

'A trusted person is cursed': Trust as an accountability mechanism in the Somali collective response to crises

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A wide range of actors respond to humanitarian crises, including those present in or socially embedded in the local context. How are local responders held accountable by those who provide them with funds to support collective responses to crisis, and by those they provide assistance to? We answer this question through empirical research on collective crisis responses during droughts in Somaliland. Somaliland is a self-declared republic in the northern region of Somalia, seeking international recognition and functioning with its own government and institutions since 1991. In Somaliland, social security is rarely provided by the state, but is rather supplied within kinship- and locality-based networks, which also play a central role in times of crisis. We argue that elaborate accountability systems exist, embedded in social practice. These systems are built on long-term relationships and are more holistic in scope than narrowly defined technical-financial understandings of accountability common in international humanitarianism. Drawing on literature on trust and our empirical research, we argue that locally-embedded humanitarianism needs to be understood from a relational ethical perspective. In Somali collective crisis response, accountability practices are upheld collectively. They are built and maintained through reciprocity and individuals fulfilling expectations, thus further cementing existing social relations. Informal accountability measures to sanction an abuse of trust in this context serve to strengthen the social support system rather than punish individual wrongdoings. Wrongdoers are thought to receive their punishment through being cursed, face the wrath of God, and societal condemnation.

Keywords: local assistance, accountability, Somaliland, trust, humanitarianism

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Introduction

What characterizes humanitarian assistance provided by local people and institutions? How is accountability defined and practiced locally? What can we learn from these practices that may benefit attempts towards localization within the humanitarian field, an agenda that focuses on shifting resources and power away from top-down, externally-driven models toward approaches that centre local agency and leadership? We answer these questions by exploring the empirical example of Somali collective crisis responses through a relational ethics lens. A relational perspective centres “the self on a web of social relationships” in a concrete context (Gouws & van Zyl 2015, 172) and emphasises the ‘doing’ of a relationship through responsibilities and obligations towards others (Brun & Horst 2023). In each specific context, subjects are produced “always already in and through relations with other subjects” (Edkins 2003, 256). This means that short-term needs are rarely disconnected from long-term perspectives, as a relational ethics emphasises interdependency, shared history and envisioned common future of helper and helped (Brun & Horst 2023).

To investigate the Somali collective response to crises, we focus on the activation of relationships at various levels and the impact of these social relationships on understandings and practices of accountability in Somali collective responses to crises. We conducted data collection in three locations: Odweyne, Burao, and Hargeisa in Somaliland, main sites of collective response mobilisation during severe drought. Research mainly focused on the collective response to crises that are beyond the capacity of those directly affected to handle. This collective crisis response is a central element in the Somali social protection system. The first author conducted 45 interviews and two Focus Group Discussions with Somali locally-embedded humanitarian actors (mobilisers, financial contributors, elders, religious leaders, implementors), people affected by droughts (2016/2017 and 2022), formal aid workers and civil servants (humanitarian coordinators at Burao and Odweyne governors’ offices). When permission was granted by interviewees, as was mostly the case, interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Data was transcribed and coded by four research assistants (Sahra Abdi, Asha Adam, Soror Bulhan and Ifrah Hassan) in Somaliland and Norway through a coding system developed during a research workshop in Hargeisa by the authors and the assistants. Codes included types of assistance providers, details on different forms of assistance, aspects of accountability, changes that had occurred over time and cross-cutting themes such as gendered and generational aspects.

Our research was carried out with a focus on accountability, which in Somali was translated to *isla xisaabtan*. Other Somali terms that are increasingly common when talking about accountability in financial-technical terms are *dabagal* (oversight) and *kormeer* (monitoring), which primarily have their origins in the international humanitarian system. Since the 1990s, with the rise of international humanitarianism in Somalia/Somaliland, there have been a ‘vernacularisation of aid terminologies’ (Musa & Kleist 2022). Traditional terminologies to describe socially-embedded forms of collective assistance have been replaced with terms such as *samofal* (humanitarianism), *gargaar* (relief), *deeq* (aid) and *caawimo* (assistance) (Musa 2023). Interestingly, when our questions related to communal forms of assistance, people did not use financial technical terms that are commonly used when talking about accountability in the context of international aid, but started using the word *aamin* (trust) instead. Accountability and trust were implicitly and explicitly contrasted, with our interviewees stressing that there was no need for accountability if there was trust. Yet what does trust entail and how does it come about?

In what follows, we will first discuss the concepts of accountability and trust, after which we present our research findings based on this conceptualization, distinguishing characteristics- and process-based forms of trust and elaborating on the collective nature of trust building and accountability. We will then discuss how our empirical findings speak to mainstream understandings of localization and accountability, and what a relational ethical perspective adds to such understandings.

