

Relational accountability dynamics in refugee-led education systems

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Mainstream aid discourse often emphasises perceived deficiencies of refugee-led initiatives regarding their capacity to deliver quality services and meet donor requirements, including accountability standards. Despite misrepresentations, emerging evidence shows that refugee-led initiatives in some contexts outperform traditional aid organisations in quality and effective service delivery. A possible explanation for their success is that their governance system is effective, including accountability processes. There is much literature on the accountability of conventional aid organisations. Yet, little attention has been paid to understanding the accountability of refugee-led systems, especially formal ones with legal status and accountability obligations to the host state. This study fills this knowledge gap. It explores principles and mechanisms that govern accountability in the refugee-led education system using ethnographic data from nationally accredited refugee-led schools in the Dadaab camp complex. Established in 1991 in the arid north-eastern region of Kenya, it has been a home to refugees from Eastern and Central Africa, the majority of whom are Somalis. Dadaab comprises three camps: Hagadera, Ifo, and Dagahaley. The study underscores that accountability relations between refugees and refugee-led schools operate as a living process shaped by everyday direct interactions, shared educational goals, collaborative efforts, reciprocal oversight, and answerability among stakeholders. I argue that technical reporting methods that characterise conventional aid are counterproductive without input from recipients. While refugees cannot hold conventional aid organisations to account due to power imbalances, geographical distance from decision-makers and complex bureaucratic procedures, they are the founders and funders of refugee-led schools in Dadaab. Proximity and direct access between those who benefit from education and those who provide it create everyday interpersonal interactions that enable relational accountability.

Keywords: relational accountability, humanitarian aid, refugee-led education, Dadaab Camps, Kenya

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Introduction

When we imagine people fleeing from war, we often envisage vulnerable individuals in need of assistance. The providers of such assistance are presumed to be United Nations (UN) agencies and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), largely funded by Western donors. Such representation only tells one side of the story, and it risks obscuring the various ways refugees collectively mobilise to support themselves and their communities, both in normal times and in times of crisis. Refugee communities engage in collective action and self-help across social and economic contexts. Socially, they create educational centres, health facilities, and sports associations (Pincock *et al.* 2020; McSweeney 2023; Aden 2024). Economically, refugee entrepreneurship results in the development of microloans, electricity supply, and cross-border trade (Pasha 2020; Easton-Calabria & Hakiza 2021; Newman *et al.* 2024). Such refugee-led initiatives often fill gaps left by host states and conventional humanitarian agencies.

While refugee-led organisations (RLOs) and initiatives play crucial roles in providing complementary actions to the conventional aid programmes, they rarely receive any recognition and financial support from donors and INGOs. This is despite global rhetoric advocating for aid localisation (Lie 2024), and efforts to promote refugee community self-help and resilience (Krause & Schmidt 2020). Limited progress is often associated with concerns about refugees' capacity to deliver quality services and meet donor requirements, including accountability standards, which involves the obligation of one set of agents (individuals or institutions) to explain and justify their actions, inactions, decisions, and outcomes to another set of agents (Bovens 2010; Rock 2020). Underlying power dynamics thus reinforce the top-down approach to humanitarian aid, which favours INGOs (Khan & Kontinen 2022).

There is a growing recognition in scholarly discussions that deficit-based misconceptions often associated with refugee-led initiatives are incorrect (Pincock *et al.* 2020; Sahin Mencutek 2021; Aden 2024). As I have shown elsewhere, (Aden 2024), nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Kenya's Dadaab camps outperform INGO-run schools in the Kenya Certificate Secondary Education (KCSE). In the current article, I will explore a possible explanation for such success: their effective governance system, which facilitates upward accountability to relevant Kenyan government authorities and downwards to the refugee community who finance their operations.

While significant literature on the accountability processes of conventional aid organisations exists (Ebrahim 2003; Clements 2020; Anstorp & Horst 2021), little attention has been paid to understanding the accountability of refugee-led organisations, especially initiatives with a *formal* governance structure and recognised legal status that makes them accountable to authorities, such as a host state. The little research that exists suggests that interpersonal relationships characterised by mutual trust, respect, shared expectations and reciprocity help maintain accountability and effective operations within *informal* refugee-led initiatives, even in the absence of a formal governance structure (Pincock *et al.* 2020; Dinbabo *et al.* 2021; Easton-Calabria & Hakiza 2021; Viga & Refstie 2024). However, this evidence does not sufficiently explain the complexity of relational accountability, especially within the context of formal systems.

Building on the existing knowledge base, this paper seeks to deepen understanding of how interpersonal dynamics, shared norms, and collective goals, which are developed through direct interactions, shape accountability in refugee-led institutions. Focusing on formal organisations, it examines the principles and mechanisms that shape and sustain accountability in refugee-led initiatives. The paper draws on ethnographic data collected over eight months during two phases of fieldwork in 2019 and 2024 from nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Kenya's Dadaab camps. The central research question guiding the study is: What principles shape accountability in nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Kenya's Dadaab camps, and how is accountability enforced in practice?

