ReliefWatch: Designing a new service for people affected by humanitarian crises

Synthesis Report

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Acknowledgements

Contents

Executive Summary

This report summarises the experience and lessons of the first year of designing and developing an accountability service for affected people that used humanitarian aid and services, including its underlying rationale, guiding principles and concept. The concept has been developed in response to a perceived lack of a means of affected people to hold the humanitarian system to account. While having the means to hold those exercising power accountable for their actions is commonly considered a right across much of public life, it is not reflected in the current reporting mechanisms of humanitarian organisations. In recent years, the digital tools and underlying ethos behind review platforms are among the drivers for a number of initiatives aimed at creating a more direct means for affected people to access information and feedback directly to humanitarian organisations. Within the sector, calls for a 'participation revolution' in global policy initiatives such as the Grand Bargain have highlighted the pressing need to correct the imbalance of power between affected people and the humanitarians that provide them with aid and services.

Beginning with early ideas for an 'ombudsman' or 'watchdog' function for the humanitarian sector, the design team used an iterative design process to create and refine the concept with affected communities and humanitarian practitioners and policy-makers. Northern Iraq provided a single context in which to ground the concept, and presented a range of considerations that impacted the design process. With a diverse population of aid recipients living in displacement camps and damaged urban areas, affected people interviewed had attempted to contact humanitarian organisations in many ways. Social media, complaints boxes and the Iraq IDP Information Centre hotline were some of the channels used by aid users, with varying success. Many humanitarians interviewed in the country recognised the lack of effective channels for receiving feedback, with surveys and assessments suggesting affected people have been insufficiently consulted on assistance provision (GroundTruth, 2019; OCHA, 2019). The design process yielded a number of key insights which informed the design of the ReliefWatch concept:

- That in the interests of creating an inclusive service that a diverse population with differing needs could use, the means of collating feedback would need to be flexible and open-ended, utilising technology already in use in that particular context but also carefully considering the inequalities of accessing the internet and mobile phone-based tools;

- That such a service would need to be both independent of, but act as a complement to, the existing assessment and accountability apparatus currently working in the particular context of Iraq, exploiting the clear gap that exists for allowing affected people to voice their feedback and experiences while being informed by, and feeding into, the approaches humanitarians are already using to understand needs;

- That any service aiming to be useful and sustainable for affected people would need to deliver a 'closed feedback loop' that ensures questions and complaints are listened and responded to. As a voluntary service, the ReliefWatch concept cannot ensure this, but can collate and present feedback in a manner as useful as possible to responders, ensuring replying is as easy as possible.

This concept has been designed as a means by which affected people can give their feedback directly to humanitarian organisations. Comprising both digital channels, in the form of a chatbot hosted on pre-existing messaging applications, and in-person interviews and fora facilitated by service coordinators, affected people can provide both feedback on the assistance they have received, or unmet needs. For affected people, Loop provides a means by which they can comment on what they have received in a safe and open manner as well as, in the case of the 'analog' channel, a space in which to discuss priorities with other members of the community. These functions were designed to be as inclusive as possible, taking into account the differing levels of access to technology and preferences of those included in the co-design process.

The service would then collates this feedback and presents it to organisations and the public. Though anonymous, data on the post's general location can assist humanitarian organisations in assessing the impact of programmes and in planning future responses. The quality of such feedback would be an important asset for the service and offers the means for people to provide less restrictive qualitative data, comprising the kind of rich experiences and stories that have the power to highlight people's agency, priorities and wishes for the future. For many humanitarians who were interviewed and co-designed the concept, this type of information was lacking and very different to the 'tick-box' exercises that often comprise current accountability tools.

As an important feature of effective and sustainable accountability mechanisms, fostering a two-way dialogue between affected people and humanitarians was also a key principle of the concept and much of the design process was spent ensuring data was presented in as useful a manner as possible for organisations to find and respond to. The approach proposed by ReliefWatch and Loop has no power to sanction humanitarian actors or enforce greater accountability, however. Top listener badges can recognise organisations that respond to feedback, but the real incentive for humanitarians that engage with the service would be the offer of a more complete and direct understanding of those they seek to help, and the opportunity to put commitments to be more accountable to affected people into practice. In a complementary manner to existing methods of assessment, such a service offers an additional source of information for planning programmes that could over time increase their effectiveness and legitimacy. The latest iteration of ReliefWatch can be seen at www.reliefwatch.io.
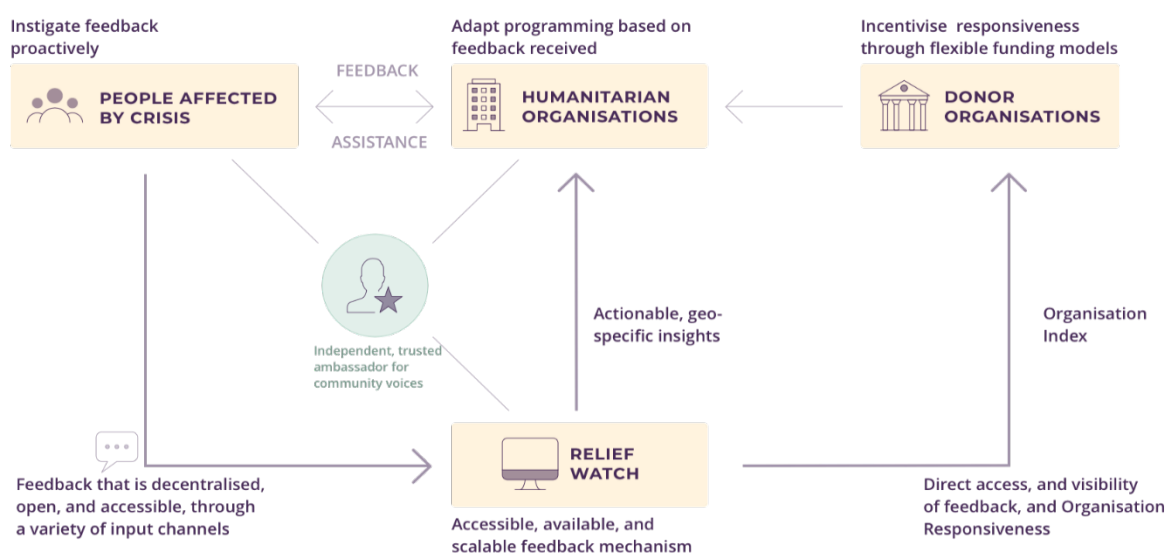

Fig 1: Diagram of the basic concept for ReliefWatch and its key groups of users

Introduction

This report details a design project for a new independent service for the users of humanitarian assistance. 'ReliefWatch' is a means by which aid recipients can provide qualitative feedback on the assistance and services they receive, and collates their responses for the purpose of providing useful and actionable feedback to humanitarian staff and donors. In doing so, it works to facilitate a more direct relationship between humanitarian organisations and the communities they work with, and providing donors and the public with the tools to access it.

ReliefWatch was designed to address key gaps in the humanitarian sector in facilitating greater participation and providing accountability to affected people (AAP). Accountability is a crucial basic facet of any authority exercising power responsibly, and the means to hold governments, businesses and other authorities to account for their actions is commonly considered a basic right. The global trend toward online ratings platforms is indicative of a growing appetite for a means to allow users to feedback directly to companies, and a set of incentives for businesses that rely more upon maintaining reputation than the threat of punitive measures.

While the humanitarian system is configured differently, the lack of any similar direct, independent services is increasingly prominent. The dominance of accountability mechanisms oriented toward donors marginalises the voice of affected people, and contributes to damaging narratives that see those affected by 'humanitarian disasters' as victims without agency. It also denies humanitarian responders the opportunity to hear directly from those they seek to assist, meaning assistance often does not meet pressing needs. While there has been a recent increase in the number of reporting mechanisms in the sector, some have been criticised as not reliably answering submitted questions and complaints (or a 'closed feedback loop') and the Core Humanitarian Standards have assessed progress on commitments to provide such mechanisms as generally poor (Austin et al, 2018: 10).

The ReliefWatch project began in December 2018 as a collaboration between design experts Sonder Collective, the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute, and Humanity United, a foundation dedicated to bringing new approaches to global problems. ReliefWatch builds on a concept elaborated in a previous project known as Constructive Deconstruction, which utilised design thinking – an approach to problem solving that gives prominence to empathising and co-designing with potential users, and adopts an iterative approach to building and testing – as its methodology. ReliefWatch also used this approach, and drew upon a global steering group of experts, funders and humanitarian professionals in a co-design process throughout 2019. The project focused its the prototyping phase in Northern Iraq, where stakeholders from affected communities, and the humanitarian sector participated in the design of the concept in parallel with the global steering group.

Through the mechanism, people affected by crisis can express their needs and provide feedback on humanitarian services in their area through a combination of digital channels, comprising a chatbot system built on Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, and face-to-face interviews and fora. These channels are facilitated by service coordinators, who build trusted relationships with communities, listen to their expressed needs and feedback, and ensure the integrity of their voices are maintained while they translate what they hear onto the Relief Watch platform. People's stories are anonymous, but organisations can see metadata such as the location and date of posting of the author to make following-up on reports easier. If organisations respond to a story, the original author is notified. A heatmap function locates down to the level of general area, helping strike a balance between the power of a system that makes feedback public and the need for autonomy.

This concept has been designed to independently provide an additional channel for humanitarians to hear directly from affected people, and for humanitarian organisations, be a complementary source of information to existing methods of assessing needs and impact. Organisations can receive recognition, not based on their perceived effectiveness and performance, but on their engagement with feedback, and the frequency of their responses. An organisation marker can suggest to affected people how likely it is that the relevant assistance provider will follow up on the feedback they submit, with the intention of creating incentives for fostering more of a 'two-way dialogue' between those that provide and those that use aid and services.