Accountability versus trust

Accountability

How are local responders held accountable by those who provide them with funds to support collective responses to crisis, and by those they provide assistance to? In order to answer that question, we start by exploring the concept of accountability. The most common lexical definition of accountability is to be responsible for, and be able to explain, one's actions. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines accountability as "an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions" (Merriam-Webster 2023). In the social science literature, definitions of accountability range from "ethnographic interpretations of idiosyncratic local meanings to highly technical financial auditing techniques", which makes any attempt to find a common denominator for accountability a difficult task (Lindberg 2009, 6). The multiple layers of meaning of accountability make the concept difficult to operationalize effectively or translate into local languages (Tan & von Schreeb 2015; Anstorp & Horst 2021). In this paper, we understand accountability as a two-way, relational process of 'being accountable to' and 'holding accountable' (Bovens 2007). This is in line with a key Somali translation of the concept, namely *isla xisaabtán*, where 'isla' refers to a reciprocal social relationship — in this case of holding each other to account.

Accountability can be guaranteed through self-regulation, various forms of regulation by others, and institutional systems. The concept relates to "external and internal, explicit and implicit, legal and voluntary" standards and "operates multiple dimensions involving numerous actors" (Ebrahim 2003, 815). Efforts to enhance humanitarian accountability have historically focused on formal, technocratic processes that mostly audit financial flows (Strathern 2000). Scholars in other disciplines have explored non-formal forms of accountability including socializing accountability, which refers to interpersonal processes through which interdependent individuals hold themselves and each other to account (Chynoweth *et al.* 2018). Internalisation and interpretations of notions of morality and justice are important as strong self-regulating factors while also being tools to demand high levels of accountability from others. Moral guidance and integrity can be derived from a range of belief and value systems, including religious and cultural ones (Carr 2023). We argue that besides institutional sources, there are social and moral sources of holding others to account to a set of given standards (or rules and norms for behaviour), to judge their performance in meeting those standards and to take action if standards are not met (Gugerty & Prakash 2010).

Trust

The literature on trust is as least as extensive as that on accountability, with major branches in literature on political and economic systems as well as within literature on the social-cultural functioning of society. Here we focus on those that take a micro- or meso-level relational approach rather than assuming "pre-set territorial arenas" as the "container of 'the social'", thus inspired by understandings of "geographies of trust" that are based on "relational or fluid spatiality" (Häkli 2009, 13-14).

Within these different literatures, trust is understood in fundamentally different ways, where one difference in approach is between a 'rational actor' approach and the notion of trust as 'presumed reliability'. From a sociological perspective, the 'instrumental' calculation of rationalistic conceptions of trust in rational choice approaches reduces trust misleadingly to a matter of risk assessment, which Giddens (1990, 33) argues misses the point, since "all trust", "is in a certain sense blind trust". Human interactions are not just guided by economic self-interest but based on a range of social and cultural norms (Shipton 2007). As Broch-Due and Ystanes (2016, 24) argue, "trusting is a social phenomenon saturated with sentiment, motivation and meaning which goes far beyond any pure, cool calculation by individuals". Several scholars on trust acknowledge a combination of rational, affective and normative elements as crucial for understanding trust (Jones 1996, 2019; Shipton 2007; Mackenzie 2020).

The notion of trust as a taken-for-granted assumption of reliability is common in anthropological and sociological approaches (Anheier & Kendall 2002). Trust is seen not as a matter of legally framed transactions between contracting parties but as generated by social structures and supported by a normative infrastructure. Here, a further distinction could be made between *characteristic-based trust* “tied to a person, depending on characteristics such as background or ethnicity” (Zucker 1986, 60). This type of trust “rests on similarity in culture, values and behaviour” (Anheier & Kendall 2002, 350). *Process-based trust* “is tied to past or present exchanges as in reputation or gift exchanges” and involves an incremental process of building trust and presupposes a degree of stability and reliability in mutual expectations (Zucker 1986, 60). Such type of trust is thus built over time, and essential for the workings of any relationship, institution and society (Höhmman & Malieva 2002; Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016; Di Somma 2022).

While most of the literature theorizing trust focuses on so-called modern societies and takes an individual approach, we argue for the importance of recognizing the collective and normative workings of trust. In this understanding, trustworthy behaviour strengthens the social system and thus has intrinsic value (Cohen 2023). Trust has been described as ‘evocative’, as it not only serves as a prerequisite for relationships but is also reinforced through the act of placing trust in others; individuals who are trusted are inclined to reciprocate by behaving in a trustworthy manner towards those who have extended trust to them (Sztompka 1999). Trust is both based on a particular moral community and can contribute to strengthening one - the moral community can be defined as the set of persons willing to rely on one another’s commitments (Cohen 2023).

Trust in the Somali context

Discussions on trust in the Somali context can mainly be found in studies on private sector and trade networks, and largely start from a rational-actor approach (Mahmoud 2008, Carrier & Lochery 2013, Carrier & Elliott 2018, Musa 2019, Carrier & Elliott 2023). The Somali case has puzzled observers, as a thriving private sector exists in Somalia and Somaliland despite operating outside formal legal and banking institutions and an evident lack of accountability in public sectors. For those who understand the Somali economy as trust-based, there is no contradiction between these different realities. Discussing “trust as a social infrastructure in Somali trading networks”, Carrier and Elliott state that

trust is a key concept through which social scientists seek to understand how informal economies, operating in large part outside of formal state regulations, are governed and sustained. (Carrier & Elliott 2023, 35)

Somali traders rely on established social relations to reduce risks (Majid 2010), rather than formal financial-technical mechanisms of contracting and financial compliance.