Understanding accountability in the context of a formal refugee-led system holds empirical, theoretical and policy significance. Empirically, examining these systems can shed light on how these institutions cultivate trust, build mutual understanding, establish legitimacy, and achieve operational effectiveness. From a theoretical standpoint, examining accountability in formal refugee-led initiatives can help advance understanding of how accountability functions outside of conventional humanitarian

aid systems. The paper contributes to debates on relational accountability that go beyond legal and financial accountability mechanisms and involve inclusive and participatory decision-making processes. Such approaches challenge the conventional top-down model of governing refugees and highlight the value of refugees' situated knowledge in shaping legitimate and effective self-governance (Pincock *et al.* 2020; Bender 2024). On the policy front, insights from this study can inform accountability policies and practices in the broader aid system, beyond education. Specifically, it can enhance understanding of how to manage 'downward' accountability, ensuring responsiveness to the needs and aspirations of beneficiary communities, which is central to current debates on aid localization.

Framing relational accountability dynamics

Accountability

Accountability is fundamental to governance processes because it functions as a tool to regulate the use and abuse of power and authority (Daun 2020). Despite its significance, it has become a buzzword that is an "essentially contested concept" (Schnable *et al.* 2021, 27). Accountability can be classified as a virtue and as a social mechanism (Bovens 2010; Daun 2020). As a virtue, it relates to the moral standards that guide individuals or organisations in performing their duties and accepting responsibility for their actions or inactions. It is difficult to empirically determine whether individuals or organisations conform to accountability standards in a virtuous sense because these standards are contingent on the institutional contexts and the nature of the organisation (Bovens, 2010).

As a social mechanism, accountability entails structured relationships between agents (individuals or institutions) through which one set of agents is held to account by another set of agents. This principal-agent relationship may involve laws, regulations, oversight, and audit bodies. The accountability mechanisms may involve at least three dimensions: *responsibility*, *answerability*, and *enforceability*. Being accountable requires fulfilling duties or functions and showing that these responsibilities have been met (Wenar 2006), and answering questions concerning decisions, actions, or inaction to those with the right to demand accountability (Brinkerhoff 2001). The enforceability dimension involves ensuring compliance with set standards or norms and providing rewards for success or penalties for failure.

The social mechanisms that sustain accountability vary between *formal* (contractual) and *informal* (relational) contexts. Accountability mechanisms based on contracts often emphasise performance indicators, performance reporting, and centralised authorities with assigned duties, regulations, and procedures to enforce contracts, along with specified consequences. Conversely, relationship-based accountability mechanisms emphasise interpersonal trust, shared norms, and goals (Chynoweth *et al.* 2018). This study emphasises relational accountability dynamics over a formal, contract-based approach.

Relational-focused accountability involves managing relationships with stakeholders through rewards and sanctions, just like contractual-based accountability. For example, stakeholders may offer or withhold network resources, such as collaboration, recognition, and trust, which is contingent on compliance with agreed norms and expectations. By nurturing adherence to shared norms, relational accountability can enable organisations to operate effectively without requiring a central authority to monitor, evaluate and enforce consequences (Hyndman & McConville 2018). However, several challenges may undermine the norms and behaviours promoting relational accountability. These challenges include misaligned expectations regarding performance and outcomes, differences in accountability dynamics across hierarchical levels within service delivery systems, tensions between the operation of formal and informal accountability mechanisms, and the gap between the rhetoric of collaboration and its practical implementation (Romzek *et al.* 2012). Furthermore, relational accountability can be challenged by competition for scarce resources and leaders shifting blame onto subordinates (Nxumalo *et al.* 2018).

Refugees and aid accountability

In a well-established national legal system incorporating international refugee law principles into its institutions, refugees can potentially use the domestic legal system to hold the state and aid providers accountable for violations of their rights (Purkey 2014). This is however rarely possible in practice because of a significant gap between national and international administrative law (Pallis 2004). Host states, especially in the Global South, often push administrative responsibilities concerning refugees as much as possible to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the global administrative body tasked with managing refugee camps globally, providing protection and other assistance to refugees. Inside camps, UNHCR functions as a surrogate or quasi-state (Kagan 2012; Ramadan & Fregonese 2017). Yet, effective administrative and judicial mechanisms are lacking to adjudicate refugees' concerns.

The delegation of the state's fundamental obligation as legal duty-bearer for refugees deprives refugees of the power to assert their rights, reducing them to passive beneficiaries of rights to protection and other assistance (Janmyr 2013; Kinchin 2016). In other words, accountability, the legal tool for converting passive beneficiaries into active claim holders (Yamin 2008), is often incomplete for refugees, especially inside camps. The gap in the accountability structures for refugees has for example been documented in the context of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, where local governance and intra-camp security is insufficient (Masiero 2012). Similarly, in Guinea's refugee camps, the host government, UNHCR, and NGOs work together to fulfil state-like functions for refugees but fail to provide adequate accountability mechanisms and access to justice, thus leaving refugees, especially women vulnerable to sexual and other human rights violations (Farmer 2006).

