

From accounting to accountability: socialising and relational accountability among civic humanitarian actors in Uganda

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This article examines how accountability is understood and practiced in refugee and community led assistance among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. Although the humanitarian localisation agenda advocates greater support for local actors, accountability remains contested and complex. Dominant frameworks emphasise formal mechanisms such as reporting, audits, and compliance with donor requirements, rooted in a technomanagerial logic of control and risk management. By contrast, this article highlights how accountability is enacted through informal, socially embedded practices shaped by soft power, collective expectations, social standing, and relational responsibilities. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2023, it explores accountability as it emerges in diaspora networks, community leadership, familial and neighborly assistance, and communal practices. The analysis is grounded in four main bodies of literature: African relational philosophies such as Ubuntu, scholarship on socialising forms of accountability, decolonial critiques of humanitarian governance, and literature on community driven development. Together, they offer a framework for understanding accountability not only as technomanagerial procedures, but as a dynamic, negotiated social process. Through ethnographic vignettes, the article shows that relational and technomanagerial forms of accountability are not necessarily opposites or mutually exclusive, but operate with different logics. This has implications for the humanitarian localisation agenda: when community and refugee led accountability is made legible to international actors, informal relational practices are often turned into formal indicators, distorting local meanings and reinforcing hierarchies. The article calls for redefining accountability in humanitarianism as a process attentive to context, culture, relationships, and lived experience.

Keywords: humanitarian accountability, Socialising and relational forms of accountability, Civic humanitarian actors, South Sudanese refugees, Localisation agenda

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Introduction

Accountability has long been a preoccupation in humanitarianism, shaped by shifting power relations and institutional norms. What began as an ethical concern has been absorbed into a formalised system of policies, standards, and procedures, largely designed and controlled by actors within the international mainstream humanitarian system (Hilhorst et al. 2021). Dominant frameworks have reinforced a technomanagerial model of accountability, structured around reporting mechanisms and performance indicators shaped by donor priorities and New Public Management thinking (Knox-Clarke & Mitchell 2011). Yet, while international actors continue to dominate policy spaces and funding flows, there is growing recognition of the diverse actors long involved in humanitarian response, including local collectives, informal networks, mutual aid groups, diaspora actors, and individuals embedded in the sociopolitical contexts of crises (Horst 2006; Hilhorst 2018). These actors challenge the narrative of humanitarianism as something delivered from outside, unsettling dominant paradigms of accountability that presuppose hierarchical relationships and external oversight (Anstorp & Horst 2021). However, despite growing interest in 'localisation' and locally and refugee-led aid, prevailing accountability structures continue to prioritise the visibility and legitimacy of international organisations, marginalising the knowledge, relational practices, and ethical commitments of those working outside formal systems. This raises questions about for whom accountability mechanisms are designed, and whether they disrupt or reproduce existing power asymmetries.

Accountability as a concept is neither fixed nor universally understood. While often defined in terms of answerability and enforcement (Brinkerhoff 2004), it also carries normative and political weight. Some view it as the responsible use of power, grounded in the perspectives of those most affected by decisions. Others frame it as a social and moral practice, negotiated within particular histories, relationships, and systems of value (Pilon & Brouard 2023). Directions of accountability also vary. Typologies such as 'upward' and 'downward' accountability highlights who is held accountable and by whom. These distinctions — along with categories such as 'sideways' and 'systems' accountability — are useful in mapping institutional logics. However, they often obscure how responsibility operates in practice, particularly in community contexts where relationships and obligations are not easily apparent to external actors (Barnett 2011). In such settings, accountability is embedded in social fields, shaped by kinship, shared histories, political affiliations, religious commitments, and neighbourhood ties (Brun & Horst 2023). It is mutual, contingent, and negotiated, rarely fixed along a single axis but continually produced through the ongoing work of maintaining and adapting relationships.

This article centres accountability as a relational, situated practice. Rather than treating it as a mechanism to be designed and implemented, it considers how accountability emerges through social relations, mutual obligations, and shared ethical worlds. Drawing on fieldwork with South Sudanese refugees in Uganda (2020–2023), it examines how accountability is understood and enacted through clan structures, familial networks, neighbourhood networks, refugee-led organisations and associations, traditional community leadership structures and other social formations that do not necessarily conform to the institutional logics of the global humanitarian system. Four overlapping bodies of literature inform this approach. First, Ubuntu philosophy, rooted in African epistemologies of relationality and being, which foregrounds interconnectedness, care, and collective responsibility (Chigangaidze et al. 2022; Chimakoram & Ogbonnaya 2022). Second, scholarship on socialising forms of accountability, which prioritise interpersonal, affective, and community-driven practices of holding and being held to account (Chynoweth et al. 2018; Andersen 2023; Arikan 2023). Third, decolonial critiques of humanitarian governance (Bovens 2008; Busoic & Lodge 2016; de Boer 2023), which examine how accountability operates within wider structures of inequality and control. Fourth, literature on community led development and service delivery, particularly works that caution against romanticising 'the local' (Kelsall 2004; Mkandawire 2010; De Herdt & de Sardan 2015).