While focusing on the private sector and thus maintaining a rather instrumentalist understanding of trust, this literature adds an important dimension, namely the need to understand the maintenance of trusting communities as a collective exercise. Evidence from trading networks in Eastleigh, Nairobi, for example, suggest that family networks pressure their members to honour the trust bestowed on them and fulfil their obligations. This was said to be vital because abuse of trust by one family member would jeopardise another family member’s chance of being trusted (Carrier & Elliott 2023). We would add that the kinship system presupposes collective responsibility, meaning that any action that betrays trust of any member of the group will have to be rectified by the group (Anstorp & Horst 2021).

Based on the above theoretical exploration, for this paper we conceptualize trust as presumed reliability that can both be characteristic- and process-based. We furthermore understand trust as stemming from and further strengthening social relations within a moral community. Our approach thus challenges both the individualistic bias in theorizing on trust, and the instrumentalist bias in empirical studies that focus on trust in the Somali context. In what follows, we will first briefly introduce the basic structure of Somali collective crisis response, after which we will identify both characteristic- and process-based trust. We will then focus on the collective workings of trust as an accountability mechanism and argue that it does not only stem from but also further strengthens social relations within a moral community.

The Somali collective response to crisis: relational humanitarianism and trust

Somaliland, like other Somali regions, faces a fragile ecology, with consistently high temperatures. Water is one of the most critical resources, making the amount, timing and distribution of rainfall essential (Maxwell & Fitzpatrick 2012). In semi-arid environments with extreme climatic and ecological variations from season to season and region to region, the scope for controlling one's environment is very limited and conditions lead to fragile economic adaptive strategies with low productivity and uncertain yields (Braun 1992). Livelihood strategies under these conditions are geared toward not only current needs, but also long-term security concerns. They are mainly based on three methods: 1) Investing in a strong social network, 2) high levels of mobility, 3) diversification of investments in different livelihood strategies, activities and/or people (Horst 2006).

Many socially-embedded forms of collective assistance exist amongst Somalis — both during crisis and non-crisis situations. Through our research we documented at least 15 different forms of collective assistance that were practiced in the pastoral areas of Somaliland. The motivation for such assistance provision can come from kinship relations, faith or broader community ties. Somalis form a community with reciprocal obligations of giving and receiving depending on needs and ability. Expectations to give assistance can relate to life-cycle situations such as marriage, birth, sickness, or death, but also situations of individually and collectively experienced crisis (Musa & Kleist 2022). The saying *maanta waa aniga, berito waa adiga* (today it is me, tomorrow it is you), emphasises that while one might be in need of assistance today, the roles may reverse, with the other person requiring help tomorrow.

In this paper we focus on collective responses to crisis, which are mostly organized through ad hoc committees, which exist on kinship, regional and national levels. These committees play a central role in activating social ties to mobilize funding and facilitate implementation of assistance. At kinship level, the collective response to droughts is organised and implemented by Kinship Crisis Committees, nominated by the kinship members. Somalis belong to kinship associations that serve various functions, including political, protective and developmental roles. In their protective role, these associations are pivotal in responding to crises. At the regional level, Regional Crisis Committees, nominated by the regional governors, mobilise and deliver assistance on the regional level. National Crisis Committees mobilise resources and implement the assistance provision on the level of both the federal state as well as the federal member states¹. They are nominated by the president and composed of mainly businesspeople, religious leaders, and sometimes youth leaders.

The crisis committees are activated specifically for the duration of a crisis. They automatically disband once the crisis has ended. Both the regional and national committees are expected to liaise with regional and national government leaders during the implementation phase. Kinship committees bypass local authorities as they are part of kinship-based communities and have direct access to the necessary information on which to base their decisions. It is only at the kinship level that women are included in the committees. As we will show, these differences between the committees are reflected in the varying levels of trust attributed to them and in particular whether that trust is characteristic- or process-based.

Two types of trust: characteristic- and process-based trust

As one of our informants argued, “Somalis can easily mobilise and pool resources, but the condition is that they have to get someone they trust” (Regional coordinator, international non-governmental organization (INGO), Burao, 08.11.22). So what are the conditions of trust in the Somali context? What are the “beliefs and expectations about a trustee's likely behaviour, which provide reason to think a particular trustee is trustworthy”? (Cohen 2023, 116). Many analyses of Somali social and economic life emphasize that trust is derived from kinship ties (Carrier & Elliott 2018, 2023). Yet kinship does not automatically lead to trust and trust can exist beyond kinship. We argue that more broadly, trust is relationally constructed based on social interactions, experiences and expectations where values, behaviours and norms of trustworthiness are exhibited or observed. Mechanisms are in place to establish whether someone is trustworthy, based on a combination of factors and a holistic evaluation of the person:

When responding to crisis, the first question is who are the most trustworthy social members. The decision as to who is a trustworthy person is based on previous information, experience and interactions. (Traditional elder, local fixer for international aid, Burao, 08.11.22)

Trust needs to exist between those mobilizing funds, donating funds, implementing assistance and receiving assistance. In order to be able to separate who is really trustworthy and who is deceiving and might abuse the trust they receive, different types of information are gathered by different people. The nature and effectiveness of this process is influenced by levels of power (in)equality, geographical proximity/distance, and positionality (i.e., insider-outsider and gender). We observe that the further removed those in need of assistance and those organising the crisis response are from each other, the more difficult it becomes to judge trustworthiness. Therefore, the more distant the level of assistance mobilisation, the weaker the degree of trust. Thus, the mechanisms to establish trust are also different. While National Crisis Committees for example are largely based on characteristic-based trust, kinship-based committees instead build on process-based trust.

Characteristic-based trust

During national crises such as droughts or epidemics, it is common that Somali state authorities form government-appointed National Crises Response committees comprising of prominent businessmen and religious leaders, two social groups that generally enjoy trust based on their background and role in society. The post-1991 Somali state authorities have limited capacity and resources to respond to crises. If assistance mobilisation is led by a public official or the mandated public institution, Somali citizens are less likely to contribute meaningfully, primarily because of their distrust of public institutions. Thus, prominent religious leaders or businessmen are added to establish trust.

In such instances, people rely on social references and visual characteristic to judge the trustworthiness of individual committee members. Explaining this, a humanitarian aid practitioner said:

People will evaluate the character of individuals delivering assistance to them. Appearance also matters when dealing with communities in need. If I had a long beard and the dress code of a practicing Muslim, then they would easily allow me into their community and trust me because they would believe I am God-fearing man. So physical appearance is also judged. (Regional coordinator, INGO, Burao, 08.11.22)

Despite deliberate effort by authorities to leverage trust in businessmen and religious leaders who are members of these committees, the national crisis response committees face lower levels of trust compared to kinship-based crisis response committees. This is largely because national committees are selected at a level far removed from ordinary citizens.

Every clan has a committee which works in the process of collecting and delivering assistance and these committees are more trusted by their varied kinship groups. However, for the other committees such as the government committees, there are many rumours [of mismanagement] that arise all the time. (Drought displaced woman in Burao Internally Displaced People (IDP) camp, 07.11.22)

Ultimately, characteristic-based trust provides a weaker basis for trust than process-based trust, underlining that rather than focusing on trust as a noun we should understand it as a relational verb — trust building. Illustrating this, when asked about the characteristics of a trustworthy person, one informant first says that they know someone is trustworthy if that person is a practicing Muslim, and then adds:

I need to have enough information about him or her to make a sound judgement, otherwise my judgement becomes based on perception. I need to have interacted with the person in his or her daily life to know that the person is not engaging in deception and tricks to win my trust. (Traditional elder, local fixer for INGOs, Burao, 08.11.22)

Process-based trust

Being socially responsible is mentioned as crucial in the Somali response to crises. Before someone affected by crisis is supported or before someone is included in a crisis response committee, it is important to verify that they are not “dab iyo reer-laawe (irresponsible)” (Traditional elder, former humanitarian worker, Hargeisa, 02.2.22). Responsibility is of relevance for the assisted, the one assisting and those raising funds. Explaining how one's reputation influences the kind of assistance one may receive, a businesswoman — the cashier of a kinship assistance group — stated:

The size of assistance depends on how the affected person is viewed, whether the person is known to be a good person before he/she was affected by crisis. People may become generous to give since a person who is held in high regard in the community earns the right to be supported in times of need. This type of person does not even have to ask others for help; instead, the community and the elders mobilize to collect resources on his/her behalf. A person is honoured in this way. The community will say ‘so and so is going through a difficult time and we must collect resources to help him/her’. On the other hand, when the careless, irresponsible person needs assistance, then the community will not be so keen in helping him/her and people will say ‘why should we collect resources to assist him/her? He/she will be careless with whatever we give’. (Kinship assistance cashier, businesswoman, Burao, 09.02.22)

Similarly, if the affected man, who supposedly should have been the head of a household, is seen to be irresponsible, then the assistance is not delivered to him but instead is provided directly to his wife and children. Furthermore:

Those deemed to be respectable individuals in the community will have the elders heedlessly collect assistance and resources for them while those seen as irresponsible will have to beg and ask for assistance themselves. (Kinship assistance cashier, businesswomen, Burao, 09.02.22)

When it comes to the providers, if those giving have been approached by someone they hold in high regard, they are both more likely to give and to give a substantial sum. This is particularly relevant at the kinship level where kinship members can easily judge the reputation of their members based on previous interactions.