The UNHCR and INGOs supporting refugees are integral to the larger global humanitarian aid ecosystem. Accountability within this system is predominately formal and technocratic, prioritising upward accountability to donors at the expense of downward accountability to beneficiary communities (Roepstorff 2020). This focus is often to ensure compliance with financial reporting responsibilities, basic code of conduct, and minimum standards in delivering aid services (O'Dwyer & Unerman 2010; Chynoweth 2015). However, reporting is not always connected clearly to doing good work. Even when aid actors fail or intentionally neglect fulfilling these basic responsibilities, it is not evident that they will face any major consequences since the mechanism for enforcing accountability within the humanitarian aid system is extremely weak (Ebrahim 2003; Tan & von Schreeb 2015).

Formal accountability mechanisms in humanitarian aid are being criticised for functioning merely as a performative act, especially for donors (Hoffstaedter & Rocheb 2013). They lack clarity in execution, are ineffective, and disregard responsibility to aid beneficiaries (Chynoweth *et al.* 2018). Emphasis on formal accountability processes can lead to risk aversion, thus limiting the ability of aid actors to adapt and creatively respond to complex humanitarian and development challenges (James 2016).

A growing body of research has shown the crucial role that refugee-led organisations (RLOs) and initiatives play in providing assistance to their communities, filling gaps left by the state and conventional INGOs (Brown 2018; Easton-Calabria & Hakiza 2021; Diab *et al.* 2024). RLOs, whether formal or informal service providers, operate predominantly on less formal and less hierarchical systems. Most RLOs are only accountable to refugees because these organisations rarely receive any financial support and recognition from conventional INGOs. Their accountability and initiatives are shaped by interpersonal relationships, direct interactions, dialogue, and shared norms cultivated over time. They are maintained through trust, mutual respect, shaped expectations and reciprocity (Pincock *et al.* 2020; Viga & Refstie 2024).

The informal accountability approach of RLOs does not equate to ineffective operations and substandard service delivery. Contrary to the dominant perspective within the formal aid system, emerging research shows how RLOs succeed in effectively addressing the needs of their communities. Easton-Calabria and Hakiza (2021) found that refugee-led microfinance groups in Kampala, Uganda have created a successful loan structure for refugees, resulting in low default rates. They highlight that strong community trust is the key accountability element underpinning the success of these initiatives. This factor is lacking between refugees and formal microfinance institutions (MFIs) and contributes to refugees' financial exclusion. This article draws on the growing scholarly work on informal accountability, framed under various terms that include socialising accountability (Chynoweth

et al. 2018), social accountability (Dhungana 2020; Hilhorst *et al.* 2021) and relational accountability (Eyben 2008; Frey-Heger & Barrett 2021).

Research Context

Dadaab and education

Since 1991, the Dadaab camp complex has hosted refugees from Eastern and Central Africa, the majority being Somalis. These camps — Hagadera, Ifo and Dagahaley — are situated in the arid north-eastern region of Kenya. As of 30th of June 2024, they hosted 383,048 refugees, accounting for 49% of refugees in Kenya (UNHCR 2024). Although they provide a much-needed safe haven for refugees, their inhabitants' protracted refugee status results in extreme marginalisation. The camps provide their inhabitants with little hope and opportunities to regain their citizenship rights through full membership in a polity, participation, and protection (Aden *et al.* 2023).

Despite the restrictive social, economic, and political conditions, the Dadaab camp complex is home to a vibrant education system, with learners sometimes achieving outstanding academic achievements that attract national and international attention (Cose 2007; Otsialo 2023). Young refugees in Dadaab work hard in their education, and hold high educational aspirations similar to their peers across the world. They see education as a pathway to building more prosperous, secure, and sustainable futures for themselves, their families and their communities (Dryden-Peterson & Reddick 2017; Morrice *et al.* 2020; Aden 2023b; Reddick 2024).

The provision of education is facilitated by UNHCR through various implementing humanitarian INGOs, including Windle Trust International (WTI), Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and independent refugee-led schools. WTI operates six secondary schools across the three camps, and LWF operates 23 primary schools (Kiruthu 2020; Aden 2023a). Refugee-led schools have been increasing rapidly since 2008. As of November 2024, refugees manage 37 secondary schools and 52 integrated academies (primary schools). Unlike the INGO system, which runs primary and secondary schools separately, most well-established refugee-led schools provide education from kindergarten to secondary. This means that entire child development, socialisation and learning processes happen under one system that is overseen by a permanent core leadership team. In contrast to the INGO-run primary schools, the integrated academies combine secular and religious education. The study of religious education was conventionally reserved for madrassas, religious schools focused on teaching Islamic studies. However, with the emergence of integrated academies, children can study both secular and religious education in a unified system.

The refugee-led schools are similar to private schools in that they charge fees. They reflect the broader trend of increasing preferences for private schooling in Kenya and across the Eastern Africa region (Bold *et al.* 2013; Gandrup & Titeca 2019). Private schools are preferred because of perceived better-quality education and scholastic achievements in national exams compared to public schools. However, I use the term *refugee-led* instead of private to highlight that these schools are established, governed, and financed through the collective endeavours of the refugee community, thus by definition *community-owned*. The fees are determined through negotiation between parents and the school, rather than being unilaterally imposed by the school administration. No uniform fees exist across schools within each of the three camps (Aden 2024). The payment of fees arguably reinforces community ownership by enhancing the collective responsibility of parents and school leadership to ensure quality governance and effective operation of schools.