The article begins with a review of literature on localised humanitarian action and the politics of accountability. It then sets out a relational framework for analysis, drawing on the literature described above. The methodology is then outlined, followed by fieldwork findings presented through vignettes

illustrating practices encountered in the field. The final section reflects on what relational practices of accountability reveal about the limitations of dominant humanitarian frameworks, and considers how alternative models might better reflect the lived realities of those engaged in mutual care and crisis response.

The accountability paradox in the localisation agenda

The 'localisation agenda' formally articulated at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, marks a significant shift in global humanitarian policy discourse. Its stated aim is to transform the international humanitarian system by relocating power, resources, and decision-making closer to crises-affected communities. Key commitments include allocating 25% of humanitarian funding directly to local actors, strengthening their leadership, and building equitable partnerships between international and locally embedded organisations (UNOCHA 2020). The underlying premise is that such a shift will produce more responsive, contextually grounded, and legitimate forms of humanitarian action.

In practice, however, the implementation of localisation has been slow and uneven. In Uganda which is often celebrated for its progressive refugee policies, Refugee-Led Organisations (RLOs), community-based initiatives, and informal associations operate alongside formal humanitarian structures in both urban and rural settlements. Despite their presence, these locally embedded actors remain structurally excluded from funding streams and decision-making platforms. This gap is often attributed to their 'lack of capacity', typically defined as the ability to meet accountability and risk management standards set by donors (Roepstorff 2020; Jidefor 2021; Viga & Refstie 2024). This centrality of accountability in the localisation discourse reflects both its political weight and its contested meaning. On one hand, accountability is framed as a mechanism for making humanitarian aid more answerable to affected communities. On the other, it functions as a gatekeeping device, often justifying the exclusion of civic humanitarians who do not conform to the formalised systems of audit and oversight preferred by international donors (Hilhorst & Jansen 2010; Duclos et al. 2019).

Local actors, including refugee-led organisations, community elders, youth associations, and traditional leadership institutions, operate within social fields shaped by kinship, neighbourhood, clan ties, religion, and political history (Brun & Horst 2023). Within these fields, accountability is enacted through relational practices: reciprocal exchange, community policing, collective decision-making, and public reputation. These practices are embedded in moral economies and are not easily translatable into the metrics and formats required by international donors. Accountability in such settings must be understood through the lens of 'embeddedness' — that is, the situatedness of actors within complex social and cultural landscapes (Pettigrew et al. 2001). From this perspective, requiring local organisations to adopt legal and accounting frameworks designed for international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) imposes a narrow, depoliticised view of what accountability means and how it should be performed (Babelet et al. 2021). Moreover, it risks erasing the diverse ontologies of responsibility that underpin local humanitarian practice (Fiddian-Qasimiyeh & Pacitto 2015; Gidron & Carver 2022). Building on this critique, this article challenges the reduction of accountability to bureaucratic and financial procedures. Instead, it argues for a more relational understanding — one that recognises the social, moral, and political forms of accountability already present in crisis-affected settings, particularly those which emphasise mutual obligation, interconnectedness, and care within community life.

Relationality, reciprocity and embeddedness — Ubuntu and socialising forms of accountability

Within African thought, Ubuntu offers an explicit relational orientation to ethics and responsibility. Ubuntu is often encapsulated in the Nguni phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* — 'a person is a person through other persons'. It is not a static worldview but a living, contested philosophy that emphasises interconnectedness, dignity, and moral responsiveness (Ramose 1999; Chigangaidze et al. 2022; Chimakoram & Ogbonnaya 2022). Here, accountability is not a duty to an abstract authority but a response to those with whom one shares a social world. It is shaped by embedded relationships

— with family, elders, neighbours, and community members — where one's conduct is continually evaluated through shared norms and mutual care (Eze 2010; Letseka 2012). African philosophers such as Menkiti (1984) and Gyekye (1996) emphasise that the self is not self-contained but becomes through the community. These insights challenge the liberal premise embedded in humanitarian accountability regimes, that rights and responsibilities belong to atomised individuals (Queiroz 2018). Ubuntu philosophy has thus been used to critique bureaucratic and legalistic models of governance that ignore the ethical substance of relationships (Cornell & van Marle 2005). Its emphasis on ethical embeddedness, including intergenerational and ancestral dimensions of obligation (Murove 2009), offers alternative understandings of responsibility to others, grounded in practices already evident across many sites of civic humanitarianism (Viga & Serwajja forthcoming).

Relational understandings of accountability are not unique to African philosophies. Indigenous epistemologies, though diverse and grounded in distinct historical and cosmological contexts, tend to share an emphasis on relationality, reciprocity, and care as the foundation of responsibility. In many Indigenous frameworks, accountability is not enacted through institutional enforcement but through relational processes of dialogue, witnessing, and shared presence (Sullivan 2009; Moreton-Robinson 2013). These processes often involve obligations that extend beyond the human — to ancestors, land, and future generations — and are embedded in place-specific practices of storytelling, truth-telling, and collective deliberation (Kornelsen et al. 2016; Lindstrom 2022).