The importance of information and long-term relationships in trust building

Information is an essential component of trust. In the Somali context, lineage ties provide a social ‘information system’ through which trustworthiness is quickly measured (Simons 1995). Somalis use this information system as social reference to pass judgements about others; judgements such as whether someone is trustworthy, credible, reliable, or otherwise. When asked how to tell who might be a trustworthy person to be included in the assistance committees, a traditional elder, knowledgeable both of humanitarianism through kinship and international organizations, noted, “the trustworthy person is visible and can easily be told”. (Traditional elder, local fixer for INGOs, Burao, 08.11.22). Information about the size of the assistance, reporting channels, and consequences in the case of malpractice is essential for trust. A local non-governmental organization (NGO) worker stated,

Trust cascades down to information. Information access is higher at kinship assistance than other forms of assistance. This information can be used for different purposes including to know what channels to use to give feedback, to judge the trustworthiness of those involved in the assistance and to know the size of assistance raised. (NGO worker, Burao, 08.11.22)

Community members know who is trustworthy and who is not, based on observations, interactions, and informal background checking. They observe people's actions and behaviours in different settings and notice (in)consistencies in action and behaviour, or if they do not know them personally they ask others who do. Both affected communities and the crisis response committee have information on each other, which plays a role in trust and in good assistance practices. One of the elders we interviewed said:

The affected people cannot lie to those providing the response. For example, if an affected person exaggerates the size of his household, those providing the response can know, and say ‘we know you have a smaller family, where did you get this large family?’ (Kinship assistance contributor, Odweyne, 05.02.22)

Access to information is highest at the kinship level. Interviewed IDP women who recounted the assistance they received during droughts said:

Clan members know each other. The community members know those who are delivering assistance to them because most of the time these are the notable community members such as traditional elders, youth, businesspeople and religious leaders (Drought displaced woman in Burao IDP camp, 07.11.22)

The community members have observed each other over time and know trustworthy kinship members. Therefore, only trustworthy people — those who have behaved consistently against social expectations in repeated social interactions — are included in the kinship drought response committee. Information on the humanitarian actors is also important for receiving information about how the money was spent. Commenting on this, a woman in Baraaqo IDP camp in Burao said:

We can get information about the assistance and those delivering it. We can know from our relatives how much money was raised, we can know how it was distributed. And if there is any malpractice, it is easy to report to the relatives or the traditional elders because we have connections. The increased access to communication has facilitated this. (Drought displaced woman in Burao IDP camp, 07.11.22)

National and regional droughts committees, on the other hand, are selected by the state authorities at the national and regional levels. These committees work closely with and through government officials. There are factors that positively or negatively influence the information and trust that the affected communities have on the committee members. First, often the committee members are prominent religious leaders and businessmen, so the public has general information about the individuals included in the national and regional crises committees. Second, the national and regional committees may inform national and regional authorities but it is not common that they inform the public about how much money they raised, how the money was allocated, how much money was left, how the money that was not used in the previous disasters was spent. This limited information negatively affects the trustworthiness of the national and regional committees. Due to the increasing public concern on accountability and demand for transparency, in 2022, the Waaheen Market Fire Emergency Committee (*Gudiga Gurmadka Suuqa Waaheen*), held news briefings and established a temporary website to provide the public with information (Saab TV 2022).

While affected communities can have varying degrees of access to information about the committee members and their actions, at the same time the committee members' information on the affected communities varies and may at times be weak. Commenting on this, a female IDP head in Odweyne stated,

Religious leaders lack knowledge of the needs of the people, they do not interact with the people and they don't know their needs; they lack information about the needs of the people. They will send more aid to some regions and less aid to other regions. (IDP gatekeeper, Odweyne, 05.11.2022)

Information is important for accountability. A local adage says “war nin aan loo diran baa sida [news is carried by individuals whom you never asked to carry it]”. (Kinship assistance cashier, businesswoman, Burao, 09.02.22). In other words: news spreads fast. Whenever there is malpractice in the distribution of assistance, the local people know. However, the question is what action the local community can take with this information. When it comes to assistance provided on kinship level, the community knows the complaint channels and report malpractices, but in other levels this is rarely the case.

Research participants reiterated that interaction, through direct or indirect social relationships and engagement, is important for trust building. Social interactions serve as a laboratory for trust building: the information from these interactions, the behaviour and actions of people during these interactions, the degree of (in)consistencies of the actions and behaviours, what others say about these interactions and the expectations of the interacting parties contribute to building or damaging trust. For reliability to be established, the two parties need to have known each other for a period long enough to establish the consistency of behaviour, “I trust the person who I have known for some time and have developed confidence in more. However, if the person is new to me, I cannot trust them” (Traditional elder,

Burao, 07.11.22). Trust is a process, and it is the holistic nature of the process that influences trust, not just parts of the process.

