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**PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST**

**Community Engagement and**

**Accountability in Practice**

# NORCAP: Who we are

NORCAP works to improve aid and better protect and empower people affected by crisis and climate change. We do this by providing expertise and solutions to humanitarian, development and peacebuilding partners.

**NORCAP improves aid in two complementary ways:**

- We provide targeted expertise to strengthen our partners' response.
- We collaborate with partners to develop solutions to unmet gaps and challenges.

NORCAP is part of the Norwegian Refugee Council.



## PART OF NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

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# PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

## Community Engagement and

## Accountability in Practice

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## Introduction

E Ruiz/UNICEF

### DISPLACED VENEZUELANs MAKING THEIR WAY ACROSS THE BOLIVIAN BORDER ON FOOT

NORCAP has established itself as a leading provider of community engagement and accountability (CEA) services to humanitarian response, building on nearly a decade of experience since incorporating the Internews Humanitarian Communication Framework in 2015. The organisation's approach has evolved significantly, moving beyond basic communication with communities to ensure community engagement influences programming and facilitates collective accountability efforts. At the start of 2024, a CEA strategy was developed for NORCAP, and a CEA Policy was approved by the NRC board later in 2024.

The humanitarian landscape has grown increasingly complex since 2020, with overlapping crises demanding innovative approaches to community engagement. From the COVID-19 pandemic to escalating conflicts and climate-related disasters, these challenges have highlighted the critical importance of accountability in driving effectiveness and efficiencies in humanitarian response. The growing digital divide, widespread displacement, and increasing access constraints have further emphasised the need for adaptive, context-specific approaches to community engagement. In light of 2025's funding changes, community engagement has become even more vital to ensure our programmes effectively reach those with the greatest needs

Evidence continues to highlight concerning gaps between humanitarian organisations' accountability commitments and their practical implementation.

These shortcomings stem from multiple factors, including limited technical expertise, resource constraints, and fragmented coordination among humanitarian actors. The situation is often exacerbated in complex operating environments where traditional accountability approaches prove insufficient or unfeasible.

NORCAP addresses these challenges by assigning CEA experts to key roles, focusing on better coordination between agencies and supporting local efforts. Their work has shifted to aim for wider impact, with experts increasingly taking senior roles that can influence accountability practices across entire humanitarian responses.

This document examines five CEA assignments undertaken between 2022 and 2024, analysing their impact across diverse humanitarian contexts. Drawn from experiences in Ethiopia, Ukraine, Latin America, Myanmar, and Gaza, these case studies offer insights into the practical implementation of accountability mechanisms in complex humanitarian environments. By examining these assignments, we can better understand successful approaches, persistent challenges, and opportunities for strengthening accountability in humanitarian action.

The following case studies were informed by interviews with NORCAP CEA experts and their UN Agency colleagues/supervisors in late 2024.

**AAP and CEA:** The Inter-Agency Standing Committee defines Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) as “an active commitment by humanitarian actors to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people they seek to assist.” AAP is implemented through community engagement, which encompasses understanding community contexts, priorities, and needs, maintaining transparent organisational communication, enabling meaningful community participation in humanitarian planning, and establishing responsive feedback systems.

While the UN system generally uses AAP, NORCAP and NRC prefer “community engagement and accountability” (CEA) which better captures both the process and commitment to being accountable to communities.

# A Snapshot of Community Engagement and Accountability Achievements in Five Key Crises



## Gaza

- **Population affected:** Over **2 million people** grappling with severe shortages
- **Displacement rate:** More than **70% of population** experiencing multiple displacements
- **Key achievement:** Leveraged **Telegram platform** already trusted by local community
- **Vaccination success:** Significant participation rates in **polio vaccination campaign**
- **Communication channels:** Multi-platform **chatbots** providing real-time information
- **Approach:** Built on **existing community networks** rather than creating new systems



## Ethiopia

- **Crisis scope:** One of **Africa's most complex** humanitarian situations
- **Dashboard utilization:** Only **6% of humanitarian partners** consistently providing feedback data initially
- **Training reach:** Joint training sessions across **multiple working groups**
- **Assessment integration:** AAP indicators added to **Multi-Sector Needs Assessment** and **Displacement Tracking Matrix**
- **Regional coverage:** AAP monitoring systems across **6 key regions** (Kachin, Shan North, Southeast, Chin, Sagaing, Magway)
- **Coordination improvement:** Enhanced collaboration through **Inter-cluster Coordination Groups**



## Ukraine

- **Displacement scale:** Over **5.5 million internally displaced persons** (IDPs)
- **Digital penetration:** **High digital penetration** and robust public transport networks
- **Expert deployment:** NORCAP expert deployed **August 2023** to support IOM
- **Approach:** Context-appropriate **digital systems** matching local needs and habits
- **Infrastructure:** Functioning cities with **robust public transport networks** amid high-intensity warfare
- **Innovation:** Easy-to-use **online platforms** for cash assistance and internal digital feedback systems



## Myanmar

- **Humanitarian need:** Approximately **18.6 million people** in need of assistance
- **Displacement:** Over **1.7 million people** displaced
- **Language diversity:** More than **40 ethnic languages** spoken across crisis-affected areas
- **Training impact:** **170 humanitarian staff** from **65 organisations** trained in AAP practices
- **Coordination reach:** Regular AAP working group meetings involving **over 75 organisations**
- **Geographic coverage:** AAP monitoring systems across **7 key regions**
- **Tools developed:** **RICAA** (Rapid Information, Communication, and Accountability Assessment) and **CORA** (Community Consultations on Response Actions)



## Latin America (Venezuelan Crisis)

- **Displacement scale:** Over **7.7 million individuals** fleeing Venezuela
- **Regional scope:** **17 countries** covered by R4V platform response plan
- **Funding challenge:** Regional response plan less than **one-third funded**
- **Coordination achievement:** **45 organisations** across national and sub-national levels in accountability working groups
- **Platform establishment:** **R4V platform** established in **2018** as coordinating mechanism
- **Innovation:** Harmonised **cross-border feedback mechanisms** and communication channels



# Establishing Accountability Systems in Gaza's Humanitarian Crisis

## Key Takeaways

- Community networks already in place are key to setting up strong accountability systems, especially in complex humanitarian settings.
- When working remotely, we need creative ways to overcome fragmentation and coordinate accountability across different places and teams.
- Long-term humanitarian response relies on genuine partnerships with local actors and staff to keep services relevant and ongoing for people affected by crisis.