The emergence of mass refugee-led schools

Nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Dadaab camps emerged because of multiple factors. The most important reason was the slow deterioration of quality education in INGO-run schools, the only formal education system that existed before 2008, creating a growing discontent. The quality of the INGO-run schools deteriorated due to a combination of several global and locally situated challenges.

Globally, the funding for refugee education has significantly declined in the past decade due to numerous global emergency crises. Refugee education is mainly funded through a short-term emergency fund rather than on earmarked long-term funds. This causes strain in planning for education in the long-term (Bovens, 2010). In Dadaab, the decline of funding resulted in a shortage of learning resources and opportunities, as well as an overreliance on untrained secondary leavers. Locally, the increased insecurity in the camps and the entire north-eastern region disrupted the effective operation of humanitarian services, including education. For example, after the Al-Shabaab attack on Garissa University in 2015, many trained Kenyan teachers fled from the camps and the north-eastern region as a whole (Ahmed 2017; Aden 2024).

Another important factor that facilitated the emergence of refugee-led schools was the role of the Kenyan government. The development of refugee-led schools in Dadaab camps would not have been possible without the willingness of the Kenyan government to certify private refugee-led schools. Most governments in the Global South countries are unwilling to engage directly with refugees and recognise refugees as formal education providers (Brown 2018; Nilsen *et al.* 2023). Over the years, refugee-led schools in Dadaab have succeeded in transforming the educational landscape in the camps, as they outperform INGO-run schools in KCPE and KCSE exams (Aden *et al.* 2022).

Several factors enable the success of these schools. Operationally, refugee-led have stricter administrative systems that enable effective service delivery, including timely completion of the annual syllabus, monitoring students' performance trajectories, and providing necessary support early on. Furthermore, refugee-led schools rely more on trained and certified teachers in both primary and secondary schools (Aden 2024). They also operate with smaller classrooms than those in INGO-run schools, which accommodate 80–100 students (Duale *et al.* 2019), rather than the maximum 45 learners recommended by the Ministry of Education (Nyamai 2021).

Research methodology and my positionality

This paper is based on two periods of ethnographic fieldwork totalling eight months in Kenya's Dadaab camps. The first fieldwork occurred between 5th of May and 15th of November 2019 while the second took place from 9th January to March 10, 2024. The follow-up fieldwork, which inspired the writing of this paper, focused on intersections of quality school governance and scholastic achievement. My primary ethnographic focus during both fieldwork focused on two secondary schools in Ifo camp: one INGO-run and one refugee-led school. I also draw inspiration and insights from additional data I collected from eight INGO-run and eleven refugee-led schools across the three camps.

The rationale for focusing my ethnographic case study on two schools in the Ifo camp was informed by both methodological and practical considerations. Methodologically, limiting my ethnographic investigation to two settings enabled in-depth data collection through multiple qualitative methods and sources thus allowing for rich and context-sensitive insights and refinement (Creswell & Poth 2016). Rich ethnographic work can also support analytical generalisation (Halkier 2011), a process where generalisation is achieved through theoretical abstraction rather than based on "sample-to-population logic" (Yin 2013, 325).

Furthermore, Ifo camp is where I grew up and attended primary and secondary education. I have a strong connection with it, as I still have family members and friends who work in the schools. I share the language, culture and nationality with the Somali community that constitutes the majority of the population in the camps. Specifically, I have a connection with the selected INGO-run school. It is the school where I completed my secondary education and later worked as a teacher. This means that I had first-hand knowledge and experiences from this school before my fieldwork trip. However, I had no experience with the refugee-led school, as it was only established in 2018, about a year before my first fieldwork, as the first nationally accredited refugee-led secondary school in Ifo camp. A detailed description of my positionality and how it enabled or limited my research can be found in my previous work (Aden 2023a, 2023b).

Data collection and analysis

During both phases of fieldwork, I regularly interacted with students, teachers, school management and parents. I conducted semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, participated in various extracurricular activities, and engaged with teachers and students across different school contexts. My sampling approach for interviews was based on an *iterative purposive* sampling technique (Campbell *et al.* 2020). I selected participants on a progressive basis as the data collection progressed, either by recommendation from earlier informants or, based on my judgement, informed by our informal conversations, that they could provide useful information. Teachers and members of school leadership were purposively selected based on their specific roles. I determined that the sampling was complete upon achieving data saturation, at which point the interview ceased to provide additional insights or themes, and further interviews were unlikely to yield valuable information to the research (Saunders *et al.* 2018).

