

Reflections

Humanitarian accountability in an age of impunity — commentary to Vandevoordt

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In a time of escalating state violence and the criminalisation of both migration and humanitarian work, this paper explores how we can think and write about humanitarian accountability under these conditions. The paper is written in conversation with Vandevoordt's work on citizen collectives' accountability practices, which shows how accountability is being reimagined and reenacted by citizens acting in solidarity with refugees outside state and public scrutiny. While acknowledging the risks of exploitation and abuse, Vandevoordt suggests that these risks can be mitigated and that cultures of humanitarian accountability can be fostered in the absence of formal oversight and regulation. Building on these insights, the paper calls for greater scholarly attention to informal and vernacular approaches to humanitarian accountability, as well as the difficult decisions and uneasy compromises humanitarian actors must navigate in an increasingly hostile political climate. It concludes by advocating for scholarly accountability and deeper dialogue and collaboration with aid organisations and solidarity networks.

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I want to begin by acknowledging the strange and unsettling dissonance of writing about accountability in a time when it seems utterly absent. As I write this piece, Israel continues its unlawful and genocidal attacks on Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, killing and displacing countless people with near-total impunity. In the shadow of these crimes, Europe persists with its deadly border policies, violently 'pushing back' or abandoning asylum seekers at sea, further eroding international humanitarian law and the right to asylum.

To be sure, many humanitarian actors also operate with high levels of impunity. As studies have shown, aid organisations regularly violate the humanitarian principles and ideals they promote,

including the basic commitment to 'do no harm'. Nevertheless, accountability is often framed as a 'gift' offered by these agencies (Hilhorst et al. 2021) rather than as a fundamental right of those they serve. Despite an increasing focus on accountability in the aid sector, the mechanisms and incentives to hold humanitarian organisations accountable remain weak.

Yet, it has been a long time since humanitarianism was 'morally untouchable' (Fassin 2011). Today, humanitarian aid is not only subject to critique and distrust (Pallister-Wilkins 2022) but is also increasingly defunded and criminalised through a combination of legal measures, police intimidation, political discourse, and smear campaigns (Lund & Browne 2024; Plowright 2024; Tazzioli 2023).

Salih (2025) aptly describes the current moment as dystopian—a time marked by what she calls a "dystopic reversal of reality" in which victims (Palestinians, asylum seekers) are cast as offenders, while human rights defenders (humanitarians, refugee advocates) are criminalised. Against this backdrop, how can we meaningfully think and write about humanitarian accountability?

Informal accountability

One possible answer lies in Vandevoordt's (2025) contribution to a special issue on localisation and accountability in the humanitarian sector. Drawing on years of ethnographic research with citizen collectives in Belgium and a broader literature review, Vandevoordt examines a largely underexplored topic: how European citizen collectives practising solidarity with people on the move approach accountability, and whether their practices differ from those of professional humanitarian actors.

Vandevoordt highlights that many citizen-led humanitarian activities—such as hosting refugees in private homes—operate outside formal oversight and public scrutiny. These interactions and relationships are often informal, flexible, and opaque, making them "difficult to control and impossible to formalise without transforming them into something else." (Vandevoordt 2025, 14–32). This context appears to preclude accountability, at least in its conventional sense. However, as Vandevoordt observes, alternative forms of accountability are being developed and practised by citizen collectives on the ground.

Inspired by recent calls for a relational approach to humanitarian accountability (Anstorp & Horst 2021; Brun & Horst 2023), Vandevoordt foregrounds the messy and dynamic encounters between citizen collectives and people on the move. While he seems to share the optimism many contemporary humanitarian researchers place in citizen-led aid as an alternative to professional humanitarianism (Rozakou 2017), he crucially avoids romanticising these initiatives. Instead, his analysis acknowledges that the informality and opacity of citizen-refugee relationships can create conditions for both dependence and independence, support and exploitation, as well as for mitigating or exacerbating power imbalances.

Significantly, Vandevoordt also identifies instances where citizen collectives implement informal accountability measures, such as mechanisms for social control and the cultivation of political reflexivity. Challenging the assumption that accountability depends on formal mechanisms or procedures, his analysis illustrates how accountability is being reimagined and reenacted by citizens acting in solidarity with refugees and other migrants, foregrounding the relational and improvisational nature of these practices.

What broader conclusions can we draw from this analysis? As I noted in the beginning of this piece, the current moment is marked by the increasing criminalisation of both migration and humanitarian work. In this political climate, citizen-led humanitarian initiatives often have few alternatives but to escape state control, as Vandevoordt emphasises. However, while the absence of formal checks and balances carries clear risks of exploitation and abuse, his findings suggest that these risks can be mitigated and that cultures of humanitarian accountability can be fostered without formal oversight and regulation. This highlights the potential value of developing 'best practice' approaches to accountability that can be shared across citizen aid and solidarity networks transnationally while being adapted to local contexts. Crucially, these practices should be developed with the participation of displaced people themselves, as their needs, expectations, and priorities may differ from those of the aid providers.

