humanitarian settings. Through its technical Working Groups and Task Forces, the Alliance develops inter-agency operational standards and provides technical guidance to support the work of child protection in humanitarian settings.

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1. BACKGROUND

Children account for 30% of the world's population and make up more than 40% of all forcibly displaced people. About 50% of the total population in humanitarian contexts are children.¹ However, in adult-centric humanitarian systems, the needs of children, including adolescents, are often overlooked. When children and adolescents are in focus, they are frequently viewed as 'vulnerable' and beneficiaries of aid in need of adult protection, resulting in decisions often being taken on their behalf and without their direct involvement.² At the same time, children have specific needs and rights, as well as the capacity to shape and influence key decisions including interventions designed to support them. Yet, when affected populations are consulted and involved in decision-making processes, adults are often the primary focus. As a result, children remain invisible and often excluded from meaningfully participating in decisions that affect them, with little attention to their evolving developmental capacities, needs, priorities, and insights.³

The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (the Alliance)⁴ identified accountability to children as one of four strategic priorities for the period 2021-2025. The Alliance called for all humanitarian programmes to be accountable to children and ensure their meaningful and equitable participation, with a focus on child-led (including collaborative), and community-driven programming.

Accountability to children is rooted in accountability to all affected people. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) defines accountability as "a commitment by humanitarians to use power responsibly: to take account of, give account to, and be held to account by the people we seek to assist."⁵ At a practical level this means:

- **Take account of affected children** - *supporting leadership of affected children in all their diversity, and participation that is meaningful to them, in such a way that interventions are informed by children's needs, priorities, and suggestions rather than by agency capacities, and can adapt to collected feedback.*
- **Give account to affected children** - *including systematically sharing timely, relevant, and actionable information with children and families, and ensuring transparent decision-making.*
- **Be held to account by affected children** - *including ensuring community complaints and feedback systems are accessible to children, and participatory monitoring and evaluation with children is undertaken.*

Ensuring meaningful participation is a key component of accountability, alongside other foundational elements. Accountability to children is grounded in children's right to participation; ensuring that

¹ UNHCR, [Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2023](#), June 2024.

² Hart, J. (2023). [The Child as Vulnerable Victim: Humanitarianism Constructs Its Object](#). *Int J Environ Res Public Health*, 20(6).

³ Lansdown, G. (2005). [The Evolving Capacities of the Child](#). Innocenti Insights, Issue.

⁴ Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2021), [Clarion Call: The Centrality of Children and their Protection within Humanitarian Action](#).

⁵ Inter-Agency Standing Committee. (2020) [Commitments on Accountability to Affected People](#).



children's points of view are heard, and their perspectives are given due weight and that they play an active role in the decisions that impact their lives, well-being, dignity, and protection.⁶

Objectives of the review:

Drawing on a literature review led by IRC in collaboration with the Alliance, this evidence brief summarises the findings of a rapid review designed to:

- Understand how child accountability has been conceptualised and operationalised in the humanitarian sector.
- Understand how children have been involved in informing and establishing these processes and systems.
- Examine the practical ways in which accountability to children has been incorporated throughout the project cycle in the humanitarian sector, including when children participate in accountability procedures and the project cycle to facilitate accountability.

2. METHODOLOGY

A rapid appraisal approach was adopted to guide identification and selection of resources to be included in this review. All documents reviewed were analysed to:

- i) identify how accountability to children has been defined.
- ii) examine what systems, structures and best practices have been used or suggested across sectors in the humanitarian space.
- iii) determine current and potential barriers and gaps in humanitarian practice.
- iv) understand how children have been involved in the design and implementation of existing accountability systems.

The review identified a total of 64 publications, 25 of which met the inclusion criteria. In total, 39 resources were excluded because: they covered general Accountability to Affected Persons (AAP) without a specific focus on children (n=20), they focused only on child participation without any description of accountability (n=17), or covered approaches to accountability in non-humanitarian settings (n=4). The cut off time for inclusion of newly published resources was set as end of May 2024, with the earliest publication date as 2004.