I conducted a total of 93 semi-structured interviews across both INGO-run and refugee-led schools during two phases of fieldwork. While data from INGO-run schools informed my thinking, this paper exclusively draws upon data from refugee-led schools, including 42 interviews along with fieldwork notes and observations. Given my fluency in English and Somali, I interviewed Kenyan teachers and a few Sudanese students in English. I conducted all interviews with Somali-speaking informants, including Somali-speaking teachers, all Somali students, and parents in Somali. Allowing informants to be interviewed in their preferred language of highest fluency enhances the depth, reliability and cultural relevance of collected information, while reducing the potential distortion or loss of crucial information through translations (Schembri & Jahić Jašić 2022; Rolland 2023).

The data analysis happened through an iterative process in two phases: during the fieldwork and after exit from the field. While in the field, I interacted with data by listening to audio recordings, taking reflective notes, identifying interesting themes, and transcribing some interviews. This approach allowed me to integrate emerging insights and observations into the data collection process, thus enabling the depth and clarity of information (Döös & Wilhelmson 2014). After the fieldwork, I conducted a comprehensive and systematic data analysis. I took note of interesting quotations and ideas as they emerged from transcripts. I then used themes that emerged from preliminary readings and analysis to develop a codebook, creating thematic codes with NVivo software. The NVivo coding allowed me to easily organise, identify patterns and data relationships, and retrieve them when needed (Feng & Behar-Horenstein 2019). The overarching themes that resulted in writing this article were categorised under the key theme of governance, with accountability being one of the themes. This paper uses pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Relational accountability dynamics in refugee-led schools in Dadaab

Principles shaping accountability

Accountability processes in the refugee-led schools in Kenya's Dadaab camps occur at national and local levels. At the national level, Kenya's Ministry of Education, which provides accreditation, oversees the operation and educational quality. Locally, parents, students, teachers, and school administration keep each other in check. This article focuses on relational accountability dynamics among local stakeholders.

The school administrators, teachers, and students I spoke with underscored their commitment to working together to keep their school operating effectively, with each group fulfilling their responsibilities while keeping each other in check. Parents who enroll their children in refugee-led schools always expect value in return for the fees they pay. They want their children to learn well and emerge successfully in national exams. The school administration is responsible for ensuring effective school operation and meeting parents' expectations. The collaborative effort that drives the operation of refugee-led schools can be illustrated in the words of Omar, the manager 1 of Al-Qura secondary

school, who discussed why their school's KCSE exam results have been consistently stronger in the past years:

Our school relies on four main pillars: administration, teachers, students, and parents. These four groups work together well. Each group knows what it needs to do and does their best. Our main goal is to make sure all our students get a good education. We work together well. We are answerable to each other. We monitor each other. Our honest support of each other helps our school to run smoothly and enables our continued success.

He then talked about how the school ensures everyone fulfils their responsibilities as expected: "The director closely monitors the activities of teachers. Teachers, in turn, monitor the progress of students. So, everyone is answerable to someone else." The school administration ensure effective collaboration among stakeholders in a number of ways. Salah, the principal of Al-Rahma Secondary School, discussed what they do to ensure collaboration among stakeholders:

We provide teachers, students and parents with the necessary information and guidance they need to fulfil their responsibilities. We have regular staff meetings where we discuss current or emerging issues. We also have an open-door policy, where parents can visit the school and speak with the school management as needed.

The primary goal of accountability in refugee-led schools is ensuring students get good quality education. However, teachers see the process of holding them to account as also a means to keep their professional integrity and help them in their career progression. Teachers talk about three-layered commitments: to the school, to students, and to themselves. Ahmed, a teacher at Al-Rahma Secondary School, told me:

The school management regularly checks our teachings and professional documents, such as the scheme of work and lesson plans. Practically, we are answerable to both the school administration and our students. When our students and our school succeed, we also succeed.

One key factor that enables accountability relationships among stakeholders in refugee-led schools is that they are few and operate within close geographical proximity. This allows them to interact directly without intermediary actors, reducing bureaucratic complexities and enhancing their relational ties. Any group's failure or negligence of responsibility can quickly be identified and addressed. Their shared goal also aligns with their interests, thus fostering a positive and collaborative relationship.

Even though accountability stakeholders in refugee-led schools emphasise shared interest and collaboration, there still exists power dynamics between them, just like any other school system with a formal structure and rules guiding its operation. Power dynamics is manifested both overtly and subtly between students and teachers or between teachers and the school management. As such, not all stakeholders have the same leverage at all times. Such power dynamics imply that it can affect whose concern and voice is taken seriously and how accountability is practically enforced. In the next section, I discuss how accountability is enforced in refugee-led schools.

Mechanisms of accountability

In refugee-led schools, accountability is maintained using established formal rules and informal approaches. I explore accountability mechanisms through the lens of two-way relationships (account holder and giver), focusing on students and teachers as account givers.