This report sets out the rationale, design process and concept behind ReliefWatch. The first section considers the lack of accountability to and participation of affected people in humanitarian responses, and their impacts: that as a result aid can be inappropriate and unresponsive, and that the sector's unequal power dynamics are reinforced. It also considers why current approaches to accountability by the sector are limited in scope, considering political and cultural issues that mean data is rarely open and funding is restricted. The second section sets out the development of the ReliefWatch concept and how it offers a means of filling these gaps, including explaining how an iterative design thinking approach was utilised during creation and testing of the concept, and some key insights from the design process. Section three details ReliefWatch, including considering its primary audiences and the key principles which informed how it evolved over the design process, before describing the feedback collation process and its organisation marker function. The final section considers key questions of integration, incentives and sustainability, as well as next steps for the initiative following its prototyping and development.
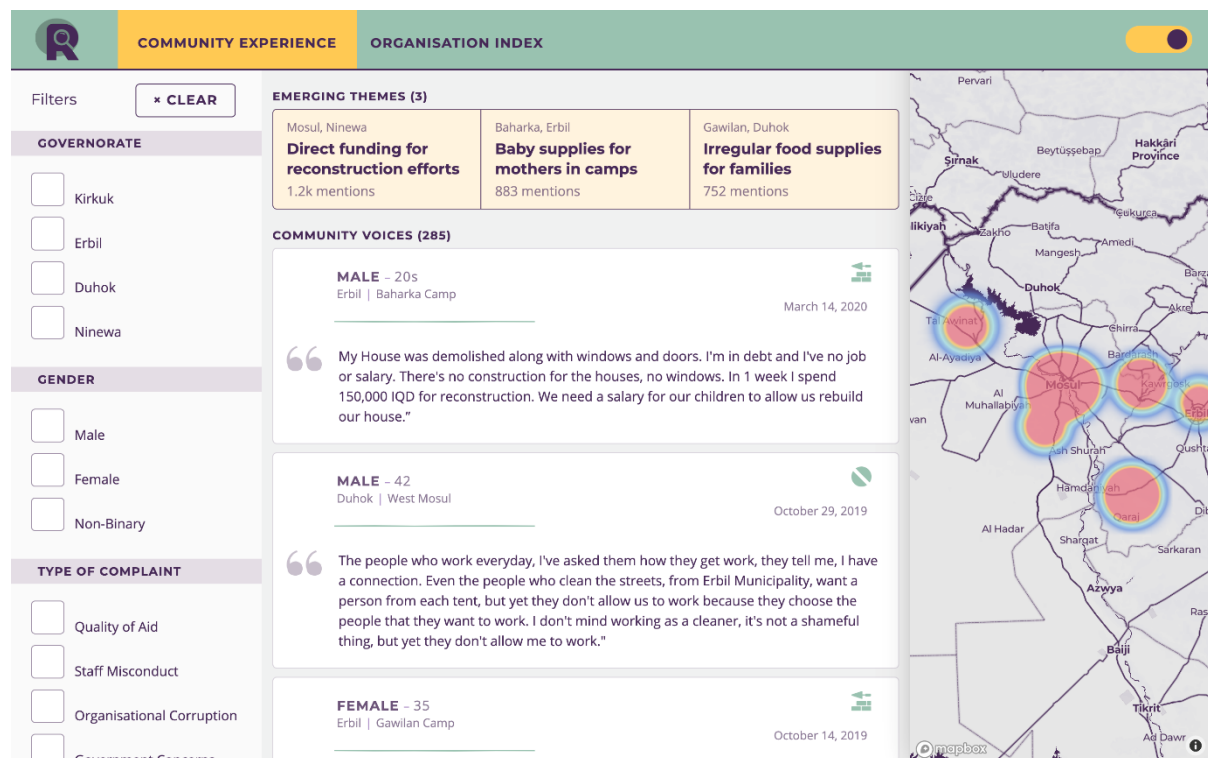

Fig 2: A screenshot of the latest ReliefWatch prototype webpage with map, comments and filter

1. Background and rationale

The problems with the humanitarian sector have been apparent across so many responses and organisations for so long that they are often considered 'systemic', and are well documented:

humanitarian action is 'inadequate, inappropriate, inefficient, untimely and inflexible' and as a result, 'not fit for purpose' (HPG and ThinkPlace, 2018: 21). A supply driven model that treats people affected by crisis as passive consumers, the sector continues to not adequately listen to its users or allow them the power to make decisions over the assistance and services they use and receive. Without a common understanding of needs, efforts to coordinate responses are often limited and there is little by way of collective governance and accountability. Just as fundamentally, the sector has also been accused of 'forgetting the human in humanitarian', and not investing in the kind of human relationships and trust-building that can help mitigate the historical paternalistic attitudes that continue to manifest themselves in contemporary responses. These issues have been diagnosed in detail but limited progress has been made on alleviating them, primarily due to the incentive structures that currently drive the humanitarian system. Many of these commonly cited problems stem from poor accountability to affected people.

Accountability could be considered as the 'process of holding actors responsible for their actions' in applying the notion that 'individuals, agencies and organisations are held responsible for executing their powers according to a certain standard' (Tisne, cited in McGee and Gaventa, 2010: 4). The internet and social media offers new means for users of products and services to feedback directly to businesses, bypassing more bureaucratised processes of auditing and surveys. Ratings platforms such as TripAdvisor and Google Reviews compile hundreds of millions of reviews of services, with the former receiving 456 million visits a month and radically changing many of the old dynamics of the tourist industry (Kinstler, 2018). Unlike other forms of accountability, such tools rely less on legalistic notions of 'subjecting power to the threat of sanctions' and rarely contain an explicit 'enforcement' mechanism (Schedler, 1999). Instead, the accountability exercised by tools such as ratings platforms and feedback forums look to the power of the market and consumer choice as a way to reward companies that do well and dissuade customers from badly performing actors. Though seen as a key test in governance and private businesses, the humanitarian sector lags behind in meeting and facilitating the right of those it claims to serve to hold them to account, through providing a means to receive questions, complaints or feedback, and listening, acknowledging and replying to them (Bonino et al 2015: 4).

While the means to voice opinions and provide feedback does not constitute the entirety of accountability, insufficiently listening and harnessing the perspectives of affected people creates numerous problems with the humanitarian sector, and a considerable imbalance in a system that risks its reputation and sustainability. The impacts of this key gap can be set out around two central themes: that a lack of accountability to affected people results in assistance being both inappropriate and unresponsive, and that this reinforces power imbalances and paternalistic relationships.

a. The current state of the system

In the current humanitarian system, the people most affected by crisis have the least involvement in decision-making and holding others to account. While there are a range of initiatives and funds intended to increase the influence and participation of affected people that humanitarian organisations have carried out, various structures and incentives of the sector, and how it has evolved and been funded, mean radical and larger-scale changes to its fundamental dynamics and relationships are very difficult.

While systems of accountability do exist in the sector, such mechanisms tend not to be oriented to affected people themselves: since aid users cannot exercise the same kind of consumer choice and power as buyers of goods and services elsewhere, reporting and monitoring in the humanitarian sector is oriented 'upward' from service providers to donors. These processes have been criticised as

disconnected from accountability to affected people, as well as not sufficiently informing project-level decision-making and learning (HPG / Thinkplace, 2018; Dillon, 2019). Conversely so-called 'downward' accountability of the type labelled as 'accountability to affected people' is still largely comprised of newer and less stringent mechanisms and have been described as 'tokenistic at best' (Konydynk, 2018: 6). The particular features of the humanitarian sector that direct systems of accountability toward donors, and the extreme imbalance of power between aid users and providers, present a compelling case for a more ambitious interpretation of accountability whereby affected people are at the centre of these mechanisms.

i.   Aid is inappropriate and unresponsive

The most obvious consequence of not having an effective means of engaging with, and being held to account by, affected people is that assistance is often not aligned with what is needed. The 'appropriateness' of aid is a common source of criticism, and unnecessary non-food aid, low quality supplies and inadequate shelters continue to be a feature of almost all humanitarian contexts. From the perspective of affected people, responses often leave much to be desired, with 75% of surveyed people in seven crises reporting that the aid they receive does not meet their most pressing needs (IFRC, 2019: 3). The impact of inappropriate aid can also be demonstrated by the scale and frequency of affected people selling some or all of the assistance they receive, in order to buy more useful goods and services that constitute a sizeable black market that surrounds displacement camps in humanitarian contexts across the world (Poole, 2019; Spiegel, 2017).

De-contextualising diverse situations as 'humanitarian emergencies' and assessing need on the basis of organisational mandate has resulted in a limited set of 'life-saving' siloes that fails to capture many of the needs cited by affected people (ALNAP, 2018: 146). It masks the 'greater spectrum of human aspirations' with all of its complexity: good livelihoods, providing children with a decent education and to live in peace are frequently cited by affected people as priorities, but are less common areas of focus for humanitarian agencies (DuBois, 2018: 6). However, with humanitarian emergencies increasing in length to the point at which the divide between it and 'development' work becomes more blurred, the neglect of more complex and longer term goals is increasingly difficult to justify. With limited monitoring tools, the sector is poor at recognising the shifts in needs among affected people over time.

Rather than engaging with this wider perspective on crises and the real concerns of affected people, a lack of accountability helps preserves a 'universalism' of both context and needs. This incentivises business-as-usual, with humanitarian responders still disconnected from the contexts from which they work (Collinson and Duffield, 2013: 7). With little engagement or understanding of the specific causes of political failures that cause humanitarian crises, this disconnect often manifests itself in physical barriers between aid 'users' and provider, and with it the disparities in recruitment and wealth that remain stereotypes of the sector. As Austin (et al, 2019: 34) summarises, there is a general lack of questioning of the unconscious biases 'that affect the attitudes, behaviours and actions of different humanitarian actors', a symptom of an exclusionary humanitarian system caused by a lack of opportunity for affected people to influence how it operates.