Alongside African and Indigenous traditions, socialising forms of accountability appear in critical organisational and psychological scholarship. Here, accountability is understood as emerging through the relational construction of the self in the eyes of others. Rather than grounding responsibility in hierarchical structures or technical systems, this work highlights how accountability is sustained through reflexivity and interaction. Mead's (1934) classic account of the self as formed through the perspectives of others informed later critiques of hierarchical models, including Roberts' (1991) argument that accountability depends on mutual recognition rather than surveillance. In this view, being accountable is inseparable from being seen — and shaped — by others whose judgments carry ethical and social weight.

Relational and socialising forms of accountability also feature prominently in community governance literature within development studies. Here, accountability is often understood not merely as upward reporting to donors or state authorities, but as a process embedded in everyday social relations and collective life. Scholars examining participatory and community-driven development and grassroots governance highlight how accountability emerges through dialogue, trust, and local legitimacy, rather than formal oversight mechanisms (Chambers 1997; Hickey 2004; Cleaver 2009). These approaches foreground practices such as public deliberation, social sanctioning, and negotiated obligation, operating through dense social networks, and shared norms. Similarly, research on local leadership and collective action in rural Africa and South Asia demonstrates that accountability often takes the form of negotiated reciprocity and communal evaluation rather than formal audits or metrics (Lund 2006; Joshi & Houtzager 2012). These insights resonate with Ubuntu and Indigenous perspectives by emphasising that accountability is not simply compliance or control, but about maintaining relationships, fulfilling obligations, and enacting care. They also show that relational accountability is not limited to philosophical traditions or cultural worldviews but evident in the everyday governance of development processes, where the social embeddedness of responsibility shapes how people hold each other accountable.

At the same time, this literature cautions against romanticising relational and local forms of accountability. While such approaches can offer contextually grounded and socially meaningful alternatives to technomanagerial models, they are not inherently just or inclusive. Scholars have warned of the risks of idealising 'the local', noting that informal, socially embedded mechanisms may mask unequal power relations, reproduce exclusion, or be shaped by elite capture (Cooke & Kothari 2001; Mohan & Stokke 2000; De Herdt & de Sardan 2015). They argue that the very embeddedness that fosters trust and responsiveness may just as well limit accountability, as individuals may avoid challenging authority figures due to kinship ties, patronage networks, or fear of social repercussions (Kelsall 2004; Meagher 2005; Nannicini et al. 2013). These dynamics mirror challenges found in formal systems, where hierarchical or institutional loyalties may also inhibit open critique (Kim 2012). They

reinforce the point that neither relational nor technomanagerial models are inherently superior; both carry possibilities and limitations shaped by their social, political, and institutional contexts.

The concept of 'the local' adds complexity to discussions on localisation and accountability. It is often framed as a coherent, informal, and community-based counterpart to the formal, institutionalised 'international'. However, as Roepstorff (2020) and Viga and Refstie (2024) argue, such binaries are both analytically reductive and politically charged. They risk essentialising local actors as culturally authentic yet structurally peripheral, while obscuring the entangled realities of local and international practice (Vainikka 2013). This framing flattens the diverse roles and strategic positioning of local actors, many of whom actively engage with and shape formal systems nationally and transnationally. It also reinforces the very hierarchies that proponents of localisation agendas claim they want to dismantle.

Recognising these complexities, this article presents relational and socialising approaches to accountability not as idealised alternatives or moral correctives, but as conceptual tools for critiquing the limits of technocratic humanitarian governance and proposing alternative ways of recognising and supporting accountability. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing efforts to rethink localisation not as a transfer of responsibilities to 'the local', but as a process that must engage with complexity, plurality, and the lived realities of humanitarian action.

Researching accountability among civic humanitarian actors in Uganda

Uganda hosts over 1.7 million refugees, primarily from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Somalia, Burundi, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. South Sudanese refugees form the largest group, accounting for almost 57% of the total refugee population (UNHCR 2024).

Over the past decade, Uganda has adopted open, inclusive policies allowing refugees greater freedom of movement, access to land, and opportunities for self reliance. For instance, the 2006 Refugee Act (Government of Uganda 2006) and the 2010 Refugee Regulations (Government of Uganda 2010) grant refugees the right to work, move freely, and form associations and self-help organisations. Despite ongoing challenges related to water, food, sanitation, and other basic needs (Serwajja & Refstie 2023), these policies have improved refugee access to resources and facilitated the growth of RLOs, Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and associations, committees, and groups advocating for refugee welfare. Some are formally registered and operate like mainstream humanitarian actors, while others remain community-embedded and informal.

Less recognised but substantial is support mobilised by local faith based groups, neighbors, extended families, and diaspora networks. Although they have gained attention in recent years, much remains unknown about how they operate, the principles guiding them, and how they understand and enact accountability. The aim of the fieldwork conducted among refugees in Kampala (the capital city) and a rural refugee settlement in Uganda between 2021-2023 was to address this gap. The names of the settlement and community organisations are withheld to protect the anonymity of interviewees.

The fieldwork comprised 43 in-depth interviews and eight focus group discussions with refugees and hosts. Participants included 47 women and 37 men aged 18-50 years engaged in different livelihoods activities such as farming, mining, casual labor, working with organisations, and owning small businesses. Ten interviews were conducted with staff from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Jesuit Refugee Service, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and the Cities Alliance and 14 with representatives of RLOs, CBOs, associations and committees. Two research assistants supported the fieldwork, interpreting interviews and facilitating access to refugees and organisation members. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for preliminary analysis, identifying core themes such as mutual assistance between kin and diaspora, the building of refugee-led associations and organisations, intersections between assistance offered by different actors, perceptions of accountability, and how accountability was defined and operationalised in different settings.