Refugee-led schools emphasize punctuality, regular attendance, and task completion as some of the ways to hold students accountable. Schools conduct roll calls three times daily: in the morning, after the morning break and after lunch. Most schools in the camps, including refugee-led schools, still use manual registers, where a class teacher or class monitor takes a roll call to identify who is present or absent. However, I have observed one fascinating approach to monitoring students' attendance at Galbed Secondary Schools, which was the first in the camp to introduce a biometric attendance monitoring system. In this school, when students arrive in the morning, they place their thumb on a scanner before proceeding to class. They do this without any supervision. The biometric system saves the exact time they logged in. The system opens at 06:30 a.m. and closes at 07:20 a.m., and then after the morning break at 10 a.m. and after lunch at 2 p.m.. After the system closes each

shift, the school management prints out the attendance record and contacts parents of absent students. Farah, the manager of Galbed Secondary Schools, told me how the biometric attendance monitoring system operates and what value it adds:

In the past, we used manual registers just like other schools in the camps. The manual method takes a lot of time and interrupts lessons. So, the reason why we introduced biometric system is to reduce administrative burdens for class teachers and to make sure that the attendance information is accurate. This approach also encourages students to take responsibility for their time.

The logic behind monitoring students' attendance, whether manually or with a biometric system, is to ensure that students attend classes regularly, to observe patterns of absence and lateness, and to foster a sense of commitment to learning and punctuality. While biometric attendance monitoring in refugee-led schools is in early stages, it demonstrates a commitment to effective time and resource management.

INGOs who have been providing education in Dadaab for over three decades have failed to identify the significant gap in the use of manual attendance records. Class teachers in INGO-run schools have long time ago ceased to mark the attendance registers themselves and instead delegated it to class prefects. Such delegation may have several consequences. First, the class prefects may mark their absent friend as 'present', making it impossible for class teachers to notice and verify actual attendance if the register is falsely marked as present. Second, given that class teachers no longer have the attendance register with them all the time as they used to, it may take them some time before they can review the register, identify students who have been absent, and contact their parents. The delegation of attendance monitoring responsibility to class prefects also signals that marking class registers is seen just as merely an administrative requirement rather than a crucial tool for accountability. Failure to monitor students' attendance can result in mass absenteeism, late-coming, and consequently mass poor performance in national exams, especially the KCSE.

Refugee-led schools notify parents immediately if their child is absent if parents do not contact the school in advance. Communication regarding students' absenteeism commonly goes both ways. Parents are also in some way expected to inform the school if their child will be absent for any reason. Manager Farah also noted this: "When classes begin, if we notice a student is absent, we immediately notify parents. Once we confirm the students' whereabouts, we inform the class teacher."

The fact that the school management handles the roll calls and monitors students' attendance allows information to follow faster between school and home. More importantly, these activities are a means through which schools exercise their established legitimate authority to keep students answerable for their actions. Tardiness and absenteeism without genuine reasons have consequences. Students may face penalties such as caning, cleaning and collecting trash or other forms of punishment teachers determine.

Monitoring performance efficacy

Besides attendance monitoring, refugee-led schools track students' progress through Continuous Assessment Tests (CATs) and end-of-term exams. The objective of CATs is to identify weaknesses and provide necessary learning interventions in advance. Faisal, a teacher at Galbed Secondary Schools, explained why CATs are essential:

The purpose of the monthly CATs is first to assess how much students are learning, second, to keep them motivated in their studies, and third, to identify weak spots where they might need more help.

If assessments of learners have waited until end-of-term exams, it can cause gaps in learning to accumulate and thus be more difficult to rectify. CATs boost students' learning and academic achievements (Santoveña-Casal 2019; Veldhuis & Van Den Heuvel-Panhuizen 2020).

The end-of-term exams take place after every three months. Individual student report cards are then created based on particular subject performance and average grades. The report card provides a basis to assess whether the student's grade has improved, declined, or remained consistent compared to previous examinations. Aside from providing teachers with information about the level

of retained learning, the report cards also allow parents to hold their children and the school to account. In refugee-led schools, parents are required to sign and collect their children's report cards during the closure. While discussing the function of report cards for parents, Jamal, another teacher at Galbed Secondary Schools, told me the following:

We are obligated to provide explanations to parents if their child's performance declines. Normally, we check students' attendance records, changes in the scores of specific subjects and overall performance over time.

Knowing that their parents will see their report cards can encourage students to take their studies seriously and do everything they can to improve their performance. The opportunity for parents and teachers to come together can allow students to discuss their learning challenges and how they would prefer to be assisted, including providing extra tuition for subjects they underperformed in. Furthermore, if the policy of parents signing off their child's report cards was not in place, some students could be tempted to forge report cards from Cybershops in town to deceive their parents. The performance-based accountability mechanism creates a system of checks and balances and shared responsibility between parents and the school, thereby safeguarding students' interests.

Quality teachings through oversight and evaluation

Refugee-led schools regard teachers as key to their success. Salah, the principal of Al-Rahma Secondary School, compared them to 'pilots' who lead students and the school to success. Because of their perceived importance, school managements often try to balance the need to maintain friendly relationships with teachers while ensuring they perform their duties well to meet the school's educational goals. The school leadership closely monitors and oversees teachers' teaching and related administrative duties. These are conducted as part of internal quality assurance processes and as requirements of the administrative mechanisms overseeing educational quality within the national education system.