Knowability is important when considering trust (Carrier & Elliott 2023). The longer we observe others, the more chance we have to know them and gather reliable information on (in)consistencies in their actions and behaviour. Commenting on this, a research participant said:

If I have known a good person for a long time, and over that time the person did not change, then I will have higher trust in that person. However, suppose I have known the person for a short time and I have not observed them over time. In that case, it is less likely I trust the person. (Drought displaced woman in Burao IDP camp, 07.11.22)

Different locally-embedded humanitarian actors establish different types of relationship over time. Trust that has been established based on long-term relationships is highest at the kinship level because the interaction between the established crisis committee and the community members is not confined to times of crisis. An INGO worker argued that local staff working in such organizations should also aim to establish long-term relationships if they wished to be trusted by the community:

A trustworthy humanitarian actor should have engaged with the people before and the local people should have found the engagement positive and fair. Then they can build their future interactions on this experience. (Drought displaced woman in Burao IDP camp, 07.11.22)

Access to information on responsibility and reliability is highest at the kinship assistance level as kinship members frequently interact and observe their kinship members, and trust that kinship members can lean on each other during tough times. Therefore, trust is higher at the kinship level compared to the other two levels of Somali assistance. Trust in national committees depends on the level of expectation, interaction and access to information that different people have with the committee members. Many of those interviewed were ordinary citizens who trusted the committee because of the social group they belong to and the information they heard of them rather than the long-term, holistic knowledge they had of them and how they managed the assistance.

Social relationships are based on exchanges between two or more parties, and in this interaction it is important that trust is mutual. Ideally, the two parties should share the feeling of trust based on their previous interactions and information. Each party should meet conditions of trust and prove themselves reliable over time. However, if trust is breached not only would this information be shared, affecting levels of trust, but this breach would have further consequences.

Levels of power (in)equality influence trust, as individuals may have no choice but to place trust in someone they are dependent on and hope for the best. This dynamic is particularly evident in certain economic and political interactions but less so in kinship networks. Regional and national committees hold power over affected individuals, but not over leaders who nominated them. Similarly, kinship committees may hold power over affected communities but not over assistance providers or contributors from urban areas and the diaspora. The affected individuals' connections to urban and diaspora communities enable them to report any malpractices, fostering accountability within the system.

Trust and the collective: holding people to account when trust is abused

Trust is based on social norms and values which provide boundaries and expectations of how individuals should behave. Not all social members uphold social values and norms equally, as one of our informants points out: "people are very different and do not think the same. The person with the right mind will be more fearful of being shamed in front of his family and community" (Elder and village head, Odweyne, 06.02.22). Those who uphold social norms and values become respected and trustworthy, while those who do not uphold social norms and values are distrusted.

At the same time, these individual decisions are also guided by the social consequences of behaving irresponsibly or unreliably. Individual committee members, especially on kinship level, are conscious of their reputation and the fact that this reputation is intertwined with the reputation of the group. If one person compromises trust, this has implications for their social group. Taking this into account, actors in Somali collective response to crises tend to hold each other accountable, demanding them

to be reliable and responsible in their actions. Once assistance is provided there is a high degree of social pressure — holding each other to account — because individual actions often have collective repercussions, including the risk of weakening the kinship assistance system.

People exercise agency in their daily interactions to construct trust, while also recognizing that certain actions and behaviours can undermine it. For instance, chewing Khat — a shrub that is chewed as a stimulant drug — can potentially erode trust for individuals who have built their trust within non-Khat-chewing social networks. In such networks, Khat consumption is viewed negatively and conflicts with established norms. However, what causes distrust is to some extent contingent on norms within smaller groups rather than society at large: In social networks where Khat chewing is common, its consumption may not necessarily undermine trust in the same way.

Trust, or mistrust, in Somali society is deeply embedded in kinship structures and relationships. In cross-clan contexts, an individual's clan affiliation — whether tied to a rival, non-rival, or historically conflictual kinship group — often plays a role in shaping (mis)trust-based social and economic interactions. However, trust can also develop between individuals from different clans through shared social bonds, such as friendships, attending school together, or maternal kinship ties. In these cases, trust is not assumed but constructed through process-based mechanisms. Discussions about trust frequently arise in both cross-clan and intra-clan interactions as a means to evaluate these dimensions.

For trust to work, there must be consequences for breach of trust. If there are no consequences, or consequences are weak or unimplementable due to power and information barriers, then trust is weakened. There are forms of control such as social sanctions that surround trust at community and individual levels (Carrier & Elliott 2023). The sanctions could come in different forms such as loss of reputation, shaming and holding the person accountable by making them pay for or correct their mistake. It could come from the community but may also be seen as something between the individual and God.

If a person breaks the trust they have been given, then he/she can potentially be cursed for their actions. However, as long as one does what is right to ensure the collected money is used for what it is intended for, then repercussions can be avoided. It is important that we don't forget those who trust us and Allah. (Kinship assistance cashier, businesswoman, Burao, 09.02.22)

The local adage *Qof la aaminay, waa qof la falay* (a trusted person is cursed) summarises the consequences of a breach of trust. What this saying reminds people of is that those who break trust will be cursed – facing bad consequences such as the wrath of God, as well as the wrath of society. The person who committed a breach of trust is shamed as '*damiir laawe*' (immoral) and '*xaarama cune*' (the one who eats the forbidden), and may be barred from future social initiatives. A volunteer in the kinship assistance committee recounted how a villager they knew had to live with the shame of his misconduct many years earlier:

When I was young, I knew a man in our village who was known as a 'tuug' (thief). I heard that drought struck in the Somali region of Ethiopia and the government sent food trucks. This man was a driver in one of the trucks, he crossed the border to Somalia to steal the truck. (Volunteer in kinship assistance and local university lecturer, Burao, 09.11.22)