Consulting directly with affected people has been demonstrated to be beneficial to both aid users and humanitarian organisations: it informs programming decisions that reduce waste or inefficiencies, builds legitimacy among affected communities and likely leads to greater community involvement through labour and resources, and can be a key reason behind a general improvement in the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian programmes (Brown and Donino, 2014: 20). But as the humanitarian sector is effectively a supply, rather than demand-driven service, the systems of

accountability remain oriented toward those with financial power, and so sacrifices the potential benefits for delivering quantifiable 'impact' in sectors and contexts of interest to donors.

ii.   The sector's unequal power dynamics are reinforced

The current state of responses and the system creates and preserves unequal power structures. Despite this, it also cements a 'humanitarian exceptionalism' and symbolic differentiation between international humanitarians and everyone else in a crisis, with the former claiming a monopoly on 'neutral' and 'impartial' assistance. While this difference can be justified in distributing aid in complex conflicts, this separation reinforces a hierarchical system that places affected people at the bottom of a supply chain with little power, presents international actors from working with often more effective local responders, and drives unhelpful labels that marginalises aid users from the system that supposedly serves them. Those who respond in order to relieve human suffering exercise considerable power, and in the absence of effective checks or a means by which users are able to complain of poor quality services or practises, this power can, from the perspective of affected people, often be unchecked. In not including the voices of affected people as a central component of all programmes, the current system usually does not allow affected people the right to hold powerful groups – in this case, humanitarian organisations – that have an important role in their lives to account (Brown and Donino, 2014). In denying a degree of meaningful choice in what assistance is received, it negatively affects the assertion of humanitarian organisations that in doing their work, they are improving not just the material existence of affected people but supporting 'dignity' and 'empowerment' – ideas frequently used among aid providers.

Instead, a lack of accountability to affected people ensures the basic structures and incentives of the system are kept constant, and continues to reinforce the perception that affected people are victims without agency, in a similar manner to stereotypical depictions of victims of famine still often used in the fundraising campaigns of international agencies. In this understanding of crises, affected people are grateful for receiving life-saving assistance from 'saviours' from wealthy countries, a patronising and infantilising depiction that reinforces neo-colonialist attitudes of 'we know best' that can influence programming and delivery. This is a particularly egregious stance to keep in the present day, when more people affected by crises are taking active roles in wider civil society, activism, fundraising and enterprises than ever before, making use of social media and other technologies to speak directly to potential donors and policy makers to tell their own stories, hold the powerful to account and inspire change, as well as making large but poorly-recognised contributions to humanitarian responses. In contrast, by not providing a means for affected people to shape their own services and societies, the approach of traditional aid actors can look outdated and reactionary.

With the numbers of people affected by crisis and using aid and services rising, the need for putting them at the centre of accountability mechanisms in the humanitarian sector becomes ever more pressing. Engaging with communities could also increase the expectations and demand for accountability more generally, and over time bring about positive shifts in power structures and dynamics in an emancipatory manner (Brown and Donini, 2014: 22). But without them, the sector will continue to be a source of frustration to affected people, and increasingly illegitimate. In recent years, high-profile safeguarding scandals have accelerated a wider crisis of legitimacy for humanitarian organisations, and demonstrated the worst of what can occur in a system dominated by extreme imbalances of power.

b. Why are current approaches to accountability limited?

In contrast to the structure and incentives of the humanitarian system that results in a lack of accountability to and participation by affected people, the majority of humanitarian organisations

agree that these are important objectives of their work. Terms such as 'accountability to affected people' (AAP) have been used widely and explicitly for at least the past decade. The demand for greater consultation, participation and accountability across the sector has led to various approaches being implemented, albeit in a mostly ad-hoc manner. Humanitarian feedback mechanisms in various forms are becoming established, collecting information for a variety of purposes including taking corrective actions in responses and strengthening accountability toward affected people (Bonino, 2014: 4). Global policy initiatives and leaders among the large humanitarian agencies also drive change within the sector.

However, a recent CHS report that rated progress on accountability commitments by its members concluded that, while stakeholders believe changes are necessary and there is significant evidence of the negative impact of current practice, commitments are still vague and 'some processes and systems [are] not conducive to change' (Austin, 2018: 29). The ability of such processes in changing the underlying incentive structures described in the previous section is ambiguous, with little attempts to 'rebalance the underlying power disparities between aid providers and recipients' (Konyndyk and Worden, 2019: 5). Varying interpretations of what constitutes meaningful accountability, persistent gaps in 'feedback loops' that leave many complaints and questions from affected people unanswered, and their lack of scale suggest that current approaches may not be as effective as required. Perhaps as a consequence, the sector has also experienced a recent proliferation of independent platforms for feedback that are not affiliated with response organisations, in an indication of both the desire for the voices of affected people to be heard, and the sometimes delayed response from the formal sector in developing their own mechanisms seen as effective and credible. This section sets out this landscape and proposes that these current approaches are currently limited by a range of political, operational and financial barriers.

i. Meaningful accountability and participation requires ceding power

The most significant barriers to greater accountability and participation are political and cultural. Placing a greater emphasis on affected people in deciding on assistance provision necessarily involves humanitarian actors giving significant power away, at the expense of their own. From a perspective of self-interest, they could argue humanitarian actors, already under threat from demanding donors and host governments, risk losing further power to a more empowered, informed and active group of users with the means of influencing the reputation of projects and organisations which may mean an impact on their own funding and longer-term viability. Arguably, the lack of binding accountability mechanisms in the sector is indicative of this incentive to keep the current status quo (Kelly, 2019: 4). What accountability tools do exist are limited to voluntary mechanisms, and have also been criticised as overly technocratic: a set of 'tick-box' exercises that divert energy from grappling with substantial questions over power (Knox-Clarke, 2017: 22). The system is capable of change: new ways of organising responses such as the cluster system, or delivering assistance such as in the form of cash for example, have changed the sector since their adoption. However, changes within the sector are largely a result of 'top-down, bureaucratic' agendas that do not suit proposals to cede power (Kreuger et al, 2016: 9).

ii. Existing accountability efforts are uncoordinated

The degree to which humanitarian organisations engage with affected people in the process of implementing responses is considered to be slowly improving. A recent study of the sector has reported 'improving participation in the reporting period centred around establishing systems of consultation' in assessment and feedback systems, citing that 51% of affected people surveyed reported that they had been consulted on what they needed prior to distribution (ALNAP, 2018: 157). Many humanitarian organisations now have their own AAP systems in operation. UN agencies

such as UNHCR are members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) task team on Accountability to Affected Populations, which seeks to institutionalise AAP through the creation of guidance and policies. Large NGOs have also developed their own systems, such as Oxfam's 'Your Word Counts' project, which trains its staff to best categorise feedback in order to be picked up by relevant programmes. In 2019, the Red Cross / Red Crescent Movement adopted the 'Movement Commitments for Community Engagement and Accountability' that commits the IFRC, ICRC and national societies to integrating community engagement and accountability into their work, and 'commit to systematically listening to, responding to and acting on feedback' from aid users (RC/RC, 2019: 7).

However, while 'AAP' appears to be increasingly recognised as important and in demand, the manner in which it is conducted has been seen as an uncoordinated and often ad-hoc. This lack of coordination can also be illustrated by the multiple terms in use for accountability initiatives, such as communication for development (C4D), communications, community engagement and accountability (CCEA) and communicating with communities (CwC) (Donino and Brown, 2014). While a proliferation of such approaches may be beneficial for improving programmes, the effect of this from the perspective of aid users is likely to be less useful. With often complex layers of sub-contracting arrangements in the sector, it can be difficult to identify individual projects or organisations, and the collecting of survey and interview data can often be a slow process meaning respondents may have to recall the impact of older interventions.

While there are growing numbers of AAP initiatives carried out by organisations, *collective* approaches implemented at scale are rarer. Common feedback services, whereby a single entity receives requests and manages the response, including by forwarding on to the relevant organisation, have been implemented in instances such as the Nepal Common Feedback Mechanism (CDAC, 2019). The 2017 formulation of the Communication and Community Engagement Initiative (CCEI) between UN agencies (led by UNICEF), the IFRC and key INGOs, was similarly developed in order to support 'system-wide collective accountability to affected people' (OCHA, 2016: 3) and aims to collate feedback and provide technical assistance and guidance to country programmes on how to improve community engagement. However, there are fewer instances of efforts to institutionalise AAP across sectors and organisations and mechanisms in which to feed information from multiple agency mechanisms into decision-making are largely absent (ALNAP, 2019: 177). This is despite ambitious global pledges such as those in the Grand Bargain that call for 'a participation revolution' where signatories committed to 'include people receiving aid in making the decisions which affect their lives'. Despite the enthusiasm for accountability tools, efforts have often been duplicated and uncoordinated, with one evaluation of the regional response to the Syria crisis identifying over 150 feedback hotlines in Lebanon alone (Lavey and Searle, 2014: 7).

iii.   Collected data is not open and limited

There is more data being captured and circulated in the humanitarian sector than ever before, with the stringent demands of donors upon organisations meaning surveys and assessments are becoming a more important and sophisticated element to the planning and monitoring of responses. However, while there has been an increase in reporting mechanisms, a proliferation of these tools are not sufficient to improve the participation of and accountability for affected people (ALNAP, 2018). A key reason for this has been the limitations of collected data, including a lack of openness in sharing among humanitarian actors, and the often narrow scope of needs assessments and surveys that comprise most of the means of collecting data. While in general, the humanitarian sector has made considerable progress with ensuring the data generated by assessments is publicly available, in a competitive funding and operational environment, data can often still be seen to be an asset to be

hold onto rather than shared (OCHA, 2020: 6). While the results of assessments and feedback mechanisms could inform future project design or donor reporting, not having data publicly available leaves affected people out of debates on the aid and services they use.