Out of the publications included in the review, eight were guidance/toolkits on how to operationalise accountability to children in the humanitarian sector, 11 focused only on specific aspects of accountability, such as enabling participation and conducting consultations with children (n=7), or establishing feedback mechanisms (n=4); and six were research and evaluation reports.

⁶ United Nations, [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), 1989.



3. FINDINGS

3.1 Defining accountability:

a. The definitions of accountability to children used in the resources reviewed primarily built on the IASC definition with additional emphasis on child participation. Notably, most lacked a focus on using feedback received or communicating to children how their contributions have been acted upon.

Overall, the resources reviewed have a strong focus on children's active participation and on participatory methodologies. At the same time, few resources outlined in detail how information, 'course-corrections' (adapting approaches to feedback received), and changes can be transparently and effectively communicated back to children and their families. Nearly all definitions stressed the importance of 'taking into account' children's views, needs, and problems in humanitarian programming and for their voices to be recorded and heard.

Some definitions also included considerations around the need to give children access to processes to "hold to account" duty bearers; feedback, complaint, and reporting mechanisms were presented as examples on how to operationalise this second aspect of accountability and to make humanitarian actors take responsibility for their actions. However, only a handful of resources went further, recognising that the feedback received should translate into adjustments to programming, offers of recourse and remedy, and sanctions so that humanitarian actors 'give account' to affected populations.

b. The literature outlined best practices, guidelines, and principles for realising accountability to children in humanitarian action, including throughout the project cycle, encompassing children's direct participation.

Most resources presented steps for implementing child-centered accountability in relation to the project cycle stages. The following best practices and recommendations were identified:

At the design stage:

- Conduct a context analysis to identify the population of affected children and key issues of concern and needs, as well as relevant stakeholders and their relationships.
- Clearly define what accountability means in the local context and integrate child participation and accountability to children as explicit objectives into proposals.
- Involve affected children and their communities in assessments to inform program design.



- Outline how information and feedback will be solicited, monitored, and used in the project as part of monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) plans.
- Budget for participation and accountability activities and dedicated staff.
- Partner with local child- and youth-led groups, civil society, and networks.
- Confirm relevance and acceptability of design with children and their communities.

During project / programme set-up:

- Mobilise local stakeholders to develop clear objectives for duty bearers around the rights, standards, and commitments children can expect as part of service delivery.
- Hold inception meetings to establish trust, share information with children in suitable formats, and seek input on their preferences and needs around engagement throughout the project cycle.
- Plan safe participation and identify appropriate and diverse representatives that can give voice to the interests of different groups of affected children, ensuring inclusion.
- Assess technical and behavioural competencies of staff and partners and integrate capacity-strengthening into project plans.
- Identify barriers and opportunities and involve children in design decisions.
- Develop monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems that include clear and measurable indicators on child participation and accountability.

During implementation:

- Support safe and meaningful child participation with caregiver engagement and awareness-raising.
- Integrate safeguarding measures and mitigate any identified risk for safe participation.
- Regular two-way information sharing adapted based on children's preferences and needs.
- Consult, involve, facilitate, and enable children to play an active role in decision-making.
- Establish and strengthen child friendly Complaint Feedback and Response Mechanisms (CFRMs) and regularly review and action data to strengthen the relationship with children, identify required course-correction, and enable adjustments.
- Use participatory approaches to involve children, including those excluded from decision-making around course corrections and changes to programming.



During programme closure:

- Facilitate dialogue meetings between rights-holders, meaning children and communities, and duty-bearers to reflect on implementation, share experiences, and agree on action plans.
- Hand over to local communities' aspects of the programme that can continue and as discussed above, ensure engagement across the design and implementation phases.
- Share and report lessons learnt.

3.2 Operationalising accountability to children:

c. Three approaches to child participation emerged from the literature: consultative, collaborative, and child-led.

The three approaches outlined are:⁷

Consultative participation tends to be the most used in humanitarian programming. It is initiated, led, and managed by adults and consists of adults seeking children's views to gain a better understanding of their lives, experiences, and recommendations for action.