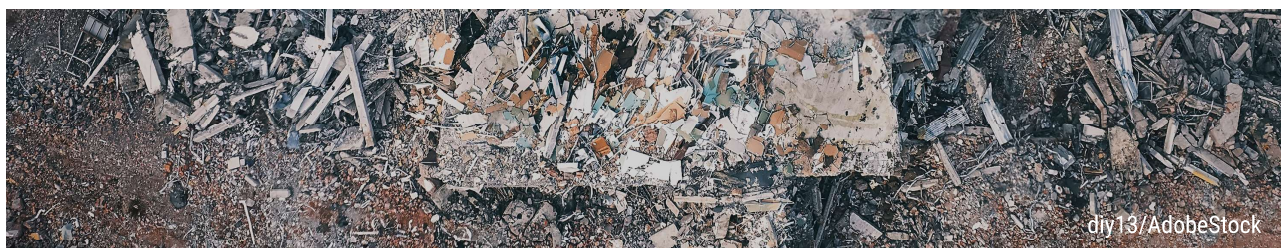
## Background and Context

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza, long-standing due to years of blockade and conflict, escalated significantly in October 2023. This deterioration left a population of over two million people grappling with severe shortages of basic necessities, including food, water, healthcare, and electricity. With more than 70 percent of the population experiencing multiple displacements, vulnerabilities were exacerbated by severe access restrictions, creating unique challenges for humanitarian actors.

The destruction of infrastructure, compounded by security risks and limited access for humanitarian personnel, rendered traditional approaches to community engagement and accountability unfeasible. Furthermore, widespread mistrust of international organisations, particularly those perceived to align with aggressors, made building trust challenging. Against this complex backdrop, NORCAP supported UNICEF in establishing a system to ensure the voices of the people of Gaza's were heard.

Amjad al Fayoumi/NRC

**DISPLACED PALESTINIANS MAKE THEIR WAY BACK TO THEIR HOMES IN NORTHERN GAZA**



## Main Achievements and Outcomes

- Leveraging Existing Community Networks for Engagement:** Understanding that creating entirely new engagement platforms in the context of Gaza would be neither efficient nor effective, the expert capitalised on the widespread use of Telegram. This platform, already trusted by the local community, became the means by which critical information was shared and feedback gathered. Community activists and leaders, including humanitarian workers and influencers, operated these channels independently, offering real-time updates. Through established dialogue with channel moderators, UNICEF successfully shared vital information about aid registration, healthcare campaigns and local partner support, ensuring humanitarian messaging reached populations despite infrastructure challenges.
- Developing an Accountability Roadmap:** The expert developed a roadmap to integrate community engagement and accountability across UNICEF's operations. This framework harmonised AAP practices by addressing overlaps between different working groups, standardised communication and engagement materials, and strengthened inter-agency collaboration by adapting UNICEF's customer relationship management (CRM) system for broader use. This roadmap helped drive accountability across UNICEF Gaza's humanitarian programming, making it a central pillar – rather than a peripheral concern – of the response.
- Enhancing Communication During the Polio Vaccination Campaign:** A key success was UNICEF's polio vaccination campaign, in which community engagement proved essential to countering misinformation and increasing community participation. The approach included easy-to-understand materials for those handling community feedback, creative use of hotlines with pre-recorded messages tailored to specific campaigns, and multi-platform chatbots that provided real-time information. These coordinated efforts resulted in significant vaccination participation rates, with a number of caregivers citing the accessibility of information as a key motivating factor in their decision to participate.

## Impact on the Response

The integration of CEA into UNICEF's operations markedly improved the relevance and responsiveness of humanitarian efforts in Gaza. By using trusted communication channels, such as Telegram, and working through local actors, the response achieved greater transparency and trust between humanitarian actors and crisis-affected communities while ensuring aid distribution more effectively addressed community-identified needs.

The establishment of inter-agency common feedback mechanisms proved particularly transformative, reducing duplication and streamlining feedback processes for communities. Together with digital solutions, such as chatbots and hotlines, these mechanisms significantly enhanced access to information and services, creating a more inclusive humanitarian response that better served the needs of displaced and vulnerable populations.

## Challenges and Solutions

The expert confronted significant operational challenges in establishing effective accountability systems in Gaza's complex crisis environment. The destruction of infrastructure, severe access restrictions, and the widespread displacement of the population (with individuals being displaced up to seven times) made traditional accountability approaches unfeasible. This was further complicated by fragmented humanitarian operations, with teams scattered across multiple locations, and a lack of collective inter-agency frameworks for accountability. Additionally, the context demanded navigating widespread mistrust of international organisations, particularly those perceived to have connections with aggressors.

These challenges were addressed through innovative adaptations and strategic relationship-building. Rather than creating new accountability structures, the NORCAP expert worked with existing trusted community networks, demonstrating that effective accountability requires the pairing of international expertise with local knowledge and access. The expert also developed digital and non-digital solutions, recognising that a reliance on technology would exclude many community members, given the digital infrastructure in Gaza had been severely compromised.



WIDESPREAD DESTRUCTION OF HOMES AND INFRASTRUCTURE IN BEIT HANOUN, NORTH GAZA

## Lessons Learned

- The Gaza assignment demonstrated that for accountability to work well, it needs to build on existing community structures and trusted local networks, rather than being imposed through standard humanitarian systems. While typical approaches often focus on setting up new systems and channels, the complex situation and damaged infrastructure in Gaza made it more effective to use community-led platforms and existing ways of communicating. This experience highlighted that **successful accountability mechanisms must be built on a deep understanding of local dynamics and trusted community channels, particularly in contexts where international organisations face credibility and access challenges.**
- The experience underscored the importance of balancing digital and non-digital accountability solutions. In a context with little digital infrastructure and multiple displacements, relying solely on technological solutions would have excluded many. This revealed that **effective accountability requires a complementary approach combining innovative digital tools with traditional face-to-face engagement, ensuring inclusive access even in highly constrained operational environments.**
- This work highlighted that effective accountability to affected populations requires a sustainable approach that transfers skills between international and local actors. Working remotely with fragmented teams across multiple locations initially limited the programme's effectiveness. The addition of a local staff member based in Ramallah who could access Gaza transformed the initiative's reach and impact. This experience demonstrated that **successful accountability programming depends on building local**

**capacity through knowledge transfer, where international technical expertise supports and empowers local staff who understand community dynamics. This sustainable approach, central to NORCAP's value proposition, ensures continuity of community engagement even in operational environments with low trust and limited access, rather than creating dependency on international presence.**

- The experience highlighted how meaningful accountability depends on collective, inter-agency frameworks rather than siloed organisational approaches. Despite individual agencies' efforts to establish robust feedback mechanisms, the absence of coordinated accountability systems led to duplication and fragmentation. **Successful humanitarian responses must prioritise unified accountability frameworks to enable coordinated and consistent engagement with crisis-affected populations, even when this requires a significant investment in inter-agency collaboration and system harmonisation.**

## Future Opportunities

Several opportunities exist to build upon systems established during this assignment. The creation of community centres would create vital safe spaces for community engagement whilst addressing barriers such as illiteracy and limited mobile access. This infrastructure could be enhanced through the development of child-specific feedback mechanisms, particularly given UNICEF's mandate and the current gap in gathering direct feedback from young populations. These initiatives, coupled with the sustained capacity building of local partners and staff on AAP principles, would ensure long-term sustainability and better integration of accountability across all programmes.