This lack of data on what people think of aid lessens the impact and pressure that publicly available questions and complaints would place on responders to assess and answer such feedback, and in so doing 'closing' the so-called 'feedback loop'. Aid users are provided with few channels to put their perspective across, and progress on developing these approaches is slow. While commitment 5 of the Sphere Standards proposes 'communities and people affected by crisis have access to safe and responsive mechanisms to handle complaints', and commits signatories to communicate these functions to affected people, protect complainants, and to ultimately close the feedback loops, a recent assessment gave progress on this goal the lowest overall score of the nine commitments (Austin et al, 2018: 10). Not making data available hinders progress on this goal.

The lack of publicly available data on what users think about the aid they receive is one of the drivers behind a recent proliferation of feedback mechanisms outside of the formal humanitarian sector, independently working to hold the responders and authorities in humanitarian contexts to account. Kuja Kuja for example collects feedback in refugee contexts, originally in East Africa, and makes findings publicly available. Re:Viewed allows users to provide feedback on NGOs they interact with, primarily focusing on the refugees hosted by and travelling through Greece. These independent organisations combine both ratings systems – in the case of Kuja Kuja, a simple traffic light scale – with opportunities for affected people to provide more detailed feedback. They join the survey work of organisations that directly asking aid users a predetermined set of questions on the assistance they do or do not receive, outside of any humanitarian agency or specific programme. These platforms are disruptive to the underlying dynamics of the humanitarian system, with many built around and using business intelligence and market research dynamics such as net promotion scores that originate in the private sector.

However, many of these channels are also limited in scope, and whether such approaches help further the kind of 'participation revolution' that many humanitarian organisations are committed to is less clear: many of these mechanisms are operated in a centralised manner often in the global North, and rely upon purely quantitative survey data. This entails affected people being found and asked for their opinion on the aid and services they have received, rather than actively participating in a more open-ended consultation. Like the closed surveys that often inform needs assessments, such tools are vital from the perspective of humanitarian responders with limited resources, who need to identify priority areas and sectors. However, restricting the accountability process to more limited questions and surveys risks missing the full picture of the needs and priorities of affected people, and allowing a more pro-active and propositional rather than merely reactive voice to become more prominent.

iv.   Funding is restrictive

Funding in the humanitarian sector is indeed tightly controlled and limited in size and scope, leading some organisations to assert that AAP is difficult to justify to many donors. Although there are some reform initiatives which seek to increase the flexibility of funding, much of the money flowing into the sector remains 'earmarked' to specific outputs, crisis contexts and projects. Despite explicit Grand Bargain commitments to make funding more flexible, the proportion of unearmarked contributions to the nine largest UN agencies fell to 17% of their funding in 2018 (Development Initiatives, 2019: 67). Funding is also often strictly time-bound, often lasting one year or less, meaning there is little by way of time and space in programme cycles to incorporate AAP

mechanisms, have them feedback information, and change the implementation of projects as a result.

Funding is also extremely competitive in the sector and this drives a market-like environment that operates on the basis of 'supply, demand, competition, monopolies and investor bias' (Slim, 2013). Initiatives to collaborate, complement the work of others and joint advocacy are often subsumed by the incentives to compete, defend mandates and sell an image of impact at scale. This marketplace does not of course mean that affected people themselves are provided with a choice, where they can consider the various trade-offs with which goods and services offered by a range of providers. Instead, the 'benefits' of competition are, like accountability mechanisms, oriented toward donors. These restrictions and incentives have traditionally meant a lack of available funding for the kind of longer-term, participatory approaches and engagement that have been identified as important gaps in humanitarian programmes. Building more egalitarian and open engagement with affected communities – what has been referred to as 'tea-drinking' relationships – is considered a valuable investment but is difficult to measure (MSF, 2014). What AAP activities are funded tend to be limited to particular projects, intended to measure the impact of a particular intervention, and as such cannot be said to necessarily be a beneficial process for the affected community.

To change this, donors would have to make their funding more flexible, which seems unlikely in the wider context of demands for greater scrutiny of where aid funding is allocated. Some donors have made progress on providing more unrestricted funding through means of pooled funds, with others explicitly stressing the need for AAP: Canada and Sweden now require the NGOs they fund to identify points where affected people are involved in decision-making, UK core funding to UN agencies includes a payment by results performance indicator on AAP, and Denmark – along with many other humanitarian actors, such as the Disasters Emergency Committee – have integrated CHS commitments into its own humanitarian strategy (Metcalfe-Hough et al, 2019: 45). For these kind of donors that are increasingly emphasising AAP as a measure of the effectiveness of the programmes they fund, more tools in which to help them assess this independently would be a valuable complement to existing means of reporting and assessment.

Conclusion

There are considerable financial, behavioural and regulatory barriers to the sector overturning some of its traditional dynamics, and the design team for this project were repeatedly told that ReliefWatch was not a feasible approach. The reasons as to why differed depending on where in the sector various representatives were situated, but both structural barriers like funding and incentives to hold on to power in the sector were cited as limiting the scope for internal change and many of the accountability initiatives proposed within humanitarian organisations (Austin et al, 2018: 34). These have reduced the impact of reform initiatives, as the underlying incentive structures and configuration of the sector remain unchanged (Collinson, 2016). Yet encouragingly, change also happens in the sector in response to external processes and pressures. Some of the most ambitious attempts at developing AAP have come from new organisations outside of the system, driven by demands for accountability by local organisations or affected people themselves. A combination of new technologies, companies and start-ups that place high importance on customer satisfaction and independent media and advocacy initiatives are already beginning to change the dynamics of a still hierarchical system, and may provide the means to build more accountable humanitarian responses.

While the humanitarian sector usually limits itself to incremental tweaks around mandates and systems, the kind of disruption through external pressures and initiatives also plays a key role in providing the means and motives for change. This emphasis on changing the external environment,

rather than focusing on the systems operating in it (proposed by a previous HPG paper as following a similar principal to evolution through natural selection i.e. 'to change the leopard, change the trees') suggests also looking outside of the humanitarian sector in seeking to drive change (Bennett, 2018: 15). While the system has many advocates for reforms working within it, the pressures from outside in the form of more visible and technologically-enabled aid users, civil society and media organisations and are likely to be the primary drivers for more ambitious changes. It was this reasoning that eventually led to the ReliefWatch design project.

2. Developing ReliefWatch

a. The Design Process

This project utilised an approach called 'design thinking' as its core methodology, from diagnosing the problem through creating and testing the ReliefWatch concept. This approach is informed by an alternative ethos to more traditional and empirical approaches to problem solving. It places great importance on direct input from end-users of a product or service, empathy-building, and discovering underlying beliefs and patterns of human behaviour. Above all else, the design process focuses on the needs of users of an existing system or product and their experiences in using them. In this case, the primary focus is on affected people who receive humanitarian assistance, and their positive and negative experience in using aid and the sector's various accountability systems. As well as aid users, the ReliefWatch team sought the perspectives of the humanitarian staff, to consider what this accountability service would mean for them and how it could drive change within their respective organisations.

A key advantage of applying this approach in the humanitarian system is the emphasis on human experiences, rather than necessarily bureaucracies and institutions. For example, affected people in a humanitarian crisis may not be familiar with the underlying logic and language created by the 'internal experts' of this particular system – indeed, the sector is infamous for its jargon, acronyms, buzzwords and 'silos' (Andrawes, 2018: 14). While often argued as necessary from the perspective of organising a humanitarian response, they can appear arbitrary and exclusionary from outside of the system. The Design process helps shift the focus of designers within an organisation or system to confront the assumptions they make in their usual work and be more outward looking in finding and developing new ideas.

The Relief Watch Design process started with a process of constructing problem statements informed by the range of perspectives acquired during the Constructive Deconstruction project, before inverting these assertions to create a shared vision of desired change. From there, ideas are developed into more tangible concepts and prototypes, ready for users to test and provide feedback on as appropriate. This process is rarely linear, as ideas and innovations are continuously tested and revised with potential users from an early phase. Several features of ReliefWatch changed over the course of the project, as a result of speaking with affected people and humanitarians. Participatory methods were also employed, that enable users from a variety of stakeholder groups (humanitarians and aid recipients) to create their own visions for aspects of the service, and to test and improve upon existing prototypes. Throughout this process, the need to seek multiple perspectives, including from people who may be disadvantaged or are less favourable to these changes, were always sought. In this way, the service was designed to meet validated user-needs, and existing user behaviours.

Along this design journey are a variety of tools that can be used in co-creation and in building empathy with users. Focus group discussions, and interviews were used by the designers in the discovery phase to understand user needs, capacities and what potential users would wish to see in

an accountability service. These informed user personas, fictional archetypes constructed from a range of interviews into characters that designers can engage with. This understanding is critical to ensure that the accountability service meets real user needs, and that it takes into account the needs of certain demographics, or those who require particular features in order to properly engage and participate. From there, journey maps and storyboards can help to visualise hypothetical user experiences over a period of time, helping to build an understanding of how needs and feelings changed over time and to identify key moments where such a service could be most effective.

Developing the concept took place over a year and comprised these stages and tools. Desk research and preliminary interviews on the sector's approach to accountability informed the initial insights. These were put to participants that included donors, policy makers, and humanitarians at an ideation workshop in April 2019, to build a shared understanding of the project approach. Needs and the basic objectives of this service were a key part of this discussion. The core design team took these findings to the humanitarian context of northern Iraq for a design research visit in late April, interviewing affected people in two displacement camps in the region and a suburb of Erbil, as well as representatives from humanitarian organisations. These insights informed the next stage of development for a subsequent steering group and prototyping visit to Iraq in July. Here, the various options for how to gather feedback were among the considerations of the team. As the concept took shape further, the team returned to the steering group in later months to allow its members to feed in their concerns and inputs. In total, interviews were conducted with 22 members of humanitarian organisations, and over 100 aid recipients have been consulted as part of the concept comprising 3 community forums and over 30 separate interviews across 5 displacement camps and 2 urban areas (Erbil and Mosul). The most recent visit to the Iraq was conducted in October, where a workshop with humanitarian staff and trials of a community forum approach in Mosul and displacement camps helped further build the concept.

b. The context of northern Iraq

At the onset of the project, the ReliefWatch design team were faced with the choice of whether to develop the concept with or without a specific context in mind. There are trade-offs to either approach and this affected the development of the project and the various issues and challenges faced over the course of its prototyping. However, following consultations with humanitarians and designers, the team decided upon an approach that focused on a specific context. Though ReliefWatch is potentially global in scope, the concept was first designed for one key context to demonstrate its concept and value before being refined and altered for additional settings. What this approach lost in easy replicability, it gained in a deeper understanding of the dynamics of a particular crisis and affected population, and consequently what was most likely to work and be adopted. In valuing this, the project also more closely follows the alternative ethos of a more local and contextually-specific humanitarian response as proposed in the project Constructive Deconstruction, as well as following a central tenet of design thinking.