Research participants described such social consequences as "*wejigaa kaa xumanaya* (loss of face)" (UN programme advisor, Odweyne, 03.11.22), implying a loss of reputation. The above quoted volunteer said,

in the kinship assistance, people have different options if they have a complaint of mismanagement of what they contributed. These include raising the issue with the kinship members, and shaming the person who did the malpractice. (Volunteer in kinship assistance and local university lecturer, Burao, 09.11.22)

Information is used to give good references to trustworthy people and bad references to those believed to be less trustworthy or to have committed a breach of trust in the past. Considering that Somalis are described as 'an oral society' efficient information sharing is of crucial importance, and this social system of sharing information is a powerful deterrent for anyone, as one's social capital stems from social status in the community. Furthermore, it is believed that someone who committed

a breach of trust will face 'bad luck' (*cuqubo*). Commenting on this, a diaspora returnee and former humanitarian actor said,

During the 1988 war when hundreds of thousands of people fled to refugee camps in Ethiopia, we started to raise funds to help people in the refugee camps. We could not use Ethiopian banks, so we had to move the donated money informally through social networks. There was a man who disappeared with a huge amount of money that he was supposed to deliver. The man lost his reputation and became mentally ill, and we believe the curse affected him. (Former humanitarian provider, Hargeisa. 12.11.20)²

Breach of trust consequences are overlapping and reinforcing and range from facing the wrath of God and the people, being shamed by the community, being cursed and reputational damage. Sometimes, the person is directly held responsible by his *xidhe* (the male relative who can hold the person accountable). This is a practice in the Somali traditional governance. The cashier of a kinship drought response committee said, "if a kinship member has, for example, misappropriated funds, his *xidhe* is asked to hold the person accountable" (Kinship assistance cashier, businesswomen, Burao, 09.02.22). Another practice of holding the person directly accountable is "to ask the person to compensate what he/she has misappropriated" (Traditional elder, Burao, 08.11.22). Asking the person to return or compensate depends on the size of what was misappropriated and the person's wealth possession:

If a person misuses the money they are trusted with, they will have to pay it back if the person has the capacity to do so. Sometimes if the person doesn't have the resources to pay it back, it is possible that they could be forgiven but they will still lose trust. (Volunteer in kinship assistance and local university lecturer, Burao, 09.11.22)

When direct societal accountability does not take place, God is expected to punish the person who committed breach of trust,

If the person is not held directly accountable, then there are two options: to leave God to punish the person while the person also loses reputation, or to take legal action. People are afraid of social punishment more than they are afraid of Godly and legal punishments. (Kinship assistance cashier, businesswoman, Burao, 09.02.22)

In addition to information being used to judge someone's trustworthiness, it is also used when someone commits a breach of trust:

People will spread the word about the malpractice the person committed and this is enough punishment to make the person lose their reputation. This affects other things such as employment, business and political ambitions the person had because when someone does a background check, they will find out the malpractice the person did in the past and they will not trust the person. (Kinship assistance cashier, businesswoman, Burao, 09.02.22)

Any accountability system is effective only to the degree of effectiveness in its enforcement: an institution is strong only if the consequences faced by those who disobey the institutions are immediate and severe (North 1990). In the kinship emergency response, the consequences of misconduct are immediate and severe. When a chief elder was asked whether, if the diaspora community and the clan family finds out that the person in charge of humanitarian assistance was stealing and misusing contributed funds, that person would face consequences, he replied, "Yes, they will be shamed for their actions...they will not be allowed to run or hold public office to represent the kinship group... definitely, they fear these repercussion" (Traditional elder, Odweyne, 07.02.22). Such consequences are most likely to discourage malpractice at the kinship level where people depend on relationships to be stable, recurrent and necessary. As a local university lecturer argued: "the reputation I have within my clan family is more important to me than the reputation I have within society" (Odweyne, 4.11.22).

On kinship level someone who committed a breach of trust can lose precious social capital, with severe implications. On national or regional levels, on the other hand, the public cannot punish those in breach of trust for their actions nor can they decide who to include or exclude in the national and regional crises committees. Some public figures do challenge this reality by openly criticising and making fun of the committee members. For example, a well-known Somali YouTube and social media-based political satire *tooshka siyaasadda*, made a clip on the national drought emergency committee,

entitled, *Marka Gu'gu da'o ama Dayrtuba Guddiga Abaaraha yaa la xisaabtama baaqiga lacagta Abaaruhu xagay marta* (when the rain starts, who holds the drought committee accountable? Where does the balance from the drought response funds go?). But while Somali citizens may criticize and lose trust in a national drought committee member, the government will likely still include these members in the next crises response committee. These committees are mainly used to raise funds from the private sector, which may use the contribution for other purposes such as corporate social responsibility, marketing, and tax reduction. Civic sanctions are less relevant in these private-public deals.