# Strengthening Community Engagement and Accountability in Conflict-Affected Regions with Limited Access in Ethiopia's Humanitarian Response

Nick Gathu Njoroge/NORCAP

## CLUSTER AAP AND GENDER FOCAL PERSONS ORIENTATION IN ETHIOPIA'S SOMALI REGION

### Key Takeaways

- Including accountability in technical working groups helps improve the response by using shared monitoring tools and indicators.
- Using evidence and community feedback, along with AAP indicators, ensures activities match what communities need and prioritise.
- Working together across technical groups makes the most of resources through creative partnerships and shared tools.
- Local coordination and building local skills are key to lasting accountability, especially in areas affected by conflict.

### Background and Context

Ethiopia faces one of Africa's most complex humanitarian situations, shaped by multiple overlapping crises. The devastating conflict in Tigray from 2020 to 2022 left millions in need of humanitarian assistance and created lasting vulnerabilities across northern Ethiopia. Although the Pretoria Peace Agreement ended active fighting in Tigray, new conflicts have emerged in Amhara and Oromia, resulting in additional humanitarian needs and operational challenges. These compounding crises occur within a difficult operational environment characterised by limited humanitarian access to conflict-affected areas.

The situation reached a critical point in 2023 when concerns about aid diversion led to the temporary suspension of food assistance, underscoring the urgent need for robust accountability mechanisms. Prior to NORCAP's involvement, accountability efforts were often siloed within individual working groups, causing duplication of efforts and reducing their impact. The Community Voices Dashboard, which collates all feedback from community engagement across the response and from multiple partners and has the potential to serve as a key accountability tool, remained underutilised, with only 6 percent of humanitarian partners consistently providing feedback data.

To address these challenges, NORCAP assigned an Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) Advisor to OCHA Ethiopia in early 2024, building upon previous support that had helped establish initial AAP frameworks and action plans. The expert concentrated on fostering the integration of accountability approaches in technical working groups and enhancing collaboration across humanitarian coordination in the country.

## Main Achievements and Outcomes

- Integration of AAP Mechanisms:** The expert worked to bring community feedback and accountability (AAP) into all parts of the humanitarian response, linking them with gender, protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), and the inclusion of people with disabilities and older people. By aligning tools like the Gender Road Map, PSEA hotline mapping, and risk assessments, they supported better tracking and planning. This joined-up approach cut down on duplication and made the overall response more effective, moving away from the disconnected accountability methods used in the past.
- Evidence-Based Planning:** Working with the Assessment and Analysis Working Group, the expert helped improve evidence-based decisions by adding AAP indicators to key tools like the Multi-Sector Needs Assessment, Displacement Tracking Matrix, and Humanitarian Situation Monitoring. This data fed into the Humanitarian Needs Overview and shaped a more people-centred Humanitarian Response Plan. They also improved the Community Voices Dashboard with comparison features and worked with the Inter-cluster Coordination Group to make sure community views were included in planning, helping to build a strong base for evidence-driven humanitarian action.
- Capacity Strengthening:** This assignment focused on strengthening local capacity. The expert ran joint training sessions with the PSEA Network, the Ethiopia Humanitarian Fund (EHF) team, and the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, while boosting engagement with area-based Inter-Cluster Coordination Groups. A practical AAP coordination framework was tested in the Somali Region using cluster-nominated AAP focal points. Working with civil society and women-led organisations was key to showing their vital role in collective accountability, localisation, and gender equality. A technical review of EHF funding proposals and new guidance on including AAP helped make sure accountability is built into future funding.



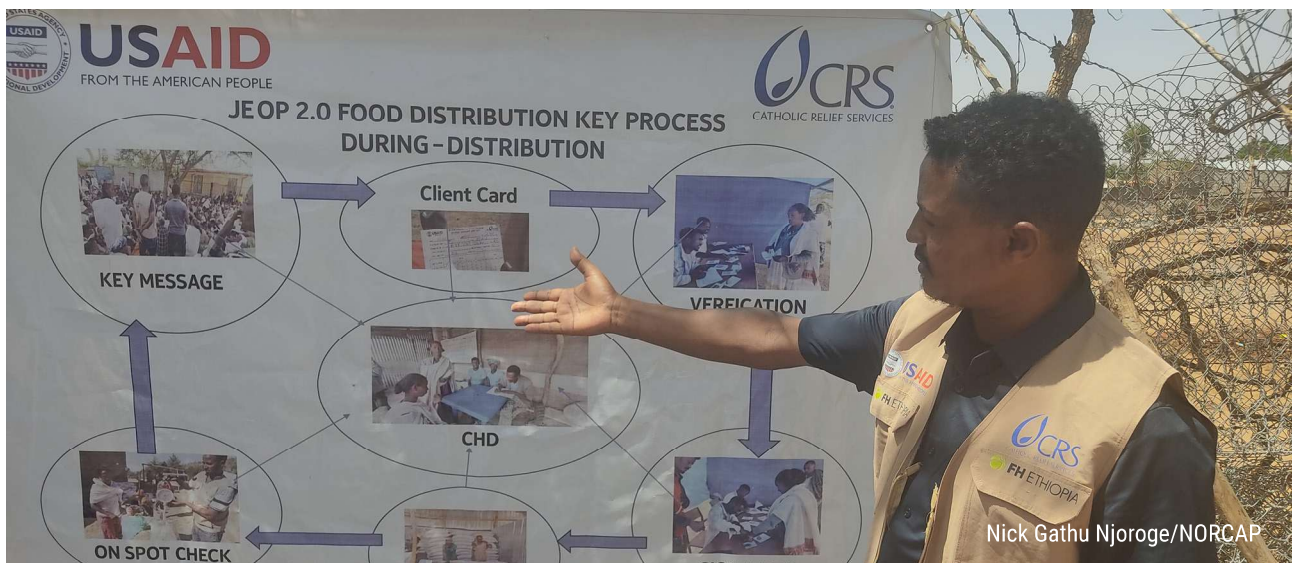
AGRICULTURE CLUSTER WORKSHOP IN ETHIOPIA

## Impact on the Response

The integrated approach to accountability made coordination more efficient by cutting down on duplication and making better use of limited resources. Improved tools for gathering evidence supported more informed decisions, helping ensure humanitarian actions were more in line with community needs and priorities.