The second fieldwork (in 2022) involved focus group discussions to validate and extend the preliminary analysis. The first author also revisited some interviewees to ask for clarification and additional information. Lastly, in 2023 and 2024, two workshops were held, bringing together different

stakeholders, including several interviewees to discuss findings and deepen understanding of accountability as practiced by different actors. Viga (first author), conducted most of the fieldwork and led the study. Refstie (second author) contributed to parts of the fieldwork, conceptualisation, and writing. The first-person pronoun “I” is used when describing work carried out by the first author alone (such as personal fieldwork experiences).

The research took place following notable corruption cases in Uganda’s humanitarian system, particularly the high-profile 2018 scandal involving fund misappropriation, inflated refugee numbers, and mismanagement within the Office of the Prime Minister and some United Nations (UN) agencies. Although investigations led to new oversight measures, they did not resolve core accountability failures. As Titeca (2023) notes, these scandals exposed systemic flaws, where bureaucratic accounting procedures advanced political agendas and undermined genuine accountability. While primarily implicating government, UN and other international actors, they scandal also triggered tighter compliance requirements for local organisations seeking funding (Sebba & Zanker 2018; Degnan & Kattakuzhy 2019). This reflects the political dynamics of humanitarian governance, where narratives of capacity and risk are unevenly distributed — often to the disadvantage of local and community-based actors.

Studying accountability is sensitive, with significant implications for individuals and organisations, including funding cuts, loss of social capital, and reputational damage (Sieber & Stanley 1998). Building trust between researchers and participants is therefore crucial, alongside adhering to ethical guidelines concerning the anonymity and informed consent of study participants (Ahern 2012). I (the first author) am Ugandan and have spent time in South Sudan as a refugee. I therefore speak Kakwa, South Sudanese Arabic, and Lugbara, languages familiar to many interviewees. Fieldwork lasted about two months in each of the field sites, with follow-up visits. This enabled rapport building and observation of projects and initiatives. The research assistants, being highly trusted community members facilitated access in the communities. However, particularly sensitive interviews were conducted independently to ensure additional confidentiality. Consent was obtained from the participants on having the examples presented in this article as a basis for analysis and it was shared with them in advance.

In Uganda, many CBOs and RLOs operate in formalised ways, adopting accountability practices that reflect those of international humanitarian actors (Betts et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2022). They use structured reporting, budgeting, and project management systems to meet donor requirements and secure funding. This alignment with humanitarian standards allows them to be seen as credible partners, but it also demands significant organisational capacity, which can be hard to sustain. Although not the central focus of this article, these organisations were prominent in the field and were part of the wider conversations shaping the research (see Viga et al. 2024).

What follows are vignettes drawn from the fieldwork, illustrating multiple understandings and practices of accountability. Some of the activities, names and places have been changed to maintain confidentiality. Vignettes are short, descriptive narratives that capture specific moments, interactions, or scenes in the field. They can function as situated accounts, narrative snapshots that are meant to evoke the lived realities of research participants and ground broader analytical claims. In ethnographic and critical development research, vignettes convey complexity, foreground everyday experience, and draw readers into the world studied (Erickson 2012; Pitard 2016). The examples presented are a few among many similar stories encountered in the field, illustrating diverse, relational, and embedded forms of accountability.

‘People talk, and that’s a punishment too’: accountability without accounting

One afternoon in an Ugandan refugee settlement, neighbours and fellow tribe members gathered under the shade of a tree for a community meeting. The aim was simple but ambitious: to form an association to advocate for their wellbeing and organise development initiatives. A respected community member had called the meeting, believing that, by working together, they could improve daily life in the settlement. An executive committee was formed, and the initiator became the leader. As activities grew, the leader shared updates — photos of community clean-ups, small gatherings, and youth engagement — on Facebook and

in WhatsApp groups connecting members of their tribe diaspora group abroad. These posts resonated with diaspora members, many of whom had once lived in the same settlement or still had family there. Moved by the initiative and the sense of self-reliance it represented, several diaspora members offered financial support.

One of the first initiatives funded was a computer training programme for young women in the settlement. The association leader and diaspora funders agreed that the money would cover some second-hand computers and a small stipend for a local trainer. The arrangement, built on trust, involved sending funds directly to the association leader's personal account for the agreed purpose. After the first training cycle, debate arose over the computers' future. The leader proposed giving them to the trainees to help them earn a living, while others argued they should remain in a community house for broader use. Tensions rose, with accusations of biased trainee selection favouring the leader's relatives. A compromise was reached: the young women kept the computers but agreed to contribute a small share of their income back to the association to fund future training. Although the project continued, it left lingering mistrust toward the leader.

The second project funded by the diaspora group was a small-scale poultry initiative to improve livelihoods. As before, funds were sent directly to the association leader, who bought chicks and set up a brooder and coop in his garden. Given this location, association members and community representatives requested the right to monitor the project. An executive board member, aware of the funds received, questioned whether the number of chicks matched the money sent. These suspicions, echoed by community members, were raised at a public meeting, leading to a tense, heated exchange that revealed growing frustration over transparency and control.