Northern Iraq was selected as the context in which to develop ReliefWatch because of a number of characteristics shared by other humanitarian contexts. As of the end of 2019, over 4 million people across Iraq require some form of humanitarian assistance and the response remains relatively large (OCHA, 2019: 5). Having experienced recurring cycles of conflict and displacement – the most recent being an influx of refugees following the October 2019 Turkish offensive against Kurdish forces in north-east Syria – a large and diverse population has been in need of humanitarian assistance in the region. The 'limbo' experienced by displaced people in northern Iraq, often confined to camps, unable to earn income or separated from family members, is also common to other contexts, as is the inadequacy of strictly humanitarian assistance to meet longer-term needs of those displaced

over a period of years. Northern Iraq also provide a diverse range of experiences and priorities for the design team to consider, and a range of feedback that often lay outside of the traditional scope of humanitarian assistance.

c. Key insights from the design process

i. The need for a variety of data collation tools to ensure inclusion

Aid users have access to often dramatically differing levels of service provision. Humanitarians interviewed as part of the ReliefWatch programme noted the conditions of the various displacement camps in northern Iraq, with some containing permanent brick dwellings with electricity, water and internet provision while others comprised only tents with minimal food distribution. Some of the most vulnerable populations approached by the design team were in urban settings, where displaced people were faced with high rents, discriminatory employment practises and minimal humanitarian support. This diversity of experiences and provision allowed the team to consider how best to design ReliefWatch to meet the needs of these multiple groups. To collate as many testimonies as possible, **the means of gathering feedback would need to have sufficient flexibility and be open-ended** in order to reach both a resident of a displacement camp who had received out of date medicines, as well as the family living in rented accommodation who had received no assistance at all.

Ensuring inclusion would also need to consider the accessibility of technology in the particular humanitarian setting, and **utilise technology already in use in the particular context.** With mobile applications, mapping technologies and social media playing a key role in driving many new accountability initiatives, assessing how potential users access and use these tools would be crucial for making the service as useful as possible. For example, Iraq has a relatively high mobile phone penetration rate of around 96% in 2019 (Kemp, 2019). Around half of mobile subscribers in the country in 2016 used mobile data, with the rest subscribing to voice and text only packages on non-smart phones (GSMA, 2016: 43). As is similar to many countries outside of western Europe, utility applications of the kind that enable multiple functions for the user are less commonly used. The majority of smartphone users accessed the internet through the phone's browser and using WhatsApp, Facebook and other messaging tools for contacting businesses and services directly. This has implications for the design of a digital collation tool, and the likelihood it will be adopted.

In designing an accountability service, it should be recognised that **digital tools offer scale and are often accessible for those in displacement contexts**: 93% of refugees for example are covered by at least 2G mobile network and the global prevalence of such technology is increasing rapidly (UNHCR, 2016). The tools offered by the service would offer a low barrier for engagement, and the freedom to provide feedback at any time. Digital channels can also provide greater anonymity, which was a concern for several interviewees in meeting people to discuss feedback. For example, one aid user in Iraq explained she would 'prefer the phone, rather than face-to-face conversation, because they won't see or remember your face'. In providing multiple channels in accessible formats and languages, ReliefWatch would provide a means for many of these aid users to put forward their feedback through unsolicited ways and/or open-ended questioning, so being as inclusive as possible.

However, **considering the inequalities of technology access and designing alternative channels for those without autonomous access to the service** was also important. For Iraq, the rates of mobile ownership among displaced people in camps of the kind interviewed may be lower than the national average. Yet phone ownership appeared common and interviews with residents of displacement camps reinforced the importance of internet access, with the majority of interviewees listing the buying of mobile data one of their largest and most important purchases each month. For those that met the design team, families frequently shared a mobile phone between them, and in general

women in a male-headed household had fewer opportunities to use mobile services autonomously (Lancaster, 2019). The role of gender and technology access remains under-analysed, but studies of refugees elsewhere in the MENA region observe lower rates of mobile use and ownership among women and adolescent girls than their male counterparts (Crabtree and Geara, 2018: 4).

Such considerations were analysed by the team, and led to a number of key changes throughout the design process in order to develop a concept that was as inclusive as possible. This was particularly the reason behind the development of an alternative means of gathering feedback that was not dependent upon mobile usage, employing instead tools such as group fora and trained interlocutors. The development of face-to-face tools were just as important as mobile-based messaging services, and such an approach would be vitally important in the more remote humanitarian contexts where internet and electricity access is less prevalent.

ii.   The need for a complementary service alongside existing mechanisms

As well as giving any service a low barrier to entry for affected people, the design team recognised that ReliefWatch would **need to both be independent of, but act as a complement to, the existing assessment and accountability apparatus of the humanitarian sector**. In the case of Iraq, there were a range of existing feedback mechanisms operated by humanitarian responders, albeit many possessing similar limitations to those outlined in the previous section. Some agencies operate dedicated complaints offices in displacement camps, while others have trialled 'pop-up desks' to disseminate and receive information from aid users (UNHCR, 2018: 2). Community Resource Centres, administered by IOM and NRC, also provide information for aid users in non-camp settings and use surveys to gauge the level of satisfaction. The Iraq IDP Information Centre (IIC), based in Erbil and administered by UNOPS, is a toll-free and confidential hotline, with a system of referral that passes on feedback to the relevant organisation if the operator cannot resolve the issue. The system is seen as a broadly successful initiative and has been credited with influencing cash programming modalities in Iraq, following operators receiving requests for cash directly from affected people (UNOPS, 2019; STAIT, 2017: 3). In a recent survey, 13% of the IDPs, refugees, returnees and host communities surveyed had heard of the IIC (Ramizova, 2019: 7).

The design process led to many valuable lessons being learnt from the experience of mechanisms such as the hotline and other initiatives, which are pioneering in their approaches to AAP and are becoming increasingly prominent examples across the sector. Co-design workshops held in Iraq with humanitarian practitioners explored the way in which the service could be used in complementary ways to internal mechanisms by key UN agencies and other aid providers. Among the key lessons from this process has been understanding the value of quantitative tools integrated into the processes of assessing needs, and its role in decision-making among responders with limited resources. A service that does not actively solicit feedback in a manner seeking to be representative of the wider population fulfils a different role to these tools, and so its results should not be taken as a replacement for established assessment mechanisms. It fulfils a different, and much-needed role.

A key insight from the process was that despite existing mechanisms, even in a relatively large humanitarian response such as Iraq, **there is clearly space for a service that allows affected people to voice their needs, concerns and experiences.** Many humanitarian interviewees did not directly hear from affected people at all, and rarely the users of their services and projects, with the majority enthusiastic at the prospect of being able to hear more from affected people in a manner useful to inform their programmes. Conversely, few affected people interviewed has been asked for their opinion on the aid they received, had valid concerns and ideas about what should be provided, and expressed frustration at the few accountability mechanisms in place. Those who disagreed with the

notion of giving feedback, owing to security concerns, were in a minority, and many of those interviewed had complained of poor services to camp authorities, and to specific international organisations who had offices on site. In general, experiences with these channels were negative. Residents complained of limited opening hours and delays. Others who wished to complain of services would go online, using the dedicated sites of aid providers and Facebook to search for relevant staff to talk with or leave messages, with little results. One resident of a displacement camp reported 'I try to go on the internet and look for the name of the INGO and look for a complaints line ... I call them and it can take over 6 people until I get to somebody who can actually take my complaint, and even then I don't know if it will be responded to or not.' A minority of those interviewed had also submitted written messages via complaints boxes, but these were reported as being insecure and easily vandalised.

In general, there was limited evidence of awareness and take-up of existing accountability mechanisms among interviewees, with the majority of aid users reporting they had not been approached or had used dedicated feedback services. One resident of Baharka camp reported: 'They [organisations] only take our information because they say they are going to bring us aid, but nobody has ever asked us our opinion on the aid they are providing.' Such testimonies are consistent with Iraq's latest Humanitarian Needs Overview, which reports that affected populations feel 'insufficiently consulted', as well as a survey carried out across six governorates that found 69% of respondents 'unaware of how to make suggestions or complaints about the aid they receive' (OCHA, 2019: 23; Ramizova, 2019: 1).

Since the service's most important intended primary users are affected people, the design process also emphasised that **independence from any existing humanitarian organisation was necessary in order to build trust and be free of any institutional agenda.** This independence would also be advantageous for the holistic ethos of the service: that feedback would not be collected and stay in humanitarian silos, but was freely available to all service providers and open for public use. It was also important for the viability of the concept that the voices of aid recipients were not inherently mediated, either by aid providers or other parties, nor felt uncomfortable with the prospect of providing feedback to those affiliated with the programmes they were discussing. This emphasis is also consistent with an approach to change that alters the surrounding external environment of the humanitarian sector, rather than being limited to internally reforming systems and behaviours (Bennett, 2018: 15). A clear majority of the humanitarian staff of organisations engaged in this process understood the need and potential of the service as an independent body.

iii.   The need to encourage a 'closed feedback loop'

The design process also reinforced how crucial responses to feedback are in both providing meaningful accountability, and for the sustainability of the service. A recent survey of aid recipients in Iraq that submitted a suggestion or complaint found 64% did not receive a response – in sharp contrast to 96% of humanitarian staff working in the country who believed complaints would get a response (GroundTruth, 2019b: 3). For those that had used various accountability channels, the most common frustration was the lack of reply or acknowledgement of their complaint, and no possibility of positive changes to assistance as a result of submitting feedback. The design team were repeatedly told of many such instances where aid users did not hear back from the feedback channels they used, and as a consequence would not try again. These reports reinforced findings from other studies that **a key test for effective accountability is ensuring that questions, complaints and feedback are adequately listened to, acknowledged and analysed, and an individualised answer is provided.** A common response to the prospect of using the service from affected people interviewed was a straightforward 'yes, if it works'. It was clear that a means of contacting the

relevant people and those best placed to respond was a major consideration of those who submitted feedback through existing channels, and the means of engaging with aid providers in this manner was of interest provided there was a response that ideally, led to meaningful positive change.