Holding states to account

To ensure meaningful accountability for refugees and other migrants, informal efforts to support refugees in ethical ways must also be coupled with political action and advocacy to hold states and institutions accountable for their actions and inactions. To conclude this reflection, I therefore turn to the first of Vandevordt's (2025, 14–32) four theses on citizen collectives' accountability practices. He argues that citizen collectives possess "a distinct power to hold their states to account," partly due to their legal status, which enables them to challenge the democratic legitimacy of repressive migration policies. Furthermore, unlike conventional humanitarian organisation that adhere to the principles of impartiality and neutrality, citizen-led initiatives often prioritise political action, including witnessing, advocacy, and civil disobedience.

This aligns with my own research on volunteer humanitarianism and refugee activism in Greece and Norway. Like the Belgian citizen collectives Vandevordt examines, the Norwegian actors I studied challenged the traditional division between humanitarian organisations and social movements. They combined aid work with political advocacy and witnessing (Mogstad 2023) and, at times, civil disobedience to assist refugees and other migrants (Rabe & Mogstad 2024). Rather than acting solely 'in the name of humanity', many emphasised a moral and political duty to challenge the actions and inactions of their own government. Turning to politics to address the limitations of humanitarian work, many invested considerable time and resources in holding the Norwegian state accountable.

However, one key difference is worth noting, largely stemming from the fact that most of the humanitarian actors I studied provided aid in Greece but were Norwegian citizens. For example, the volunteer-driven organisation *A Drop in the Ocean* (hereafter DiH) operated on the Greek islands and mainland but was, until recently, primarily managed from Norway, where most staff and volunteers were born and living. As I explore in my monograph (Mogstad 2023), DiH took on increasing and unexpected responsibilities in Greece, filling gaps left by both the Greek state and professional humanitarian organisations. To maintain access to refugee camps—such as the former and infamous Moria camp on Lesbos—the organisation made an uneasy 'humanitarian-political compromise': while they were vocal critics of the Norwegian state, they largely remained silent on Greek human rights violations and often collaborated with Greek authorities. Using the language of accountability, we could say that DiH sought to hold its own government accountable for their complicity in refugees' suffering through political advocacy at home, while simultaneously refraining from holding the Greek state accountable in order to protect their humanitarian space and access.

This strategy was met with criticism from other actors on the Greek borderland—including aid workers, activists, and some asylum seekers—who argued that DiH prioritised its own presence and self-preservation, thereby contributing to the normalisation and legitimisation of Greek and EU policies of containment and repression. Notably, DiH was not oblivious to this critique but had its own reasoning. Some staff members emphasised that it was neither their place nor within their power to hold the Greek state accountable. As I argue in my book (Mogstad 2023), this reasoning can perhaps best be understood through the political philosophy of Chomsky, who contends that people should focus their political critiques and actions on their own nation-state. Chomsky argues this partly because he believes rights-bearing citizens in democracies carry some level of personal responsibility for the actions of their own nation-states. However, he also sees it as the only arena where individuals can make a tangible impact. As he deftly put it, "It is very easy to denounce the atrocities of someone else. That has about as much ethical value as denouncing atrocities that took place in the 18th century" (Chomsky 1987, 51). Additionally, several DiH staff and volunteers defended the humanitarian-political compromise as 'morally necessary' in a broken or imperfect world where asylum seekers face suffering and political abandonment on Europe's doorstep.

Concluding thoughts

Vandevordt's analysis showcases the value of a relational and ethnographic approach to humanitarian accountability — one that recognises both the constraints and the potentials of citizen-led aid in an increasingly hostile political climate. His analysis also suggests that scholars should pay greater

attention to informal and vernacular vocabularies and approaches to humanitarian accountability, such as political reflexivity (see also Knott 2018) and kinship (see also Mogstad & Rabe 2023). While not discussed in his work, discourses and approaches that align with a more radical social justice agenda—such as sharing (Mogstad 2023) and reparation (Sabaratnam & Laffey 2023)—also warrant further exploration.

In this reflection, I have also highlighted the importance of attending to humanitarian actors' uneasy dilemmas and humanitarian-political compromises in a world increasingly hostile to migration and aid work alike. Such compromises are, of course, not new. Aid actors have long faced difficult decisions about balancing access with a desire to take a principled stance or speak out against rights violation and injustice. As Vandevoordt argues elsewhere (Vandevoordt & Fleischman 2021), citizen collectives also operate with limited capacity and resources, forcing them to navigate different temporal concerns — such as short-term relief and commitments to long-term political and institutional change. In the current political climate, where humanitarian aid is simultaneously and increasingly defunded and criminalised, these dilemmas are becoming even more acute. From Afghanistan and Sudan to the borders of Europe, aid organisations are facing increasingly difficult choices that shape both their own accountability practices and their ability to hold states accountable.

Where does this leave us, as critical scholars of humanitarianism? An obvious starting point is to examine our own accountabilities: to the people we study, to humanitarian workers and solidarity workers, and to our academic colleagues who are currently experiencing repression, intimidation, and criminalisation for speaking out against Israel's genocidal war on Gaza. Beyond this, we should seek deeper dialogue and collaboration with aid actors and solidarity networks — not just to offer our insights, but also to discuss, learn, strategise, and mobilise for a world with more justice, freedom, and accountability.

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