One night, the situation escalated. According to several community members, the association leader's compound was stormed and nearly all the chickens killed allegedly as punishment for mismanaging funds. The leader, however, denied this, claiming a tree had fallen on the chicken house, killing all but two. Nevertheless, he went on to say that the remaining two chickens had been moved to a more 'neutral' place in a neighboring community.

Meanwhile, the remaining association members called a meeting with the chief, formally accusing the leader of mismanaging project funds. According to interviewees, the chief listened and ultimately sided with the group, demanding that the association leader issue a public apology to the community. The leader refused, even as some threatened to escalate the matter to the police. Instead, he and the chief agreed to drop the apology demand — a decision reluctantly accepted by the community. It was also agreed not to inform the diaspora funders, fearing it might jeopardise future support, a decision broadly supported. Several internal measures were introduced to rebuild trust and prevent similar conflicts. The leader retained his position—largely due to his close relationship with the diaspora funders—but the leadership structure was expanded. Key decisions were now to be made collectively by a broader board, and regular reports would be given at community meetings to ensure transparency. In addition, one symbolic but important change was implemented: the key to the storage area where equipment and resources were kept would no longer be held by the association leader, but by another trusted community member.

The story illustrates how accountability can be perceived and enacted in socialising and relational ways. From a hierarchical 'accounting' understanding of accountability, one might conclude accountability was lacking, since the funders were not informed and the leader remained in position. However, this does not mean that the person was not held to account. A broader understanding that includes socialising and relational forms shows accountability in the process (community policing and consensus-building), mechanisms (involvement of local leaders and sanctions), and outcomes (loss of social capital, trust, and the change of practice). Accountability was implemented through what Fox (2007) calls sanctioning relationships where expectations are communicated through persuasion and negotiation rather than formal rules and legal action.

Trusted individuals rich in social capital often gain privileged access to employment opportunities, informal surveillance of property, and important information. Loss of trust, therefore, serve as a powerful social sanction. Trust is also a deeply valued form of social capital "bestowed" as a form of honour (Hawley 2014, 1) — yet "notoriously vulnerable," easily damaged and difficult to restore (Baier

1992, 110). As O'Neill (2002, 12) notes, it "is not to be squandered". In Ubuntu philosophy, trust is tied to collective responsibility and shared humanity, fostering a strong sense of community and mutual care (Chigangaidze et al. 2022). It requires both competence and goodwill, compelling individuals to act responsibly and in the best interests of others (Hawley 2014). The community's withdrawal of support from the association leader constituted a sanction in itself, underscoring the central role of trust in community-based accountability (O'Sullivan & O'Dyer 2009; Musa & Horst 2025).

One way to read the decision to keep the leader in place is that, having faced the consequences of loosing trust, the leader would now act more in line with the community's expectations and shared interests (Savage & Kanazawa 2002). It also avoided public scandal or loss of credibility with diaspora funders, who were not informed. At the same time, the outcome could be seen as clientelism, with the leader's close ties to the chief shielding him from full accountability. This illustrates the complex dynamics of community-based oversight, where trust and social ties can both enable and limit sanctioning (Six 2015).

Chiefs occupy a central yet ambivalent role in many refugee settlements. Formal systems like the police or local government authorities are often mistrusted. These systems are seen as corrupt or unwilling to resolve disputes in ways reflecting communal needs, such as negotiating compensation for lost livestock or goods (Rowley 1940; Poggo 2002). Chiefs are therefore the first contact point for many community members when they need help to resolve disputes or mediate tensions. Despite this, their role is frequently overlooked or undervalued in humanitarian responses. Knoetze (2014) suggests this stems from international aid workers' unfamiliarity with customary leadership, and/or because chief rule is not viewed as in line with modern ideals of democratic governance. Additionally, conflicts in the refugees' countries of origin — such as South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda — have taken place along ethnic lines. This has led both aid organisations and refugees themselves to downplay chiefs' roles, fearing that visible reliance on ethnic or tribal leadership might deepen divisions or fuel further conflict.

Extensive scholarship shows that traditional authority structures are often co-opted into informal control systems reinforcing elite dominance and weakening democratic accountability through neopatrimonialism and clientelism (Cammack 2007). Chiefs may reward loyal supporters and marginalise dissenters. Customary justice systems have likewise been criticised for entrenching patriarchal norms, limiting women's access to justice and excluding them from decision-making (Tripp 2001). It is important to note that many of these gendered norms were introduced during the colonial era alongside European religious teachings and social conventions (Kilonzo & Akallah 2021). Nevertheless, chiefs remain central figures in both Ugandan communities and refugee settlements. Their authority does not always align with liberal, rights-based frameworks, but it is locally recognised, negotiated, and embedded in social relations.