Conclusion

We have shown that accountability is practiced in Somali collective crisis response, though it might be difficult to recognize from the angle of a narrow understanding of accountability as technical-financial mechanisms rather than the reciprocal practice of being responsible for, and being able to explain, one's actions to those one is answerable to. This broader understanding of accountability is a two-way process of being accountable and holding to account (Bovens 2007), which happens in many different ways in the Somali collective responses to crises and becomes visible when taking a relational perspective (Di Somma 2022; Brun & Horst 2023). Here, trust is the key mechanism, where we conceptualize trust as presumed reliability that can be characteristic- and processed-based. We understand trust as both stemming from and a prerequisite for social relations in moral communities, and focus on its collective and normative workings (Cohen 2023).

Our empirical research has shown that receivers, providers and mobilizers of assistance are evaluated by their level of responsibility and reliability — through long-term social relationships and access to detailed and holistic information. Trusting is a socio-cultural phenomenon (Shipton 2007; Broch-Due & Ystanes 2016), and for those who do not fulfil the expectations or the trust that was instilled in them, the consequences of abusing people's trust can be severe as losing trust and face in the community means facing severe repercussions for future opportunities. Furthermore, if social consequences are not in place, the community believes that the 'offender' will at least face consequences by God. A trusted person is truly cursed, if trust is not honoured.

Our research also showed, however, that trust-based accountability mechanisms were most relevant the closer the social relations were. This relates to the fact that trust involves an incremental process of building trust and thus presupposes a degree of stability and reliability in social relationships and expectations (Zucker 1986). Emergency committees set up to deal with crises on the kinship level functioned well in understandings and practices of being accountable and holding to account, largely drawing on process-based trust. Yet for government-appointed committees, the situation was different. Since in the case of national crisis committees, for example, it was impossible for all those involved to know each other, and the social consequences and punishments of abused trust were also more difficult to follow through, in those cases accountability was dependent on characteristic-based trust through professional reputation and was in general weaker than for lower-level initiatives.

Our research shows that access to accurate information, recurrent and reciprocal social relationships, and relevant sanctions play crucial roles in the effectiveness of trust as a mechanism for accountability. These factors contribute to process-based trust and contribute to a relative level of power equality. In contrast, as demonstrated by the case of national and regional crisis response committees, assistance organized at higher communal levels tends to garner weaker trust among the general public and those being assisted due to limited transparency and access to information, lack of sustained relationships and unequal power dynamics that make sanctions less efficient.

The empirical knowledge gained from studying trust as an accountability mechanism in Somali collective responses to crises offers important contributions to existing theorizing on trust. In much of the literature on trust, rational and affective dimensions are taken as opposites (Jones 2019; MacKenzie 2020), but a holistic approach to trust suggests that trust relations are part of complex social relationships that entail all these dimensions. We argue that relationships of trust need to be studied as integral parts of social relationships more broadly, and as reciprocal relationships — as the Somali '*isla xisaabtani*' highlights very well.

Our study further encourages researchers to understand this reciprocal relationship beyond the two parties involved to the wider community or social group. Trust relations between two individuals take place within a network of social relations that are affected by that interaction. By studying trust and accountability together, we have learned that when trust is broken, there are always consequences for the individual, and often also for their social group. Thus, members of the group have a stake in making sure that trust is honoured. Such relational ethics can be understood from the fact that humans are inherently vulnerable and interdependent, while also recognizing that vulnerability is relational and changes over time (Mackenzie 2020). Cooperation, marked by promise-keeping and reliable interaction between individuals and the large social group, in many contexts is a crucial means of handling this human condition (Carr 2023).

One question that remains, is whether lessons can be drawn from the existing accountability mechanisms that form part of the Somali response to crises that are of relevance for a wider group of assistance providers. This question is particularly relevant in light of the localization debate, which has increased the discourse — though not necessarily practice — on redistribution of resources and decision-making power from international to local humanitarian actors (Mohamed-Saleem 2020; Roepstorff 2020; Dijkzeul 2021). In this article we have argued that there are great levels of accountability within Somali crisis responses, but the mechanisms used are very different from what international donors and INGOs are looking for. As such, supporting locally-led collective crisis responses requires a rethinking of what accountability means and how it is practiced in relational forms of assistance.

Trust is a process, and it is the holistic nature of this process that influences the decision to trust, not just parts of the process. Technical-financial forms of accountability are concerned with only specific elements that are captured. Being accountable in the formal technical-financial sense does not necessary mean being trustworthy but being trustworthy may also enable formal accountability. Evaluating trustworthiness is part of the decision-making process from needs assessment to assistance delivery in Somali collective responses to crises, and trust expectations are furthermore adhered to in order to contribute to greater levels of trust in future crisis responses. Equally important, trust goes beyond the individual, as an individual's actions have repercussions for the social group or collective they are part of. That is exactly why the social group holds the individual to account, and reciprocal forms of accountability can be so effective.

Notes

¹ What constitutes the 'national' level is contested in the Somali context, with Somaliland for example operating as a non-recognized autonomous region.

² Interview conducted as part of postdoctoral research for Diaspora Humanitarianism (D-HUM) project, led by Nauja Kleist.

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