From the perspective of humanitarian responders, a key complaint that affected the likelihood of responding to feedback was not being specific in terms of geographic location or sector to be sufficiently 'actionable' for their programmes or sectors. Though initiatives such as the IIC provide a rare means of collecting feedback, the route from an aid user calling the hotline to the relevant cluster, organisation, staff member and an action or reply was described as 'hazy' and cumbersome. Humanitarians interviewed voiced concerns that this means feedback loops are not often closed, and information as to the status of submitted claims is lacking. Multiple representatives of UN agencies and INGOs working in northern Iraq described these current accountability systems to be in need of improvement, and were positive at the prospect of a system that would **provide sufficient specificity in terms of location or sector to make it easy to forward to those most likely to provide an individual reply.**

As a voluntary service, ReliefWatch could not guarantee a 'closed feedback' loop for every complaint or comment posted on the site, however the service should provide humanitarian staff with relevant data in as useful a manner as possible, with the options to filter and categorise feedback according to area or particular demographics. The service would also encourage organisations to respond, and shows when this happens. A function that shows those who posted feedback when the comment 'has been read' by accounts belonging to humanitarian organisations serves as a temporary indication that the feedback is understood, and a response may be forthcoming. Individual responses themselves are recognised through the organisational marker, which indicates the frequency by which organisations are answering queries and provides an incentive for humanitarian organisations to reply to feedback.

The ReliefWatch concept

This section explores the concept for ReliefWatch. Beginning with establishing who the service would be for, this chapter then sets out two problem statements agreed upon by the stakeholder group, before then establishing some key principles for designing the concept that the team decided as a consequence of their research and interviews. From there, the concept is detailed, including the various channels by which it collates feedback from aid users and how this data is presented for the benefit of humanitarian staff and others. Throughout this section are discussions of key challenges to the concept raised over the course of its development, and how the team mitigated these issues.

Who is ReliefWatch for?

The design of the concept was shaped by these experiences shared by affected people and humanitarians, as well as the wider research that considered the state of accountability in the sector. From these findings, the design team created two problem statements from the perspective of affected people and humanitarian organisations:

> *People affected by crisis do not consider feedback mechanisms as accessible, effective, confidential and/or safe. When provided, feedback is not always investigated, resolved and results fed back to the relevant persons promptly, or at all.*

> *Humanitarian actors are held to account based on resource use to funders, and not based on the expressed needs and feedback of people affected by crisis.*

These two groups constituted the primary audience, who could benefit from the service in a number of ways:

Affected people

Placing aid users at the centre of this service meant reconfiguring the usual 'customers' for accountability away from donors and the rest of the sector. Instead, interviews and the co-design process identified some clear needs for affected people using the humanitarian system that were not filled by existing feedback mechanisms. ReliefWatch would offer these users:

- An independent, open and direct means for affected people to express their needs that are either not met at all, or give their perspective on the state of the aid currently provided;

- A platform to show questions, complaints and ideas from affected people and incentivise aid providers to provide responses, that could include justifications for their decisions or information. The platform would allow users to see other feedback from affected people, potentially increasing power and leverage.

- An unsolicited means of communication that allows people to speak autonomously, not being limited to closed surveys or framed in terms of humanitarian programmes or silos, but considering the broader experiences of affected people and providing the means for communities to suggest alternative ways in which humanitarian organisations could assist in aiding responses.

- Along with providing the means to hold organisations to account, lead to community voices shaping humanitarian action itself, through beginning to shift the incentive structures that limit change in the sector.

Humanitarian actors

For those involved in a humanitarian response interviewed in the design process, there was a general consensus that the current means of hearing direct feedback from affected people could be improved. The service would provide a useful tool for responses:

- Provide a new, direct source of information from affected people, freely available with the option to present views at the geographic level of particular areas or districts, to highlight areas with positive feedback to learn from, more negative comments to investigate or entire areas that could have been overlooked;

- A means to engage more widely with aid users than through the results of need assessments – more qualitative data – essentially, longer and more detailed testimonies from affected people, unhindered by the process of donor reporting and the often 'tick-box' nature of surveys;

- A way to increase community voices in decision-making, either through assessing impact of projects or being used prior to its implementation in order to understand what can be done and how best to do it;

- Make visible previously less well-covered groups such as displaced people living in urban rather than camp contexts, assisting in advocacy to provide these populations with services.

Secondary users

- For **donors and governments,** the service could be used to see potential unmet needs to fund, or see the impact of humanitarian programmes directly and independently. The

prototype provides a marker which indicates the responsiveness of humanitarian organisations to feedback, which could be one of a number of factors in considering suitable responders to fund. The notion of making funding dependent upon positive feedback from assessments was controversial, but the service could function as a complementary tool to established accountability mechanisms used to assess potential funding partners. Donors interviewed as part of this design process were enthusiastic about this system, with one interviewee proposing such a service would provide a tool to triangulate information from monitoring and evaluation reports and understand which organisations are working responsibly.

- **Civil society and the media** could also constitute a good audience, creating wider awareness of real needs of those affected by humanitarian crisis. Rather than be passive recipients, being able to see the experiences and priorities for recovery from affected people directly would reduce the distance between actors and constitute a powerful shift in how victims of humanitarian crises are received. The topics of many affected people are likely to be highly political, and of interest to wider national and global civil society groups. With thousands of local NGOs in Iraq and only a minority partnered with larger INGOs in delivering humanitarian work, the service could also identify gaps for these groups.

Collating feedback

The concept for ReliefWatch is centred around providing affected people the means to provide comments on their needs, and feedback on the assistance they do or do not receive from humanitarian organisations. To do this, information is collated through a variety of means that include digital and face-to-face channels. This combination would help the service bring the perspectives of hard-to-reach and vulnerable people into the fabric of humanitarian decision-making. In this section, these channels are set out, as is the rationale for including them in the concept.

Digital channel

The primary digital channel consists of a chatbot that takes users through a series of questions on where they are and their experiences of aid. The questions comprise both more structured prompts around general aid satisfaction as well as providing the opportunity for longer-form answers that are not limited to discussing relief on a sectoral basis. Some users intuitively made use of speech-to-text tools to input their experiences on their phones. Additionally, some users made use of their phone's camera feature to send pictures of the aid they receive, or needs that are unmet. This is in order to give space to the kind of experiences the design team heard during interviews with affected people, and those that humanitarian staff explained were particularly missing from their assessments of aid users.

Since utility applications are rarer in Iraq, the team designed chatbots that are hosted on pre-existing platforms such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. This significantly lowered the barrier of entry for users as the services lives on a platform users are already familiar with, using features they are already accustomed to. The back-and-forth of the automated system allows people to give their experiences of humanitarian organisations conversationally. The feedback discussion prompts are conducted by activity and service, rather than organisation. Categories include camp management, socio-economic support and livelihoods, but are not limited to them. The design team envision automating this classification of user experiences as the service grows, with certain keywords is users' feedback triggering a particular categorisation.

Key advantages for these kind of digital channels include their permanent availability, responsiveness, their pre-existence on the phones of users, their potential for scale. Prototyping this feature with affected communities in Mosul and displacement camps in the KRI helped surface the requirement for features, and highlighted the variety of ways users interact with services on Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. Many participants said they would share the link to this chatbot with friends and family, provided there was a positive impact in terms of replies and action from humanitarian organisations. Those who helped trial the concept generally found the system intuitive and easy to use, and appreciated the mix of spaces in which to provide short and longer form answers.

'Analog' channel

ReliefWatch also collects feedback through face-to-face interviews with individuals and groups in affected areas. These are conducted in a 'town hall' format that would take place regularly at camps and neighbourhoods, and provide the space in which to listen to both individual cases and collective community feedback. User testing demonstrated the importance of both formats in both creating a safe and collaborative atmosphere and in revealing different sets of needs and feedback, as well as reinforcing findings from surveys that found the majority of people prefer providing feedback face-to-face (Ramizova, 2019: 6). During prototyping in Mosul, interviewees commented positively on being provided with a space to discuss psychosocial needs that they lacked access to, as well as a lack of supplies for reconstruction. This supports interviews with humanitarian staff, who emphasised the need for qualitative feedback that describes needs, particularly for the Iraq context, in areas where displaced people have returned and have begun the process of reconstruction.

'Service coordinators' would act as team-based facilitators for these discussions, acting as impartial moderators in a language participants can understand and in a manner that is open and non-judgemental, and make clear that in this role, they are unaffiliated with any organisation. Who service coordinators would be was a key focus of the design process, as it was continuously reinforced that international personnel often lack local language skills and turn over quickly, making it difficult to develop trusting relationships with stakeholders. Effective local engagement of the type required for such a role would necessitate a skillset more akin to social work or community organizing. Staff and students at university departments and research institutes, and socio-linguistics experts, served as service coordinators during prototyping and struck an ideal balance between demonstrating independence from affected communities while having an effective understanding of needs, language and customs.