Adding AAP indicators to key multi-sector assessments meant that community views were consistently included in planning, and helped confirm feedback trends shown in the Community Voices Dashboard.

One of the most important impacts was on the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), where the expert made sure AAP was part of the planning process—leading to a stronger link between what communities said they needed and how the response was designed.



**CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES FIELD MANAGER EXPLAINING THE FOOD DISTRIBUTION PROCESS FLOW**

## Challenges and Solutions

Limited funding for cross-cutting work meant new ways of working together were needed. The expert tackled this by building partnerships across technical working groups and creating tools that could be used for multiple purposes. To help humanitarian workers operate more safely in conflict areas, the expert worked with the Access Working Group and the Ethiopia Humanitarian Country Team Communications Group to create key messages and a rollout plan. This helped raise awareness of humanitarian principles and what humanitarian actors do, both among communities and local responders.

Partners faced two main problems when sharing feedback for the Community Voices Dashboard. First, they were worried about data protection and the risk of negative attention for the agencies involved. The expert responded by offering targeted sessions that explained the dashboard's safeguards and showed how shared analysis of feedback can help improve humanitarian efforts. Second, partners pointed out a lack of AAP resources specific to Ethiopia. They asked for tools and guidance in local languages, as well as simpler ways to analyse feedback and more training on how to work with qualitative data.

The Ethiopia assignment took place in a setting with few resources, where limited funding and competing demands made it hard to implement accountability activities. The lack of dedicated funding for cross-cutting work especially affected how long joint AAP efforts could last. This showed how financial pressures can limit both the quality and the reach of

accountability, and why sustainable systems need dedicated resources and strategic teamwork across sectors to make the most of limited funds.

The assignment also showed that evidence-based methods are essential for real accountability. The Community Voices Dashboard gives useful feedback on community views, but broader assessments provide deeper understanding of what communities truly need. To create a people-centred response, it's vital to include cross-cutting indicators and involve local actors in analysing the data. This highlights the value of involving cross-cutting working groups in assessment design and programme planning, to ensure community perspectives are clearly reflected.

Finally, the experience showed that strong accountability needs steady support at both national and local levels. While there was good commitment at the national level, putting systems into practice locally was often limited by a lack of capacity and resources—especially in conflict areas. The assignment made clear that long-term accountability depends on supporting both national coordination and local delivery, using tools and methods that are suitable for challenging settings.

## Lessons Learned

- The Ethiopia assignment operated in a resource-constrained environment where funding limitations and competing priorities consistently challenged the implementation of accountability mechanisms. The lack of dedicated funding for cross-cutting initiatives particularly affected the sustainability of collective AAP activities, requiring innovative collaboration and resource sharing approaches. This experience highlighted how financial constraints can fundamentally impact the quality and reach of accountability efforts; **sustainable accountability mechanisms necessitate dedicated resources and strategic collaboration across technical working groups to maximise limited funding opportunities.**
- The assignment emphasised that evidence-based approaches are crucial for fulfilling accountability commitments. While the Community Voices Dashboard provides valuable data on community preferences, multi-sectoral assessments yield deeper insights into the needs and priorities of crisis-affected communities. To achieve truly people-centred humanitarian responses, it is vital to integrate cross-cutting indicators and involve local actors in the analysis. This underscores the **importance of engaging cross-cutting technical working groups in assessment design and humanitarian programme cycle analysis to ensure community perspectives are effectively represented in response planning.**
- The experience emphasised that effective accountability systems require consistent engagement and support at both national and sub-national levels. Despite strong buy-in at the national level, **the implementation of accountability mechanisms was often challenged by limited capacity and resources at sub-national levels, particularly in conflict-affected areas.**

The assignment illustrated that **sustainable accountability necessitates balanced investment in both national coordination systems and local implementation capacity, supported by context-appropriate tools and methodologies that can operate in challenging environments.**



## Future Opportunities

The humanitarian response in Ethiopia should build on what has already been achieved. Key priorities include improving coordination at the local level by strengthening partnerships with local actors and using cluster or cross-cutting focal points to better integrate AAP into coordination efforts, rather than relying on separate sub-national AAP groups. It is also important to grow the Community Voices Dashboard by increasing the involvement of local and women-led organisations, helping ensure feedback reflects a wider range of voices and supports stronger advocacy with clusters, donors, and agencies. Creating a shared feedback system across agencies would also help close the loop more effectively, while supporting sensitive case management and building community trust.

To facilitate this, it is vital to include AAP as a central part of the Ethiopia Humanitarian Country Team's Localisation Strategy, improve AAP training and capacity-building for local organisations, and secure reliable funding for accountability work. These steps, along with better monitoring and efforts to break down silos between technical working groups, will help build a stronger accountability system and improve support for people affected by crisis.



# Establishing Accountability Systems in Ukraine's Digital Humanitarian Response

Filippov/UNICEF

## Key Takeaways

- To achieve real accountability, it's often more important to focus on getting core systems and processes right than chasing short-term results.
- Accountability methods should be based on a deep understanding of the context, not just relying on standard humanitarian approaches.
- The best way to get organisational support for accountability is to show how it directly improves programmes and helps meet donor requirements.
- Long-term accountability needs careful planning to use existing resources and budgets more effectively, rather than relying on new funding alone.