Collaborative participation is also initiated by adults but involves an active partnership with children. It takes place when children help to work out what needs to be done and how. This collaborative approach generally translates into co-designing programme activities, systems, and mechanisms with children, enabling them to influence or challenge both the humanitarian process and outcomes.

Child-led approaches rely on children initiating their own activities, rather than responding to ideas or projects initiated by adults. They create their own structures or organisations through which to determine the issues that are most important to them. Adults may participate in child-led consultations as facilitators.

⁷ Inter-Agency Standing Committee. (2020). [With us & for us: working with and for young people in humanitarian and protracted crises](#); Save the Children. (2023). [Children's consultation in humanitarian contexts](#), UNICEF. (2020). [ENGAGED AND HEARD! Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement](#).



d. While child accountability and participation in humanitarian action is currently largely limited to consultations, examples and recommendations of higher-level engagement exist.⁸

Examples gathered:

- Information centres in Myanmar in the cyclone Nargis response with trained peer educators from existing child-friendly spaces holding regular sessions with children to collect suggestions and feedback using drawing cards;⁹
- School brigades to map hazards and collect local information as part of disaster preparedness in several settings in Central and South America;¹⁰
- Children's committees identifying issues and inequities in services at community level;¹¹
- Engaging child and youth groups in assessments during Nepal floods;¹²
- Using children's drawings to inform proposal development and safety interventions in displacement camps in Haiti.¹³

3.3 Barriers and enablers:

e. Key barriers to the realisation of real child accountability in humanitarian contexts are the need for adequate financial and human capacity.

This was discussed in nearly all documents. As demonstrated so far, the design, set-up, and implementation of effective accountability systems requires thorough planning, engagement of multiple stakeholders, rollout of diverse activities at different stages of humanitarian programming, and relevant skills. All these factors can put a significant strain on program budgets and require adequate resources to be factored in from the early stages of the humanitarian response.

⁸ For recommendations on engagement with youth please consult: UNICEF. (2007). [*The Participation of Children and Young People in Emergencies. A guide for relief agencies, based largely on experiences in the Asian tsunami response*](#); Inter-Agency Standing Committee. (2020). [*With us & for us: working with and for young people in humanitarian and protracted crises*](#).

⁹ Save the Children. (2010). [*Accountability Matters in Emergencies*](#).

¹⁰ UNICEF. (2007). [*The Participation of Children and Young People in Emergencies. A guide for relief agencies, based largely on experiences in the Asian tsunami response*](#).

¹¹ UNICEF. (2007). [*The Participation of Children and Young People in Emergencies. A guide for relief agencies, based largely on experiences in the Asian tsunami response*](#).

¹² Save the Children. (2013). [*Review of Children's Participation in Humanitarian Programming*](#).

¹³ Ibid.



On human resources, the potential **lack of skills and competencies on how to engage children and effectively establish systems that are safe and accessible for them was identified as a gap**. Capacity building of staff, partners and other relevant stakeholders was consistently identified as a key step in the operationalisation of accountability to children and a prerequisite to meaningful child participation. Ensuring that protection, other sector staff, and programming and support staff are familiar with best practices for interacting with children, as well as with child participation principles and approaches, can become a strategic lever to realise child accountability.

f. Partnering with local civil society, children's associations, and youth-led organisations emerged as a prominent enabler to ensure the adequacy, acceptability, effectiveness, and sustainability of child accountability mechanisms.

Working closely with local partners and activists can be an effective approach to move beyond child participation and information sharing towards **the creation of acceptable and locally relevant systems. Through such systems, children can collaborate with adults to participate in decision-making and realise improvements in service provision by building on existing practices and mechanisms.**

3.4 Gaps in existing literature:

g. Acknowledging the complexity of the challenge.