From there, service coordinators would submit and likely translate what they have heard from these discussions, making a note of participant's location, gender and age range that can help make the service as useful as possible for humanitarian organisations. This is then amalgamated with feedback gained through digital channels. In addition to this role, it is envisaged that Service Coordinators meet bi-laterally with humanitarian organisations, ideally including senior staff of the Humanitarian Country Team, to ensure that views and opinions of affected people are represented at the highest level. The role of these coordinators is also to scale the service using the digital channels, through coaching and transitioning communities towards using digital channels to provide their feedback. Though it is envisaged that a network of Community Fora will be maintained, this transition will assist with scaling the service with a small team.

Presenting feedback data

Once submitted, feedback data is categorised, geo-located and presented on the ReliefWatch site. The prototyping process revealed the necessity for a layer of aggregation of this qualitative data to allow users in managerial positions to see emerging themes, while for those working at an operational level, the details of feedback from one individual theme could be identified and responded to. Categories that affected people and service coordinators will submit can be sorted according to details including relevant area (in the case of Iraq, by governorate), gender, camp or non-camp context, theme (camp management, socio-economic support, reconstruction, cash assistance etc.), and 'type' of complaint, if relevant (quality of aid, staff misconduct, organisational corruption, government concerns etc.). Those submitting feedback can name specific humanitarian organisations in their messages, but this is optional and reflects the lack of knowledge of exactly which aid provider was responsible for what programme among those interviewed.

Prior to comments being publicly available online, a 'moderator' function performs a basic level of both categorising and limiting of submitted comments that are explicitly abusive or relate to especially sensitive issues. To some degree, this process can be automated with the moderator verifying rather than manually categorising feedback. Certain words would constitute tags which could then be presented to a moderator as comprising an emergent category to present on the site. A key issue for the design was the means by which the service would distinguish between complaints over services with especially egregious reports of abuse, including instances of staff misconduct or corruption. In such a situation, as with all complaints, the priority is to provide sufficient anonymity in order to not expose vulnerable populations to more risk and so no data that can be used to identify an individual is presented on the site. In cases where such a report is submitted, a member of ReliefWatch staff can elevate the claim and directly forward it to the relevant organisation, if that information is available. If not, staff will approach the claimant directly and seek further details before contacting the relevant organisation.

The feedback collated by the service would be geographically specific, and is presented as a 'heatmap' that plots the density of submitted data. These maps allow users to identify the specific

locality and/or displacement camp where the feedback originated, but not to the level of an individual building, striking a balance between being sufficiently localised for the benefit of humanitarian staff while preserving the anonymity of those submitting feedback (see Fig X). Heatmaps can demonstrate the frequency and distribution of comments, and be further filtered by particular topics of concern, gender and other categories. It would fulfil a core function of the service in providing an accessible 'monitor' of the tone of particular areas and highlight key areas of need or neglect. It would also enables humanitarians to evaluate whether their current points of service are aligned with locations on the map where unmet needs are emerging.

Fig 5: A ReliefWatch 'heatmap' demonstrating levels of feedback provided in specific areas

This also assists in the process of ensuring that data submitted from both sources is verifiable. As a key concern of some humanitarian staff interviewed for the project, confirming that complaints and feedback were based on 'real' gaps or inadequacies in service provision was also an objective for the concept. While the moderator function has a minor role in filtering the most obvious fraudulent cases from being presented, it is not envisaged this will have a 'fact-checking' function. Instead, as has been demonstrated by other crowd-sourced mapping initiatives such as AirWars or Ushahidi[1], the large number of complaints acts as a means of establishing clear, identifiable trends and gaps. The service coordinator also has a data verification role in confirming key findings, and the service's community experience site has the means to assess commonly used words and phrases. Together these methods increase the verifiability of the feedback presented, without constituting a large filter than detracts from the core principle of providing a means for affected people to directly submit their experiences.

Organisation Marker

ReliefWatch also looks at which humanitarians organisations are using the platform to listen to communities. This engagement, indicated by replies to relevant comments and a number of survey questions asked of affected people who submit feedback (including 'are you satisfied with the responses provided to your complaints?'), forms a basis for the organisation's 'responsiveness

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[1] AirWars (https://airwars.org/) and Ushahidi (https://www.ushahidi.com/) are non-profit crowdsourcing initiatives originally created to map and assess alleged instances of airstrikes in civilian areas of conflict in Syria, and reports of electoral violence in Kenya, respectively.

marker. Organisations that consistently read and reply to experiences on Relief Watch can also be awarded with a 'Top Listener' badge that is displayed on their profile. The notion of an indicative marker system for agencies was seen as an important element of the concept since, for the first time, responsiveness to the concerns of affected people themselves is placed at the centre of an accountability system. Importantly, the ratings system does not measure the overall performance of the organisation or the quality of the assistance it provides. Instead, an indication of responsiveness to complaints can suggest to affected people how likely the organisation will be in following up claims, and ensures organisations are held to account for shortfalls in listening and responding to this kind of feedback.
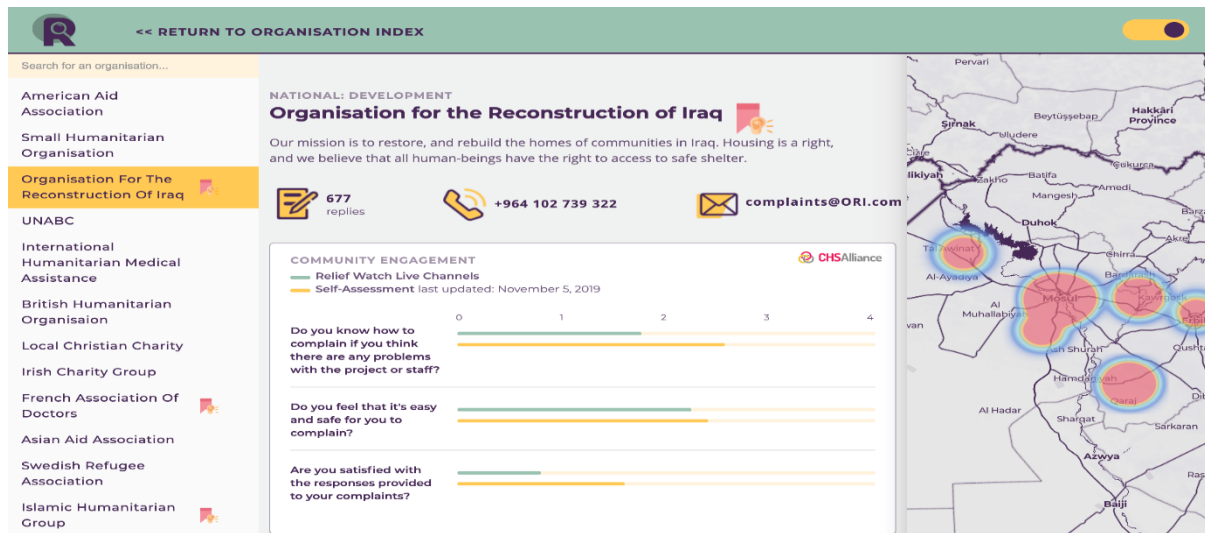

Fig 6: An example page of the ReliefWatch organisational marker

The organisational marker required careful consideration of a number of issues raised by humanitarian staff. Many were concerned that initial plans for affected people to rate what they had received, citing the higher probability that those using the service would leave negative reviews, or a low awareness of specific aid providers. During prototyping, the prominence of humanitarian organisations did vary and the team found a mixed picture of how familiar different organisations were to affected people. While many residents of displacement camps were familiar with the BCF and others with a prominent role in camp management, others could not name specific aid providers. This proposal was also particularly questioned by humanitarians working in the field of protection, who described it as a difficult issue to rate the performance of from the perspective of affected people. Those who worked in the field of healthcare proposed that higher order objectives around for example, reducing antibiotic immunity, may not be popular among individuals but are nonetheless a vital humanitarian objective. Importantly, some saw the idea of comparing the ratings of organisations with each other as dangerous, as those who carried out more straightforward interventions in easier areas to work in would likely receive higher ratings than those doing still critical work in more difficult contexts, creating perverse incentives to conduct and fund the former.

These challenges led to a redesign of a marker system based on responsiveness, which leaves the space open for organisations to leave comments and justifications for their actions in situations where affected people are dissatisfied with the aid they have received. In addition, as a senior humanitarian staff member in Iraq emphasised, the presence of complaints should not necessarily be a bad indication. When taken in the context of other performance indicators, it could demonstrate that organisation is present in that location and are operating under constraints that could be highlighted to authorities and donors. A public marker of engagement with responses

provides an incentive to organisations to become more accountable through listening and responding to those they seek to serve, and can be used in a complementary manner to other monitoring and evaluation tools.

Key questions for the ReliefWatch service

Throughout the design process, humanitarian staff proposed a number of questions and challenges to the ReliefWatch concept. While most agreed with the diagnosis of the various structural problems and incentives with humanitarian responses, the design of the service as an answer to at least some of these issues often proved controversial. Such challenges and predicted limitations of the service have both influenced its design, and have wider relevance for accountability and participatory approaches in the sector.

a. Integration with the humanitarian sector

A key question for the ReliefWatch concept concerned its relationship to the international humanitarian system and the various existing means of reporting and assessment. Would such a service be external to the humanitarian sector, and if so, how could it feed in to the humanitarian system and drive change?

The service was designed with affected people as its primary users, and impacted its functions and role. In considering the incentives for affected users to engage with such a service, the principle of independence is particularly crucial to establish ReliefWatch as an impartial service that is both not restrictive in terms of what experiences it gathers, but also not formally connected to specific humanitarian organisations. As discussed in a previous section, aid providers exercise considerable power and would likely influence responses if affiliated with the service. The channels for collating information, both digital and face-to-face, have been designed to make clear this independence to potential users: that although it has been designed to openly listen to feedback, collate it and present it to aid organisations, it cannot guarantee a change in services. This will be an important point to make clear to affected people and will be more difficult if the service is affiliated with any aid provider.