Research on relational and socialising forms of accountability in informal and community-led settings shows that trust-based and embedded forms of accountability can be effective in shaping behaviour, especially where social ties, moral expectations, and concerns about reputation matter (Golembiewski & McConkie 1975; de Boer 2023). However, these approaches also have limits, particularly when power is uneven or when informal sanctions are not followed through after repeated misconduct (Jerving 2017; Wang 2023). This may help explain why the association and community members did not rely solely on restorative or socialising forms of accountability. Some actions, such as storming the compound and killing the chickens, were openly punitive, expressing collective anger and a sense that trust had been seriously breached. Other steps taken, like changing the committee's composition, requiring regular reporting to the community, and assigning storage access to someone else, point to more procedural and formalised forms of accountability. Taken together, these responses show how communities often combine different strategies — moral, social, and procedural — to address wrongdoing and reassert control. The measures taken depend on how serious the situation is perceived to be, and on the degree of mismatch between community expectations and the actions of those in positions of responsibility. Such considerations are also seen in for example the practice of volunteering.

“As long as you don’t get greedy”: volunteering, leadership, and relational accountability

In the morning, I waited under the straw-thatched roof of a local NGO compound as community leaders — host Local Council (LC1) members, Refugee Welfare Council members, RLO and CBO leaders, women’s leaders, and youth leaders — arrived. I had invited them for a focus group to discuss mutual aid practices in the settlement, how they were organised and what kind of accountability relations that sustained them. Some came walking, others on bodabodas [motorbikes], taking phone calls as they entered the compound. They greeted one another, lingered in small groups, and gradually filled the benches arranged in a circle.

Over the years, I have attended hundreds of such gatherings — both as a Ugandan and as a refugee in South Sudan. In Uganda’s settlements, researchers, UN agencies, NGOs, and authorities convene meetings to introduce funders, gather information, or conduct assessments. Community leaders act as intermediaries, while also organising their own meetings to resolve disputes, solicit input, and coordinate activities. Much of their time is spent on this representational work, alongside civic humanitarianism efforts, whether in capacity of being representatives, or as initiators of own projects. Together it forms an essential part of community governance and the broader civic support infrastructure in many refugee settlements.

After the discussion, lunch was served, and modest transport allowances were distributed. One by one, the leaders moved on to other activities: speaking with residents, mediating disputes, escorting vulnerable individuals, or representing their communities elsewhere. Though often described as “voluntary,” this work takes up significant time and energy, and is central to the daily functioning of communal life.

In Uganda, most community leaders do not receive official salaries. Similarly, RLOs, CBOs, and civic groups depend heavily on ‘volunteers’, with only a handful of salaried staff. Volunteers shoulder much of the organising, outreach, and implementation. However, donors typically reject funding administrative overhead, so volunteers’ everyday expenses rarely make it into project budgets (Smith et al. 2022). Volunteers therefore rely heavily on modest stipends, meeting allowances, or informal payments that helps cover basic costs like transport, airtime, and internet. Some volunteers admitted diverting portions of the funds they managed to cover basic expenses, and some also to pay for their work as a full time livelihood. This was described as acceptable practice by community leaders and community members alike given that the work demanded time and effort, often at the expense of other income-generating activities. But there were limits. If the volunteers were to display sudden signs of wealth, such as purchasing a motorcycle, investing in property, or exhibiting extravagant spending habits, community members said that they would take action to intervene. This could take the form of direct confrontation, reporting the behaviour to local chiefs, or allowing word to reach the NGOs the volunteer was linked to. Others might respond more subtly, by refusing to attend meetings the person organised or withholding support for their initiatives, all acts that signalled disapproval and cast the individual in a negative light.

The above illustrates how accountability is shaped through embedded relationships and shared moral expectations, rather than formal rules or external oversight. Small personal benefits like transport refunds or meeting allowances were not seen as corruption, but as part of sustaining one’s ability to serve the community. What mattered was whether their actions remained within the bounds of collective norms. When someone was seen to take too much, it signalled a breach of those norms, prompting community intervention. This reflects what socialising theories describe as accountability formed ‘in the eyes of others’ (Mead 1934; Roberts 1991), where judgement is grounded in ongoing social presence, not abstract principles or technical indicators. It also highlights a form of responsibility often overlooked in dominant humanitarian frameworks — one that is negotiated through relationships and grounded in the moral expectations of everyday community life (Ramose 1999; Letseka 2012). Such relational accountability becomes especially visible in refugees’ descriptions of assistance within kin and family relationships.

When asked about help received and provided during their journeys and in their current homes, participants most often cited emotional, material, informational, advisory, and counseling support from parents, siblings, uncles, neighbors and extended kin — both within the settlement and across

distances, including their country of origin and the wider diaspora. Reflecting on what accountability for this support looks like, many equated it with trust. As explained by one of the interviewees:

When my uncle in Canada transfers such money into my account, he does not ask me to give receipts of what I have bought or give an account of how I have spent the money. My uncle trusts me and he is confident that I will use the money wisely (Male South Sudanese in the refugee settlement, July, 2021).

Most of those who provided assistance emphasised that there was ‘no need for follow-up’ on how the funds or other resources were used since they trusted those who they assisted. However, when asked what they would do if for example funds meant for school fees were suspected of being diverted — say, to drinking or gambling, most changed their statements. Trust remained central, but many acknowledged informal oversight mechanisms. Gossip, for instance, served as a monitoring mechanism with news often travelling back through neighbours or extended family. These channels of social surveillance show that even in trusted relationships, accountability is shaped by relational norms and quiet monitoring. Similar dynamics operate in communal practices like funeral contributions, where support functions as a reinforcement of social and community bonds.