Despite observing a general commitment among humanitarian actors to promote child accountability and participation, **few resources explicitly recognise the barriers and challenges that prevent organisations from fully operationalising accountability to children in humanitarian practice, and in emergency contexts.** Child participation is challenging to implement in contexts of armed conflict or forced displacement, where the risk of reprisal, abuse and other violations is higher, and instability and movement make it difficult to establish and maintain mechanisms with children. Often, legitimate safeguarding concerns and uncertainty or fear of doing further harm result in the exclusion of children or in the lack of recognition of child-specific needs and risks.¹⁴

At the same time, a real acknowledgement of the requirements for establishing functioning child accountability systems in humanitarian contexts may allow organisations to put in the relevant focus, expertise and resources to strengthen this capacity internally. Furthermore, such acknowledgement of the challenge may facilitate donors' recognition of the resources required to enable meaningful child accountability. This includes recognising donor requirements, which can make the

¹⁴ Bennouna, C., Mansourian, H., & Stark, L. (2017). [Ethical considerations for children's participation in data collection activities during humanitarian emergencies](https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-017-0108-y): A Delphi review. *Conflict and Health*, 11(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-017-0108-y>



implementation of child accountability systems more difficult; for example, in relation to agreements with local partners and (tight) timelines for inception periods.

h. Lack of sector-specific guidance.

While this review has demonstrated that humanitarian actors have produced a wealth of guidance and toolkits to inform the creation of child accountability systems, these attempts rarely provide specific guidance on how to practically operationalise accountability across sectors. This is an important gap: from sector to sector, the practical implementation, modality and appropriateness of the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of child accountability changes. A rare example of sector-specific guidance for non-protection actors working in health, education, climate, and peacebuilding is provided by a UNICEF report from 2020,¹⁵ illustrating the need for guidance which is specific and targeted to its audience. Working with other sectors to integrate a child-focus into existing guidance is a recommended action requiring investment in personnel to lead such collaborative action.

i. Lack of diversity and intersectional-specific guidance.

There remains a tendency to perceive children as a homogenous group. While several resources included considerations related to the diverse needs of children based on their age, developmental capabilities, and gender, very few included in-depth considerations of how other factors such as ethnicity, disability, culture, religion, and sexual orientation need to be considered for the design of successful child accountability systems. Most include only limited considerations of the accountability barriers and enablers for children from marginalised groups (for example, diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, adolescents who are married/in union or parents, teenage parents, children with disabilities, children on the move, etc.).

4. CONCLUSION

Despite an increasing interest in and attention to child accountability in the humanitarian sector in recent years, many humanitarian leaders and decision-makers are uncertain about how to realise this change in practice. This is due to lack of awareness, resources, capacity, and commitment. The result is de-prioritisation. At the same time, accountability to children is a responsibility of the whole humanitarian system. As highlighted in the latest Grand Bargain report,¹⁶ to achieve this there is a need for increased funding for programmes that support affected people, including children, in designing and delivering responses to their own needs. Some donors have adopted standard

¹⁵ UNICEF. (2020). [ENGAGED AND HEARD! Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement](#).

¹⁶ Inter-Agency Standing Committee. (2023) [Grand Bargain 3.0](#)



requirements to plan accountability to affected populations measures¹⁷ as part of funding applications, while others are reported to be adopting standard requirements to evidence that planned actions have been taken.

What adequate resourcing for effective, sustainable, child accountability looks like must be agreed. It should then be embedded into organisations' commitments and strategies beyond one-off projects, similarly to how gender-sensitive approaches have been mainstreamed across the humanitarian system. Furthermore, donors should recognise these resourcing requirements and commit to facilitating them both financially and in terms of the way their systems are structured.

Concurrently, it is important to note that child-sensitivity and child engagement in accountability to affected persons provides benefits for the whole humanitarian system. Its credibility and utility transcends organisational or donor requirements. However, this needs to be further evidenced, through a bank of case studies, stronger monitoring and evaluation of existing efforts, and research. The growing literature, summarised in this evidence brief, responds to this need, with more work yet to be done, both in the thinking behind and practice of child accountability in humanitarian action.

¹⁷ Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (2024) [Emergency Application Guidelines Common Requirements](#)