The design process and prototyping suggested that formal integration with the existing system presents both technical and political complexities in the case of Iraq, and likely elsewhere. As demonstrated by existing accountability mechanisms, integration with the existing system cannot promise a 100% response rate, and establishing a service within for example, the cluster system will expose it to its existing dynamics and will automatically exclude certain actors that are not involved. Technically, a system that directly refers mentions of particular agencies to their staff for example, would miss potentially relevant pieces of feedback from the many people who were unaware of the organisation whose aid they were referring to. It would also risk missing a key advantage of a service that also highlights where needs are not met and where there is a lack of a humanitarian response, and more cross-sectoral issues, rather than just feedback on existing programmes.

For these reasons, the priority for ReliefWatch is its establishment as an independent service alongside the existing system. This approach would be of benefit to humanitarian organisations, as it would provide free feedback directly from affected people and work as a complementary source of information that sits alongside the existing range of tools for assessment that are more quantitative or specific to organisations or programmes. The challenge for the service would to then deliver feedback to humanitarians that is as relevant to their work as possible without compromising on the rich and open nature of the qualitative data collated. To mitigate the potentially large amount of submitted feedback, the concept also proposes a paid model where humanitarians can see specific

analytics for areas of interest (for example, 'notify me anytime education is mentioned in Duhok governorate') and divide the commitment of seeing and responding to feedback across an organisation. This addresses a key point raised by humanitarian staff in interviews, that comments and direct feedback from affected people are not sufficiently specific with regard to location that they can be acted upon. A further means of feeding into the humanitarian system could be the ReliefWatch Service Coordinator role, who are also envisaged to play a role in engaging with humanitarian organisations, as they could meet with senior staff to relay summaries of what they have heard in facilitating feedback fora and interviews with affected people. Through these functions, the service seeks to make engagement with the humanitarian system as easy as possible, while also maintaining its commitments to independence and affected people.

b. 'Closing the loop' and incentives to engage

An important test for the longer term viability of ReliefWatch concerns the degree to which affected people who submitted comments feel they have received a satisfactory response from aid providers, and ideally one that leads to positive changes in aid practise. This would, in the first instance, require humanitarian organisations to engage with the service and provide these responses. If such a service was to operate externally to the humanitarian system, what would be the incentives for aid organisations to do this?

Previous sections considered the proliferation of AAP channels outside of the sector, which raises questions as to what would be different with this service. But while existing external channels provide an important emerging role of breaking the role of accountability out of just the humanitarian sector, this concept differs primarily in that comments are unsolicited and the approach is open: users can access the service through the digital channel at any time, rather than have to wait to be approached by a survey. This provides a fundamentally different source of data that is highly qualitative and less restricted. While not providing the same rigour and representativeness of these quantitative surveys, the service would constitute a complementary source of information for humanitarian staff to consider that sits outside of existing silos and projects. This novel source of data that will likely not be picked up by other approaches is a key incentive for humanitarian organisations to engage with the service.

This report has also noted the lack of incentives to change accountability in the sector, because of the various dynamics that operate among aid providers and funders. Since the primary users of this service are affected people, barring minimal filtering, submitted data is publicly available, and so also provides a different set of incentives for change that are more centred around public reputation. Since many humanitarian organisations place a high value on accountability to affected people and have committed to be more participatory in their approaches, this service offers a means to engage more with their users and take their perspectives into account in designing programmes. While not a punitive mechanism, the organisation marker also provides recognition for responders that have engaged with feedback and comments and replied. Improved aggregation and classification of qualitative data and more user management features are priorities for the further development of the service.

c. Sustainability and scale

The design of the concept and its voluntary and independent structure also led to questions around pathways to scale: how can the service grow, and be sustainable?

ReliefWatch has been designed as a service that can be used in many humanitarian settings. The context of northern Iraq was chosen as the focus for the initial co-design and prototyping, and

offered a range of design opportunities and challenges, including a diverse population of aid users, differing levels of technology access and a range of existing accountability programmes. These factors will also be present in other humanitarian settings and the service was designed to be flexible with regard to which channels and means of collating data could be deployed to reach the most people. In Iraq, existing messaging applications were in common use and so the digital channel was hosted on those systems. In designing the service for scale, the priority for taking the service forward into other contexts is to ensure accessibility of the service for affected people, and so making channels contextually relevant. The potential of the community forums was demonstrated in the Iraq context and 'analog' mechanisms will likely constitute a key part of the initial service in contexts less suited to digital feedback collection. While the particular channels may adapt depending on the particular context, the underlying principles of open data, transparency and independence as articulated in this paper will continue to inform the service at a global level.

Over the next five years, the service is envisaged to expand its scale. Funding remains heavily restricted and earmarked for most humanitarian organisations and this is unlikely to change in the near future. Though some donors have made funding for accountability approaches available and there is growing awareness of the importance of participatory tools in the sector, they remain a minority and the service will need to draw upon alternative funding structures outside of project cycles or individual response organisations. Subscription models from donors or humanitarian agencies, that could include a paid service that offers a greater level of specificity in data analytics, could constitute a viable means of funding once the service is established.

Ultimately, the sustainability of the service is dependent upon its widespread adoption by both humanitarian organisations and affected people. The aid users interviewed as part of this project were generally enthusiastic at the prospect of being able to submit comments, complaints and ideas to responders. However, over the longer term, ensuring the service is used by affected people will be dependent upon whether their submissions are replied to by humanitarian organisations and positive practises occur as a result. This will necessitate effective engagement and categorising by the service to make replies as accessible as possible for humanitarian organisations, and considered replies and responsive programming by responders. While these are considerable undertakings, they are necessary in a humanitarian sector that is increasingly scrutinised and committed to be more accountable to affected people.

Conclusion

Accountability to affected people and participation are difficult to deliver in humanitarian responses, owing to the dynamics and incentives of a sector whose funders are not the same as those who use their services. Despite the best efforts of humanitarian organisations, this often leaves affected people insufficiently consulted on their needs and perspectives, leading to inappropriate assistance and responders being seen as increasingly illegitimate. The designers of this concept, and the many humanitarians and aid users consulted as part of this project, recognised these issues and sought to fill this gap through a new service that provides the means for affected people to submit their comments and feedback to a platform that is publicly accessible. From there, the service could collate responses into categories that would be of use to humanitarian organisations to reply to and consider in the planning of programmes, and provide an alternative source of information directly from affected people.

This is not a new idea, and there are other means of collating feedback that have been designed within the sector and outside of it. Where this service is different is its independence and openness, design decisions taken to be of most use to its primary users: affected people. Rather than be asked

for feedback on a specific project by the implementing organisation, affected people can use the service to put questions and comments to responders that may lie outside the scope of particular mandates and siloes, with these inputs and responses publicly available. In doing this it utilises the agency of affected people in humanitarian crises, who are already making increasing use of social media and other technologies to speak directly to humanitarians and the wider world.

In adopting this approach, the service is not intended to replace any existing means by which humanitarian organisations assess need or the impact of programmes. Instead it would constitute a complementary and transparent means by which a different group of people to donors can exercise their voice and hold service providers to account. In doing so, it will make it easier for affected people to participate more in decision-making around the provision of aid and services, as part of project cycles. Over the longer-term, it could shift thinking until listening and responding to feedback is considered a requirement to ensure good programming and accountability. In designing this service, the range of means by which the users of services in non-humanitarian contexts could contact their providers and post their experiences publicly were considered. While not replacing more bureaucratic and punitive rules, regulations and auditing processes that exist for businesses and governments, ratings platforms and other tools offer an alternative and direct means by which service users can feedback and help change practises.

However, while the concept draws inspiration from the private sector ratings platforms and appears superficially similar, its underlying ethos is based on the fundamental right of affected people to be heard and to increase accountability in the sector. In the process of designing this concept, the team found a growing awareness and frustration among both affected people and the staff of humanitarian organisations that progress on accountability and participation is slow, to the detriment of both groups. There was also considerable enthusiasm for an approach which would lead to people caught up in humanitarian crises having a more direct relationship with those that seek to assist them. In doing so, organisations that provide assistance and populations in crisis would be more informed and accountable, and could lead to both more effective responses carried out by a more accountable humanitarian system and more empowered affected people[2].

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[2] A full bibliography for this report is available, please contact j.bryant@odi.org.uk

Text box: ReliefWatch to Loop

In summer 2019, the ReliefWatch concept was merged with a similar initiative, also in its design stages. Named 'Loop', the service would also enable aid recipients to put their experiences directly to humanitarian, development and local organisations. Many characteristics of ReliefWatch were shared by Loop, with both concepts committing to principles of open data and a two-way dialogue, and stressing the importance of users being able to categorise feedback by geographical or programme area. In addition, Loop proposed a governance model that reinforces its ambition for greater participation, with affected people and communities taking a key role in deciding how the service would operate and its priorities.

Loop replaced ReliefWatch as the name of this combined initiative. The name Loop has a number of advantages and is more reflective of the final design of the concept. Initial proposals for an independent AAP mechanism began during the HPG project 'Constructive Deconstruction', and originally took the form and title of an 'ombudsman' and later, a 'watchdog'. Such concepts suggest a form of accountability that carries with it a punitive function for transgressing individuals or organisations. However, it became apparent that developing a voluntary service with a robust enforcement element would currently be an unrealistic goal. Instead, the design focus shifted toward developing more of a two-way dialogue between affected people and humanitarian staff and organisations, and was seen by the design team as being of greater benefit for those the service sought to assist.

Co-design and prototyping visits to northern Iraq, and input from affected people and policy makers, allowed the creation of a Minimum Viable Product (MVP), to allow for a more long-term pilot to run. Since January 2020, the ReliefWatch project team and Loop are intending to launch pilots in five different contexts. These contexts have been selected to allow the team to gradually add additional digital and 'analog' channels for users to input their feedback on, and present new factors to consider in designing a service most appropriate and useful for affected people in those humanitarian crises.

The latest prototype of the ReliefWatch platform can be seen at www.reliefwatch.io.