Confirming community ties through support at funerals and functions

It was a hot, still afternoon in the settlement when word spread someone in the neighboring zone had passed away. By evening, neighbours had already gathered under a mango tree near the family's compound. Women moved quietly between cooking pots, stirring millet porridge and boiling water for tea. Men arranged plastic chairs in a loose semicircle, preparing space for conversation, condolence, and the steady stream of visitors who would come to pay their respects. A low murmur of conversation hung in the air as more people arrived on foot or motorbike, not only from the immediate area but from other zones and nearby settlements. Some were family. Others were from the same ethnic group or home region in South Sudan. A few were former neighbours from before the war, reunited here in exile. Others were formal representatives from the Refugee Welfare Councils. Even a representative from UNHCR came by.

The family had already begun receiving visitors the night before. Each arrival was met with quiet handshakes, and hushed words — take heart, we are with you. Visitors brought small gifts: money, maize flour, sugar, soap, or airtime. A few elderly men offered words of prayer or took seats beside the family to sit in silence. Each gesture was recorded. A young man with a notebook sat on a woven mat near the head of the homestead, carefully noting the names of all who came and what they brought. This was not just tradition—it was a form of social accounting. Later, when death visited another household, this family would be expected to show up in turn. The burial itself was brief, but the mourning stretched across days, with evening gatherings, shared meals, and open space for grief. Amid it all, the flow of support continued: small collections were taken to help the family with burial costs, food was pooled and redistributed, and arrangements were made for someone to stay with the widow for the weeks ahead.

None of this was counted as humanitarian aid. No NGO reported on the number of participants, the maize donated, or the hours spent cooking, comforting, or sitting in vigil. These acts fell outside the metrics of formal assistance. Yet, for those in the settlement, this system of mutual care is immediate and reliable. It provides both material and emotional support in moments of deep vulnerability, and represents clearly structured forms of relational labour (Harrell-Bond & Wilson 1990; Hillary & Braak 2022). In this sense, funerals and other functions are not only acts of remembrance, but powerful reminders of the collective responsibilities that quietly sustain life.

In line with Ubuntu and socialising perspectives, support during funerals is not simply an expression of sympathy but a deeply embedded social obligation. It represents a form of accountability that emerges less from formal sanctioning and authority, and more from everyday social relationships and expectations of mutuality. This does not mean that measuring, monitoring, and oversight are absent. Contributions are either noted down or, at the very least, carefully remembered by those involved, forming a moral ledger that structures future expectations (Ramose 1999; Letseka 2012). These forms

of monitoring have also adapted with changes in digital media. In interviews with South Sudanese groups in Kampala, for instance, people described how it is now common to make financial pledges via WhatsApp groups in response to funerals and other communal functions.

We have a group of members who came together to support each other during difficult times — like when someone is sick or there's a death in the family — and also during celebrations like birthdays, initiation rituals, festivals, or weddings. When something comes up, our chairperson will ask for contributions through our WhatsApp group. As people send money, their names and the amounts are listed in the group, so everyone can see who has contributed. It's a way of making things transparent immediately. And after the event, anyone from the group can check with the family to confirm that the money was handed over properly (Interview South Sudanese refugee, Kampala, October, 2021).

Listing names and amounts in WhatsApp groups introduces a form of real-time documentation and visibility to the full group that functions similarly to financial tracking or auditing. The option for members to follow up with the recipient family adds a layer of informal verification. This illustrates how practices of relational accountability can incorporate features often associated with more formal, technomanagerial oversight, unsettling the boundaries between the two.

The vignettes presented in this article offer situated glimpses into how accountability is practised, negotiated, and contested within specific relational and social contexts. Rather than relying on formalised reporting structures or upward-facing audits, they show how people hold one another to account through social ties, mutual expectations, and shared moral norms. Leaders are confronted, not always by formal sanction, but through loss of trust, public critique, or renegotiated roles, without it necessarily reaching the ears of the funders. Volunteers are allowed to 'take a little', so long as their actions remain within what is accepted by community members. And funeral contributions, recorded in memory, notebooks or WhatsApp groups, reflect not only acts of care but also a quiet system of social accounting. Across these examples, accountability emerges not as a technical fix or institutional design problem, but as a situated, relational practice — one that is shaped by proximity, presence, and the judgements of others who matter. The following section explores what can be learned from these relational forms of accountability when discussing reframings of accountability within humanitarian debates.

Relational accountability and the humanitarian localisation agenda

As highlighted in the introduction, advancement on the localisation agenda has remained uneven. This is often attributed to concerns about accountability and the perceived lack of capacity among local actors. However, we argue that such concerns rest on narrow, technocratic definitions of both concepts.

Capacity is typically assessed through institutional metrics: compliance with humanitarian principles, robust organisational infrastructure, standardised accounting procedures and adherence to audit and reporting systems. In this logic, accountability becomes largely synonymous with technomanagerial control, formalised and vertical, driven by oversight and risk mitigation. This model privileges predictability and procedural legibility over contextual responsiveness (Becker et al. 2020). It fails to recognise the embedded, situated forms of capacity many local actors mobilise that is rooted in language, trust, shared experience and relational knowledge, as shown in the examples in this article.