The school leadership, including the director, manager, principal, and director of studies (DOS), monitor teachers' teaching and class attendance. Abdisalam, the director of Galbed Secondary Schools, told me: "Every time the bell is rung, after 5 minutes, the DOS, the principal, the manager, or I take a round to inspect if all teachers are present in their respective classrooms."

The school director, the manager, and the assistant manager are all non-teaching positions. This gives them enough time to monitor teaching activities and handle administrative responsibilities. The DOS and the principal are part of the teaching team and assist in monitoring and other administrative matters only when they do not have a lesson. The school management monitors teachers' presence in the school, their delivery of lessons, and the correction of assignments. Teachers are required to complete the syllabus on time and conduct revision sessions before the exams begin.

Besides monitoring at the classroom level, teachers are required to submit weekly work plans on Monday morning. In the opening of the school term, they are required to submit their updated professional records, such as schemes of work, lesson plans, and records of work covered. This allows the management to determine whether the planned work is in line with the national curriculum and to ensure that the syllabus is completed on time.

Timely completion of the syllabus is particularly essential because it allows enough time for revision, especially in the final year when students are preparing for the KCSE exams and must revise all the topics taught over the four years of secondary school. Not completing the syllabus can negatively affect the overall performance of individual students and the school average. Arguably, one of the reasons why students in refugee-led schools outperform their peers in the INGO-run schools in the KCSE exams, as observed in my previous study (Aden 2024) is that completion of the syllabus on time and revisions makes students in these, face the KCSE exams with less stress and fear. They develop the confidence that they can tackle questions quite well.

Another way that refugee-led schools hold teachers accountable is through assessment of individual teachers' pedagogical quality. This is done both by the internal school leadership and an officer from the Ministry of Education. Some schools conduct the internal assessments monthly, while

others do so some months before the Ministry of Education officers' visit for school evaluation. The director of Galbed Secondary Schools discussed their internal evaluation process:

The manager, principal, DOS, or I visit teachers in class to assess their teaching and engagement with students. After the assessment, we will commend what was done well and highlight areas for improvement.

The objective of classroom observations is not only to ensure compliance with quality education standards set by the Ministry of Education but also to provide opportunities for teachers' professional growth and learning from good practices. However, refugee-led schools conduct a special classroom observation if students report complaints against a particular teacher's teaching quality.

Participatory student practices and community relations

Students in refugee-led schools play a crucial role in holding teachers to account. They have a democratically elected student government representing students' interests at the school level and class representatives representing students' interests at the classroom level. The student government and class representatives can report any concerns about a particular teacher directly to the school management without fear of reprisal. Badi, the school head boy of Al-Qura Secondary Schools, explained the role of student government in ensuring teachers perform their duties as required:

The school director closely monitors teachers' activities. In the same way, teachers monitor the activities of their students. As the head boy, it does not happen often that students' concern about a teacher gets to me. The class monitors are in charge of what happens in the classroom. They can report concerns directly to the principal, the manager or even the director. It is impossible that students report a concern and not be heard, for which I would be required to intervene. The management takes students' concerns seriously.

Students' active involvement in teachers' accountability shifts the conventional power dynamics between students and teachers. Given that refugee-led schools have stringent policies that strongly emphasize students' educational interests above all else, it could be argued that students have higher leverage over teachers. The consequence of not performing the teaching service in accordance with the needs of students may cause the termination of a teacher, especially if students submit complaints and the management confirms the teacher's weakness. Suleyman, the director of Al-Qura Secondary School, told me:

For us, we prioritise students' interests. Neither the teacher's nor the management's preferences matter. The goal here is to make sure that the student benefits and that the teaching-learning process follows the correct and lawful method.

The rationale for prioritising students' interests is quite apparent because they pay the school bills, and at the same time, they are the direct beneficiaries of the educational programmes. This makes them a key account recipient. However, it does not mean financial contribution is the primary accountability mechanism. Instead, it serves as a complement to community-based accountability that is shaped by shared responsibility, trust, and mutual understanding. While parents provide the financial resources necessary to operate the school, schools are, in turn, required to maximally commit the funding needed to purchase necessary learning materials and hire qualified teachers. Such prioritisation limits the profit maximisation culture, which is often the goal of private enterprises, whether education-related or otherwise.

Students also serve as the bridge connecting the school and the community. To strengthen the relationship and mutual interest between key stakeholders, the refugee-led schools strive to ensure that their system is adaptive to the evolving needs of the refugee community. Teachers, students, parents, and the school have all mutual strategic interests in ensuring the success of the refugee-led system. That is achievable only through collective efforts but requires effective leadership. If the refugee-led system fails to operate effectively and meet the quality educational standards required, it can cease to exist. Their failure would also mean that the refugee community would not achieve the aspiration that initially inspired the formation of these schools.