## Background and Context

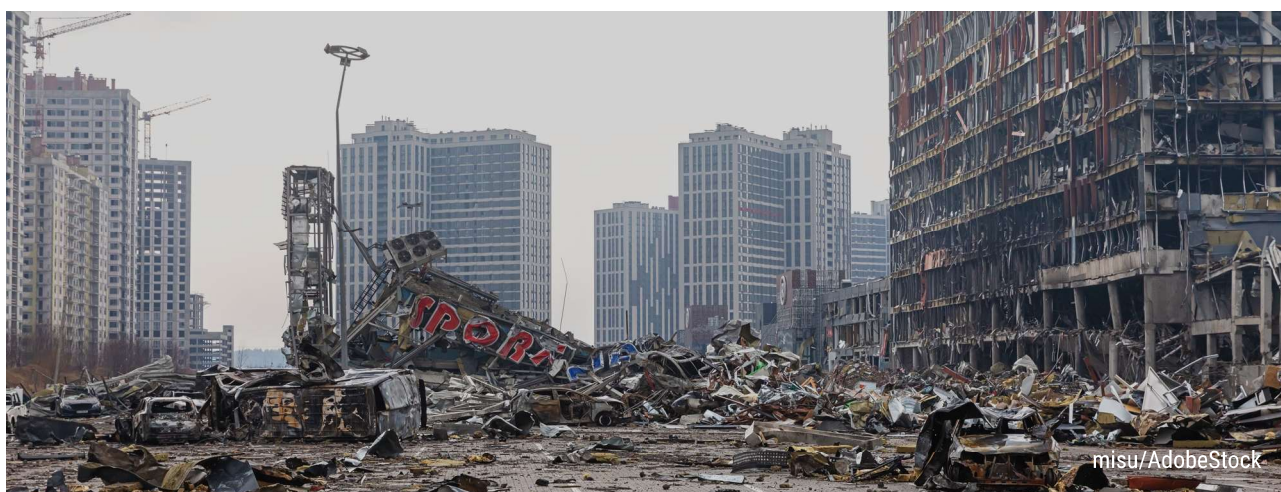
The humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, triggered by the ongoing conflict since 2014 and sharply intensified by the full-scale invasion in February 2022, has left millions in need of assistance. With over 5.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and countless others affected, the scale and complexity of the crisis rival the largest humanitarian responses globally. Unlike traditional displacement scenarios often centred around camps, the Ukrainian context involves dispersed populations living in functioning cities with robust public transport networks amid high-intensity warfare, necessitating tailored approaches to community engagement.

Ukraine's unique socio-political and economic landscape further complicates the response. The country boasts high digital access and a relatively strong civil society, which presents opportunities for leveraging technology and local partnerships in humanitarian programming. However, the ongoing conflict has severely strained local capacities, disrupted livelihoods, and created significant gaps in service delivery. Traditional humanitarian approaches, often designed for static settings and developing economies, needed to be reimaged to address Ukrainian communities' dynamic and complex needs. These challenges underscored the urgency for robust accountability mechanisms to ensure that assistance reached those most in need effectively and equitably.

Humanitarian agencies initially faced significant challenges in accountability and community engagement. When attempted, feedback systems were limited or fragmented, and agencies struggled to communicate effectively with crisis-affected populations in a country with high digital access but little organisational capacity to engage at this level. Recognising the gaps, NORCAP deployed a CEA expert in August 2023 to support the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in implementing systematic AAP mechanisms.



Sandor Szmuto/AdobeStock



## Main Achievements and Outcomes

- Integration of AAP into Core Programme Operations:** The NORCAP expert helped build community engagement and accountability from the ground up, making it a key part of IOM Ukraine's work by embedding AAP into daily processes, standard procedures, and budgeting systems. At the same time, they strengthened internal capacity by recruiting staff and providing training. The focus was on identifying and combining AAP budget lines, bringing AAP data and indicators together in one place, and making accountability part of every programme activity. Funding for AAP came from reviewing project proposals and donor commitments. This groundwork made accountability a lasting, built-in part of how programmes are delivered, rather than something extra.
- Development of Context-Appropriate Digital Systems:** Recognising Ukraine's strong digital skills and infrastructure, the expert used technology that matched local needs and habits. This included creating easy-to-use online platforms for cash assistance and building internal digital systems to manage community feedback. By using tools that fit the local context instead of bringing in outside methods, these efforts reached more people and worked more efficiently, staying accessible to the Ukrainian population.
- Cultural Shift in Organisational Mindset:** By showing clear benefits and actively advocating for change, the expert helped shift attitudes toward accountability across IOM Ukraine. They worked with programme managers to build understanding of how AAP can improve programme delivery and meet donor requirements. As a result, accountability moved from being seen as optional to being recognised as a vital part of the humanitarian response.

## Impact on the Response

Putting a strong AAP strategy in place greatly improved IOM's humanitarian work in Ukraine. The expert helped turn widespread support for AAP into concrete action across the organisation, making the response more focused on the needs and voices of people affected by the crisis. This led to better services and stronger trust between communities and humanitarian actors.

Improvements to the call centre, clearer systems for sharing information, and a dedicated budget created an important way for people, especially in remote or conflict-hit areas, to give feedback. Adding AAP to MEAL processes also made sure that feedback was used to learn lessons and improve programmes.

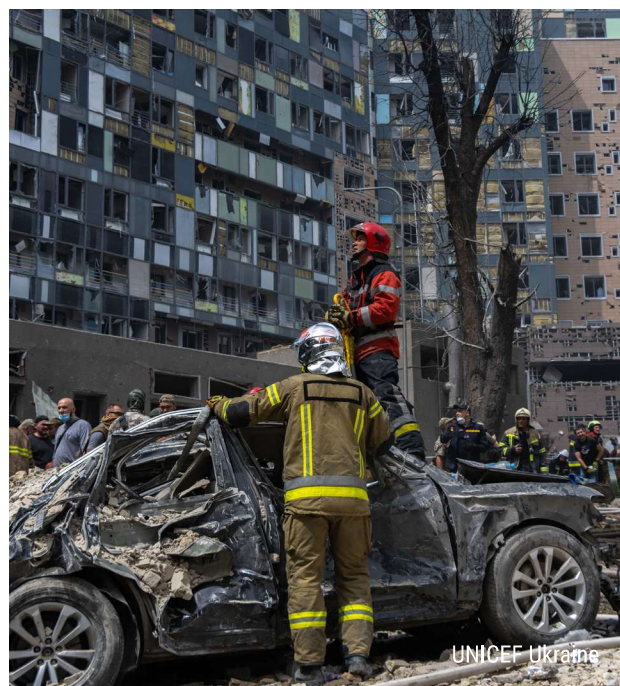
## Challenges and Solutions

The expert faced several practical challenges when setting up strong accountability systems within IOM Ukraine. One of the biggest was the difficulty of hiring skilled staff in a context of near-full employment, where many organisations were competing for the same talent. While there was broad agreement on the importance of AAP, there was limited know-how on how to scale it up in this unique response.

The expert took a steady, long-term approach to tackling these issues. Instead of using quick fixes, they focused on building lasting systems and processes, including digital tools that worked with Ukraine's existing technology. By showing how accountability could improve programme quality and meet donor expectations, they gradually won support from programme managers—while also building internal capacity through staff training.