Relational and social accountability function alongside technomanagerial approaches. Although they can diverge from formal principles like neutrality or independence, they draw on reciprocal obligations and ethical care that carry their own forms of effectiveness and legitimacy (Chabal 2002; Kelsall 2004). However, actors must often convert these relational practices into formal indicators aligned with donor frameworks. This can disrupt local accountability dynamics, erode relational trust, and undermine the very qualities that enable local effectiveness. The tension between technomanagerial and relational accountability highlights a core shortcoming of the localisation agenda. Although commitments to power shifting and local knowledge are frequent, institutional reforms have focused on procedural tweaks such as new funding windows, refined coordination arrangements and capacity

building schemes, while neglecting the relational foundations on which genuine trust, legitimacy and effectiveness depend (Brun & Horst 2023).

'Risk' in the localisation agenda should move beyond the fear of misuse of funds to include the potential cost of failing to engage with relational, community-driven practices of accountability. As Jideofor (2021) argues, the question is not only whether local actors can be trusted, but what is lost when they are not. The recent corruption scandals in Uganda's humanitarian system involving state and UN actors make the supposed vulnerabilities of civic humanitarians pale in comparison. Yet, these high-level scandals have paradoxically reinforced fears about engaging local actors in humanitarian practice.

Relational and socialising forms of accountability should not be romanticised. Local institutional frameworks are shaped by hierarchies, patronage networks, gendered exclusions, and generational power imbalances (Platteau 2004). Efforts to centre relational forms of accountability must therefore be accompanied by careful attention to internal power dynamics and the ways in which relational obligations may be leveraged to consolidate authority or suppress dissent. Valuable lessons can be drawn from fields such as transitional justice, where hybrid models have been developed to navigate the tension between international legal norms and local customary practices (Okello et al. 2012; Allen & Macdonald 2013). A similar ethos is required in humanitarian localisation. Effective localisation does not entail abandoning procedural rigour or due diligence, but rather developing plural accountability frameworks that are context-sensitive, inclusive, and adaptable. This involves recognising that accountability is not a universal standard to be exported, but a relational process shaped by diverse social and moral orders. Embedding hybrid mechanisms where formal oversight is complemented by community-led structures of trust and obligation could offer one such pathway.

At the same time, care must be taken to avoid distorting or undermining existing mutual aid and relational practices through the imposition of formalised accountability demands. When these practices are reclassified as 'aid', subject to reporting requirements, performance metrics, and contractual frameworks, their social logic can be disrupted. Mutual care becomes a deliverable; reciprocal responsibility becomes compliance. In some cases, this can hollow out the very relationships that sustain collective resilience in contexts of crisis and displacement. Rather, these practices should be understood as part of a broader humanitarian landscape — one that encompasses not only institutional responses, but also the often-invisible labour of care, solidarity, and improvisation that unfolds when people are trapped in long-term displacement (Viga & Serwajja forthcoming). Recognising this full spectrum is essential for any meaningful shift in how accountability is conceptualised, enacted, and supported in humanitarianism.

Conclusion

This article begins from the recognition that communities in crisis are often sustained by everyday infrastructures of care and obligation outside the formal humanitarian apparatus, and that examining these practices can offer valuable insights into how accountability is understood and enacted. Drawing on fieldwork with South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, it has illustrated how accountability is embedded in social and relational practices such as funeral contributions, WhatsApp exchanges, informal meetings, and reciprocal care grounded in trust, mutual recognition, and communal obligation. These practices are not peripheral but central to how refugee-led and community-based responses function and sustain themselves. They also offer an alternative to more technomanagerial ways of understanding accountability.

Technomanagerial and relational accountability often overlap, with each form incorporating elements of the other. Yet they can be distinguished by their different logics: the former privileges control, neutrality, and distance, while the latter relies on proximity, embeddedness, and mutual responsibility. These distinctions matter deeply. They influence which actors are considered as legitimate, whose knowledge counts, and how power circulates within humanitarian systems. For localisation to fulfil its transformative potential — redistributing power, addressing colonial legacies, and empowering local actors — it must meaningfully engage with diverse, situated forms of accountability. This is neither to romanticise relational accountability, which can reproduce exclusion

or elite control, nor to dismiss formal oversight, which provides safeguards against arbitrariness. Rather, it is a call to acknowledge the limitations and possibilities of both approaches, moving beyond technical reforms in funding or coordination to fundamentally reconsider how legitimacy, capacity, and responsibility are defined.

Such reconsideration requires a shift from viewing accountability primarily as a mechanism of compliance towards understanding it as a socially embedded practice shaped by relationships, trust, and context. It means engaging with local perspectives not merely as inputs but as foundational sources of knowledge and authority. Ultimately, transforming humanitarian accountability involves confronting deeper questions about power — who holds it, how it is legitimised, and whose priorities it serves. Doing so opens possibilities for accountability frameworks that are not only more inclusive but also more responsive to the realities of those most directly affected by humanitarian crises. If humanitarianism is to be reimagined from the ground up, shifting from a logic of ‘accounting’ to one of genuine accountability may be essential — not to abandon oversight, but to reorient it toward trust, shared responsibility, and justice.

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