Conclusion

This paper explored principles and mechanisms that facilitate accountability in nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Kenya's Dadaab camps. The study builds on emerging research on refugee-led initiatives (Pincock *et al.* 2020; Easton-Calabria & Hakiza 2021; McSweeney 2023; Aden 2024; Viga & Refstie 2024) and critical aid accountability literature (Hoffstaedter & Rocheb 2013; Chynoweth *et al.* 2018; Roepstorff 2020). It shows that accountability in the refugee-led system is grounded in shared educational goals, collaborative efforts, reciprocal oversight, and answerability among key stakeholders, including school management, teachers, students, and parents. This is facilitated by close geographical proximity and direct interactions among stakeholders. The study used students and teachers as illustrative account givers and identified several mechanisms to hold them to account. These include monitoring students' attendance and performance efficacy, as well as monitoring and evaluating teachers' teachings and quality. The findings have several empirical and theoretical significances for the debate on aid accountability.

Accountability in the refugee-led system operates as a living process shaped by everyday interpersonal interactions. The presence of all leadership tiers within the school environment, along with the close geographical and relational proximity to other stakeholders, facilitates frequent interaction between the school leadership, teachers, parents and students. Parents also have the benefit of communicating with the school leadership in their own mother tongue without the need for an intermediary translator. These factors collectively enable key accountability stakeholders to understand each other better, build mutual trust, and coordinate to solve problems quickly and effectively. Previous research on refugee-led initiatives has also shown that shared culture and everyday interactions play a crucial role in shaping reciprocal obligations, trust, answerability, and mutual support (Pincock *et al.* 2020; Easton-Calabria & Hakiza 2021; Viga & Refstie 2024).

In practice, accountability manifests in multiple contexts of everyday interactions. For example, a teacher may evaluate a colleague's teaching and provide direct and constructive feedback; a parent could visit the school to observe and discuss their child's progress; and a school manager may contact parents to communicate concerns about their child's behaviour and attendance. This ongoing reciprocal communication fosters trust and transparency, thus creating an environment in which accountability thrives (Hyndman & McConville 2018; Musa & Horst 2025). The refugee-led system walks alongside their communities by listening to, understanding, and valuing their feedback.

The way accountability operates in the refugee-led system starkly contrasts with how accountability is practised within conventional aid organisations. In the latter system, accountability is constructed around upward accountability to donors and host states at the expense of downward accountability to beneficiary communities (Roepstorff 2020; Anstorp & Horst 2021). Donors and conventional aid organisations place little value on the perspectives of beneficiary communities on planned or delivered assistance. Consequently, refugees cannot hold conventional aid organisations to account due to power imbalances and the fact the main decision-making leadership of these organisations is situated overseas. Their representatives at the camp or national level just perform administrative functions and cannot make major changes to the system without the support and authorisation from organisational headquarters, whether in New York, London, or elsewhere. Furthermore, decision-making within this system follows complex bureaucratic procedures and takes a long time to make much-needed decisions or resolve problems.

On the contrary, refugees have enough power to keep the refugee-led system in check because they are the founders and funders of these systems. They decide the standards for evaluating quality of service and how to penalise or sanction failures to live up to their responsibilities. For example, a refugee-led school cannot stop teaching a particular subject because of limited funding to hire a teacher. However, INGO-run schools can and often do so whenever donor funding is short. Education implementing INGOs often set their goals and service delivery standards based on available funds. In this case, the learners' needs and interests are often not a fundamental component of the accountability equation within this system.

While refugees have more accountability power within the refugee system, the power relations between refugees and the refugee-led system are more complex and dynamic. No single stakeholder

holds an absolute monopoly of power over others. Each side, that is, schools and refugees, has unique sets of tools to regulate the other side's use and abuse of power (Daun 2020). For example, the school management and teachers draw their leverage from their role as caretakers of national accreditation standards and as gatekeepers regulating access to institutions through admission and what disciplinary actions should be taken against students, including expulsion from school.

Conversely, parents and students counterbalance the institutional power through their financial and social capital leverage. They provide the financial resources that help the schools to operate. In a competitive educational landscape, they hold the 'exit power', the ability to transfer to a competing school if they experience mistreatment, poor-quality education, or unsatisfactory results in national exams. Furthermore, the satisfaction of parents and students can help schools attract more clients and return older ones. On the contrary, their dissatisfactions may deter new clients or cause the loss of existing ones. The distribution of power within the refugee-led system reduces the possibility of any side overstepping their authority and disregarding responsibilities (Woods 2016; Chen *et al.* 2020).

The balanced power dynamics observed in refugee-led schools offer crucial lessons to conventional aid accountability. To enhance the effectiveness and impact of aid, it is critical for conventional aid organisations to cultivate productive relationships with aid beneficiaries and to listen to their perspectives with humility, care, and compassion. It is counterproductive to depend solely on technical reporting and external auditors who cannot understand or do not even care to understand the rich, context-specific insights the beneficiary communities might provide about the services they receive.

Notes

¹ A 'manager' in the refugee-led school holds the second highest position in the administrative hierarchy. They often report directly to the school director (CEO). Unlike INGO-run or government schools, where the school "principal" often serves as the CEO, in refugee-led schools they come third in the leadership structure. Some of the specific responsibilities of managers include registering new students, collecting school fees, conducting internal quality assurance assessments, taking role calls (often through assistance to the school manager) and contacting parents as necessary.

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