## Lessons Learned

- The Ukraine assignment showed that standard accountability approaches, often designed for low-income settings, need major adjustments for more digitally connected, middle- and high-income contexts. Traditional humanitarian methods often depend on in-person engagement and paper-based tools, but Ukraine's strong digital skills and tech infrastructure required different, more suitable solutions. This experience highlighted that **successful accountability mechanisms must meet populations where they are rather than assume the transferability of approaches from other humanitarian responses.**
- The assignment showed how crucial it is to set up strong basic systems before moving on to more visible accountability activities. In a setting where core accountability structures were missing, it was important to resist the urge to chase quick results and instead focus on building lasting, reliable mechanisms. This demonstrated that **effective accountability requires methodical development of workflows, standard operating procedures, and resource allocation processes, even when this means slower initial progress on more immediate or visible activities.**
- The experience highlighted that digital tools, when suited to the context, can greatly improve the reach and efficiency of accountability systems. While some in the humanitarian sector were hesitant about using technology, Ukraine's strong digital infrastructure and tech-savvy population made online platforms and digital feedback systems more effective and easier to access than traditional methods. This demonstrated that **successful accountability mechanisms must embrace context-appropriate technology while ensuring systems remain accessible to all crisis-affected populations.**



## Future Opportunities

Looking ahead, there are clear opportunities to build on the accountability systems set up during this assignment. Key areas include expanding feedback mechanisms to reach more regions, making sure accountability is fully integrated across all programme teams, and creating clear guidance for digital engagement that reflects Ukraine's strong tech skills. Strengthening partnerships with Ukrainian civil society organisations is especially important to make sure accountability systems are locally relevant and can last beyond the current response. With these next steps, the work already done could become a model for accountable humanitarian action in digitally connected, middle- and high-income settings.



# Supporting Community Engagement and Accountability Remotely: Overcoming Access Constraints in Myanmar

Osaze/Adobe Stock

## Key Takeaways

- Remote accountability tools and creative ways of engaging communities are essential in areas that are hard to access.
- Working closely with local organisations and using tools that fit the local culture are key to long-lasting community engagement.
- Strong coordination between agencies and shared approaches help get the most impact when resources and communication are limited.
- Ongoing support for building local skills and accountability systems at the subnational level is vital for lasting results.

## Background and Context

Myanmar faces one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, with approximately 18.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. The February 2021 military coup dramatically escalated existing challenges, leading to widespread armed conflict, economic collapse, and the displacement of over 1.7 million people. The crisis has been further compounded by the impacts of COVID-19, climate-related disasters, and the chronic erosion of basic services.

The humanitarian response operates under severe access constraints, with many regions completely inaccessible to international and national personnel due to ongoing conflict and government restrictions. More than 40 ethnic languages are spoken across crisis-affected areas, creating significant communication barriers. The operating environment is further complicated by limited technological infrastructure and frequent communication transmission shutdowns, particularly in conflict-affected regions, rendering traditional approaches to community engagement impossible.

Prior to NORCAP's involvement, the humanitarian response struggled to maintain consistent accountability mechanisms in hard-to-reach and newly-affected areas, leading to fragmented community engagement approaches and limited feedback from crisis-affected populations. To address these gaps, NORCAP assigned two Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) experts between February 2022 and January 2023 and from July 2023 to June 2024. The first operated from the capital but with limited access to crisis-affected areas. Owing to visa challenges, the second operated almost entirely remotely. The experts focused on developing innovative solutions for maintaining engagement and accountability in areas to which humanitarian organisations had little access, primarily working through the Protection and Shelter/Non-Food Items (NFI) clusters.

## Main Achievements and Outcomes

- Systematic Accountability Framework Development:** The first NORCAP expert set up strong AAP monitoring systems across key regions in Myanmar, including Kachin, Shan North, Southeast, Chin, Sagaing, and Magway. This involved a thorough review of AAP activities across the country, with a focus on communication, community engagement, feedback systems, and inclusion. The second expert created a framework to coordinate accountability work more effectively nationwide. Through ongoing advocacy, both experts helped adjust the national AAP strategy and workplan to better reflect community needs, and ensured standard AAP indicators were included in the Myanmar Humanitarian Response Plan and Humanitarian Fund guidelines.
- Inter-Agency Coordination Enhancement:** The experts improved coordination by setting up a new inter-cluster initiative that brought together the Protection, CCCM, Shelter, WASH, and Food Security Clusters, and created field-level working groups in key subnational areas. They also boosted inter-agency coordination by supporting the CERF Under-Funded Emergencies AAP project. This joint effort brought together WFP, IOM, UNHCR, and Plan International, and led to regular AAP working group meetings now involving over 75 organisations at both national and local levels. As part of this work, the expert trained 170 humanitarian staff from 65 organisations in AAP practices through targeted capacity-building sessions.
- Community Engagement Tools Development:** The experts tested and confirmed the use of shared tools, including the Rapid Information, Communication, and Accountability Assessment (RICAA) and Community Consultations on Response Actions (CORA). These tools were adapted to local cultures and used alongside improved feedback systems in camps in Myitkyina, Lashio, and Taunggyi. They also set up lasting systems for community engagement by creating local guidance in Burmese and standard templates for collecting and recording feedback, helping to keep trusted and preferred communication channels open to a wide range of communities.

## Impact on the Response

The assignments helped keep accountability systems in place across Myanmar, even in areas that were hard to access. Introducing AAP tools marked a major shift from one-off efforts to more structured accountability monitoring, allowing for evidence-based decisions within clusters even without direct access.

The focus on building capacity remotely and using digital tools showed that support from a distance can still strengthen accountability. By creating tools and methods designed for remote use, the experts found new ways to support community engagement in hard-to-reach areas. Setting up standard inter-agency coordination also improved how information was shared and helped avoid overlap, even in isolated locations.

## Challenges and Solutions

The humanitarian response in Myanmar faces serious access challenges, made worse by frequent communication outages and limited capacity of the national AAP platform to support local efforts. To address this, the NORCAP experts created remote training and information systems that local partners could easily use. They also developed flexible feedback tools that can work without constant internet access. These efforts were supported by partnerships with local organisations, helping build their ability to run and sustain accountability systems. However, further AAP support needs to be more tailored to the local context, with activities better matched to on-the-ground realities.

A lack of resources, especially dedicated AAP staff, made it hard to build strong accountability systems. The experts responded by designing easy-to-use tools and templates. Still, the focus was mainly on setting up feedback systems, with less emphasis on maintaining them over time. Confusion over terms like “communicating with communities,” “community engagement and accountability,” and “AAP” has also led to overlapping technical working groups in the field. Securing long-term funding for AAP activities remains a key challenge and will need ongoing advocacy and support.



## Lessons Learned

- The complex operating environment in Myanmar has resulted in severe humanitarian access limitations and frequent staff turnover within organizations. This has significantly impacted the consistency of accountability mechanisms and the stability of coordination structures. Community engagement and accountability require sustained, long-term commitment; **frequent disruptions to humanitarian operations and high staff turnover significantly impact the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms and hinder the development of localised coordination and accountability structures.**
- The assignment highlighted the critical importance of adapting technical solutions to local contexts and infrastructure limitations. While innovative tools like the AAP 5W Tracker showed promise, their effectiveness was contingent on local buy-in and practical usability. **Technical innovations must be balanced against local capacity and infrastructure constraints to ensure sustainable implementation of accountability mechanisms.**
- The experience demonstrated that effective accountability systems depend heavily on strong local partnerships and cultural adaptation. Despite the challenging context, organisations showed significant commitment to improving accountability practices when provided with appropriate tools and support. **Sustainable accountability mechanisms require developing culturally appropriate tools that can be effectively transferred between staff members, helping mitigate the impacts of high turnover while ensuring continuity of institutional knowledge within national and local organisations.**

## Future Opportunities

Looking ahead, the humanitarian response in Myanmar would benefit from expanding the tracking of AAP activities to additional clusters beyond Protection, Shelter/NFI, while developing a centralised digital platform for real-time accountability data analysis, as proposed in the CERF UFE project. Critical priorities include strengthening cross-border accountability mechanisms for displaced populations, establishing dedicated AAP focal points within each major implementing organisation, and creating sustainable funding mechanisms for long-term accountability initiatives.



# Harmonising Cross-Border Accountability Approaches in the Regional Venezuelan Displacement Response

Iván Stephen/ACNUR

## DISPLACE-AFFECTED PEOPLE BOARDING BUSES IN SOUTHERN MEXICO

### Key Takeaways

- Regional coordination is key to making sure community engagement is consistent across different countries
- Working with local partners and adapting to local cultures is vital for long-lasting accountability efforts
- New technology needs to be used in ways that fit within available funding
- Linking accountability efforts to existing coordination structures helps them grow and reach more people

### Background and Context

The Venezuelan displacement crisis represents one of the largest migration phenomena in recent history, with over 7.7 million individuals fleeing economic instability, political unrest, and humanitarian crises. Latin America and the Caribbean have absorbed the vast majority of this exodus, creating unprecedented challenges for host governments and humanitarian agencies attempting to provide cohesive, sustainable responses. The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded these difficulties, deepening existing inequalities and straining host countries' capacities to respond effectively.

The crisis is complex, and exists in an environment characterised by multiple, interconnected challenges. Migration patterns are diverse and fluid, including pendular movement across borders, transit migration through multiple countries, and longer-term settlement in host communities. This complexity is augmented by limited access to regularisation processes and social services for displaced

populations, creating additional vulnerabilities for those seeking assistance. Growing socioeconomic pressures in host communities have led to increased xenophobia and strain on local resources, further complicating integration efforts.

The humanitarian response is equally multifaceted, with the Refugees and Migrants Response Plan of the R4V platform (Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants, the forum that coordinates the response to the refugee and migrant crisis in Venezuela) spanning 17 countries with varying capacities, priorities, and approaches. Initial responses were often fragmented, with individual countries developing isolated solutions that failed to address the cross-border nature of the crisis. This fragmentation was particularly evident in accountability mechanisms, where different approaches to community engagement and feedback collection made it difficult to maintain consistent communication with mobile populations or address issues that crossed national boundaries.

The Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V) was established in 2018 as a coordinating mechanism to address these challenges, working to bridge gaps between host governments, international agencies, and civil society organisations. The platform operates as a unique model of humanitarian coordination, specifically designed to address the complexities of regional displacement while respecting national sovereignty and existing humanitarian architecture. Prior to NORCAP's involvement, however, the platform struggled to maintain consistent accountability mechanisms across borders, leading to gaps in community engagement and reduced effectiveness of response efforts.



## Main Achievements and Outcomes

- **Regional Framework Development:** NORCAP helped create a comprehensive accountability framework under the R4V platform, standardising feedback mechanisms while allowing for local adaptations. This included harmonised communication channels, integration of accountability in regional response plans, and strengthened stakeholder collaboration, particularly with diaspora and migrant-led organisations.
- **Inter-Agency Coordination Enhancement:** The assignment strengthened coordination through the establishment of harmonised cross-border feedback mechanisms and communication channels. This pioneering collaboration brought together key humanitarian actors, establishing regular inter-agency accountability working groups reaching 45 organisations across national and sub-national levels. The initiative enabled consistent information sharing and coordinated response efforts across multiple countries, while ensuring protection-sensitive approaches to feedback collection and response.
- **Community Engagement Systems Development:** The NORCAP expert facilitated the development of culturally-adapted feedback mechanisms integrated into protection services, establishing clear pathways for community input. These systems were supported by comprehensive guidance materials developed in multiple languages, ensuring accessibility across diverse communities. The creation of standardised templates for community consultation and feedback documentation, now utilised by multiple partner organisations, has established a sustainable framework for ongoing community engagement.

## Impact on the Response

The assignment helped change humanitarian practice in Latin America by showing that strong accountability systems can work across borders through regional coordination. Introducing shared feedback systems marked a big shift from scattered efforts to more organised accountability monitoring, allowing for evidence-based decisions even when direct access was limited.

The expert's focus on regional coordination and consistent methods showed that structured support can improve accountability in different settings. By creating tools and approaches designed for cross-border use—such as along the Bolivia-Chile and Colombia-Panama borders—the assignment found new ways to keep communities engaged across the region. Setting up standard inter-agency coordination also improved information sharing and cut down on overlap between countries.

## Challenges and Solutions

The humanitarian response in Latin America faces severe funding constraints, with the [regional response plan less than one-third funded](#). To manage this, the NORCAP expert developed simple, low-cost approaches using locally available technology, along with flexible feedback systems that could work within tight budgets. These efforts were supported by strong partnerships with local organisations, helping maintain community engagement despite financial pressures.

A key success in this region was placing experts who spoke fluent Spanish and/or Portuguese. Speaking the local language was essential for building trust, understanding detailed feedback, and communicating clearly with affected communities. Future assignments should continue to prioritise language skills as well as technical know-how to ensure the best results.

Limited resources, especially the lack of dedicated accountability staff, made it harder to run full CEA activities. The expert tackled this by creating easy-to-use tools and templates that fit smoothly into existing workflows. Still, securing long-term funding for accountability remains a challenge that needs ongoing advocacy and support.



DISPLACED VENEZUELANS CROSSING THE BORDER INTO COLOMBIA

## Lessons Learned

- The regional nature of the Venezuelan displacement crisis, combined with severe funding limitations across Latin America, has created unique challenges for maintaining consistent accountability mechanisms. The dramatic underfunding of humanitarian operations (currently at 17 percent) has led to a concerning pattern of programme interruptions and limited implementation capacity. Community engagement initiatives require predictable, sustained funding; **severe resource constraints and funding unpredictability significantly undermine the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms and threaten the sustainability of regional coordination efforts.**
- The assignment revealed fundamental tensions between formal humanitarian accountability frameworks and Latin America's strong cultural traditions of community engagement. While standardised approaches and tools were necessary for regional coordination, their implementation needed to acknowledge and build upon existing local practices. **Humanitarian accountability mechanisms must strike a careful balance between regional standardisation and respect for established local approaches to community engagement to**

## ensure meaningful participation and sustainable implementation.

- The experience highlighted how cross-border displacement requires innovative approaches to feedback collection and response. The movement of populations across multiple countries demanded new ways of tracking and sharing community feedback to strengthen informed decision-making both sides of a border, while ensuring protection-sensitive approaches. **Effective accountability systems in regional displacement contexts require flexible mechanisms that can function across borders while maintaining consistent standards and protecting vulnerable populations.**

## Future Opportunities

Looking ahead, the humanitarian response in Latin America would benefit from expanding the regional accountability framework to additional sectors, while developing more sustainable funding mechanisms for long-term accountability initiatives. Critical priorities include strengthening cross-border accountability mechanisms for displaced populations, establishing dedicated accountability focal points within each major implementing organisation, and creating sustainable funding mechanisms for long-term accountability initiatives.

# Lessons and Recommendations for Humanitarian CEA Operations



E Ruiz/UNICEF

The analysis of NORCAP's recent community engagement and accountability (CEA) assignments reveals important insights for strengthening accountability mechanisms in complex emergencies. While each crisis presents unique challenges, several common threads emerge regarding the effective implementation of accountability and engagement approaches across different operational environments. These lessons have significant implications for how humanitarian organisations approach accountability, particularly in contexts characterised by access constraints, advanced digital infrastructure, and the increasing importance of empowering local organisations.

## **LESSON ONE: Sustainable accountability mechanisms must be built upon existing community structures and local partnerships.**

The experiences across all case studies demonstrate that while standardised accountability frameworks can help coordinate accountability at the global level, they need to be flexible enough to be adaptable to local contexts and capacities. Success depends on leveraging existing community networks, cultural practices, and local expertise while providing appropriate technical support to enhance these structures.

- **RECOMMENDATION: Humanitarian agencies should prioritise partnerships with local organisations and invest in their institutional capacity.** Humanitarian organisations should allocate specific resources to strengthen local partners' accountability capabilities, including dedicated funding for training, tool development, and ongoing technical support. This investment should build upon existing community engagement practices and mechanisms rather than replacing them.

**LESSON TWO: Digital solutions must be balanced**

**with practical limitations and access constraints.** The contrasting experiences in Ukraine and Myanmar highlight how technological approaches to accountability must be carefully calibrated to local infrastructure and community preferences. While digital tools can enhance efficiency and reach, over-reliance on technology risks excluding vulnerable populations, particularly in contexts with limited connectivity or digital literacy.

- **RECOMMENDATION: Develop flexible, hybrid approaches to accountability that combine digital and traditional engagement methods.** Organisations should invest in context-appropriate technology while maintaining alternative channels for community engagement, ensuring inclusive access across different population groups and operational environments.

**LESSON THREE: Regional and cross-border crises require innovative approaches to accountability coordination.**

The R4V platform experience in Latin America demonstrates how displacement crises spanning multiple countries demand new frameworks for maintaining consistent accountability mechanisms across borders. Traditional country-based approaches often prove insufficient for addressing the needs of mobile populations.

- **RECOMMENDATION: Establish harmonised regional accountability frameworks with standardised tools and methodologies.** These frameworks should facilitate cross-border information sharing and coordination (mitigating protection risks) while allowing for necessary local adaptations supported by dedicated funding for regional coordination mechanisms.

**LESSON FOUR: Resource constraints significantly impact the sustainability of accountability mechanisms.**

Across all contexts, limited funding and human resources emerged as critical challenges to maintaining effective accountability systems. The experiences in Ethiopia and Myanmar in particular highlight how funding unpredictability can undermine long-term accountability initiatives.

- **RECOMMENDATION: Integrate accountability costs into core programming budgets rather than treating them as optional add-ons.** Humanitarian organisations should establish dedicated funding streams for engagement and accountability activities and advocate with donors for sustainable, multi-year funding specifically allocated to CEA activities.

**LESSON FIVE: Remote operations require specific**

**adaptations to maintain effective accountability.** The experiences in Gaza and Myanmar demonstrate both

the possibilities and limitations of implementing CEA mechanisms in contexts with severe access constraints. While remote support can be effective, it requires careful consideration of local capacities and communication channels.

- **RECOMMENDATION: Develop specific guidance and tools for implementing accountability mechanisms in remote operations.** This should include strengthening local staff capacity, establishing clear communication protocols, and creating flexible feedback mechanisms that can function with limited direct access to crisis-affected populations.

**LESSON SIX: In a world with limited humanitarian funding, CEA remains essential for ensuring aid efficiency**

**and effectiveness.** The documents highlight how properly implemented accountability mechanisms ensure resources are prioritised where they're most needed, prevent aid diversion, enhance local leadership, build trust, improve adaptability, and ensure inclusion of vulnerable groups.

- **RECOMMENDATION: Mainstream CEA into all humanitarian programming by integrating it into organisational strategies and operational plans.** Humanitarian agencies should establish dedicated CEA budgets within core funding, develop staff competencies in community engagement practices, and create measurable indicators to track CEA effectiveness. Organisations should also advocate with donors to recognise CEA as an essential component of humanitarian response rather than an optional add-on, emphasising how it maximises the impact of limited resources through targeted, community-driven interventions.



Urdaneta/UNICEF Panama



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