

# Reimagining humanitarianism: relational accountability in locally-led responses

In debates on humanitarianism in the last decade or so, 'localisation' has been a central concern, broadly referring to the transfer of decision-making power, resources, and responsibility to local and national actors. While the inclusion of certain actors such as local and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is relatively straightforward, incorporating others — like affected communities themselves or local less formal civil society — is often more complex. The special issue on reimagining humanitarianism examines the transformative potential of centering communitarian practices, including mutual assistance networks, relational support systems, and local accountability frameworks, in order to rethink humanitarian action from the ground up. In this editorial, we focus on core themes in the individual articles in connection with research on local understandings and practices of accountability. 'Local' refers not only to actors in geographic proximity to the affected populations, but also to the embeddedness in social, cultural and accountability systems of the crisis-affected contexts. We argue that formal accountability mechanisms — systems that hold donors, NGOs, and implementing agencies responsible for their actions, decisions, and resource use — are valuable but can create an illusion of control in crisis settings. Humanitarian response is enacted by human beings, and it is ultimately human beings who hold each other to account. If accountability is truly understood as an opportunity to learn, grow, improve, in ways that include different stakeholders' perspectives, it should be possible to achieve more reciprocal and genuine forms of accountability. This requires a perspective that centres and redefines understandings of power from a relational perspective.

Keywords: relational humanitarianism, localisation debates, locally-led aid practices, accountability

## The broken promise of localization

Local communities have long played a central role in crisis response, through mobilizing resources, coordinating relief, and sustaining recovery during and after emergencies. Despite this, local actors and systems remain unrecognised or sidelined in dominant humanitarian narratives (Sezgin & Dijkzeul 2016). While the humanitarian sector calls for more locally-led aid and greater inclusion of crisis-affected people in decision making, these discussions often reinforce the primacy of international actors by framing localization in terms of integration into externally defined models. This approach does not shift existing power dynamics; instead, it subtly reinforces them.

In this special issue on reimagining humanitarianism we call for a fundamental rethinking of humanitarianism, one that not only centers local actors — including community groups and solidarity networks — but also recognizes their knowledge systems and practices on their own terms. This

requires a fundamental shift in the starting point of both humanitarian practice and scholarship towards less visible, locally led, and informal forms of assistance as the foundation for rethinking aid. This perspective holds across most debates in the humanitarian field and, in light of the current funding crisis, is not only timely but increasingly unavoidable.

Calls to center local actors and knowledge in humanitarian responses may seem self-evident or even uncontroversial, but meaningful shifts remain constrained by the geopolitical history and institutional architecture of mainstream humanitarianism. This architecture has been shaped by colonial worldviews, unequal power dynamics, and vested interests embedded in national and global political economies. It continues to determine not only how aid is delivered, but also how knowledge about humanitarianism is produced, legitimised, and circulated (Mamdani 2009; Mbembe 2019). Humanitarian studies themselves have often reinforced these dynamics, privileging international actors, formal institutions, and technical models of intervention. Together with others, we therefore argue that humanitarian scholarship must shift its centre of gravity (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Paccito 2015; Hilhorst 2018; Rutazibwa 2019).

What is deemed 'local' or 'global' is not simply a matter of scale or location, but of perspective and power (Ferguson & Gupta 2002). Geographical approaches — especially those grounded in relational thinking — help unsettle these binaries by tracing how humanitarian practices emerge through spatialised power relations, mobility, and everyday negotiations. Rather than treating space as a passive backdrop, these perspectives follow Massey (2005) in seeing space as relational and actively produced through encounters shaped by unequal power relations, histories of inequality, and resistance. This framing runs through the contributions in this special issue, which challenge dominant narratives and foreground the situated, locally grounded, relational, and contested nature of humanitarianism. Together, they call for a more relational understanding of humanitarianism; one that reimagines it as a set of relationships rooted in trust, shaped by local realities, and sustained through mutual forms of accountability (Brun & Horst 2023). A humanitarian landscape, in other words, where subjects are always formed "in and through relations with other subjects" (Edkins 2003, 256).

Accountability is central to these questions because it reveals how power circulates through humanitarian relationships: Who is answerable to whom, on what terms, under what conditions, and with what consequences? We aim to advance this discussion by exploring how accountability operates within relational forms of humanitarianism and what insights these practices offer for redistributing power within the humanitarian field. We therefore ask: What characterises humanitarian assistance provided by local residents and institutions? What ethical principles and values underpin these practices, and how do they shape humanitarian responses? How is accountability defined locally, and how is it practiced in a range of different relationships? And ultimately, what can we learn from these practices that may benefit attempts towards shifting power to local actors within the humanitarian field? The special issue addresses these questions through a multidisciplinary collection of papers that focuses on examples from Africa, Asia and Europe. Several of the authors have lived experience from and/or practice-based knowledge in the contexts they write about. Together, the contributions provide empirical richness to what accountability practices look like from a relational perspective.

We highlight the importance of recognising and engaging with existing community-based forms of mutual aid, support, and accountability. Humanitarian response and accountability are fundamentally relational — shaped and sustained by the people who hold one another to account. The editorial outlines this approach to relational humanitarianism, exploring how power and accountability operate within both mainstream and relational humanitarian frameworks, and drawing out key themes from the special issue contributions. We end by summarising the main findings and suggesting areas for future research.

## **Relational humanitarianism**

Humanitarianism is frequently approached through the lens of a formalized system dominated by institutions and actors primarily based in the Global North. What we call the 'mainstream humanitarian system' has been shaped by the Dunantist tradition and its guiding principles of humanity, impartiality,

neutrality, and independence. However, this institutionalised form of humanitarian aid represents only one dimension of a broader humanitarian landscape (Hilhorst 2018). Humanitarianism, when approached relationally, reveals a more expansive and entangled field, including mutual assistance, community solidarity, everyday forms of care, and contextually grounded practices of responsibility. These forms are not 'local' or 'informal' in contrast to the 'global' or 'formal'. Rather they are co-constitutive, entangled within broader histories of displacement, governance, and struggle (Brun & Horst 2023).

Drawing on Massey's (2005) relational understanding of place, we view humanitarian landscapes as not fixed or passive spaces, but as dynamic and contested, continuously reshaped by social relations and material practices (Hilhorst & Jansen 2010; Collinson & Elhawary 2012; Roepstorff 2020, 2022; Brun *et al.* 2024). This approach offers a bridge between different temporalities by illuminating how immediate actions are connected to the longer histories and futures of displacement and recovery relationally. Thus, this relational approach to the humanitarian landscape also connects humanitarianism to development and peacebuilding efforts (Barakat *et al.* 2020).

Over the last decade, research on humanitarian efforts operating outside the formal humanitarian system has expanded significantly. Scholars have introduced various conceptualisations to capture these alternative modes of assistance, including 'citizen aid' (Fechter & Schwittay 2019; Jumbert & Pascucci 2021), 'volunteer humanitarianism' (Sandri 2018), 'grassroots humanitarianism' (McGee & Pelham 2018), 'solidarity humanitarianism' (Haaland & Wallevik 2017; Rozakou 2017), 'everyday humanitarianism' (Lewis 2019; Viga & Refstie 2024), 'subversive humanitarianism' (Vandevoordt 2019), 'vernacular humanitarianism' (Brković 2017, 2023; Musa & Kleist 2022), and 'relational humanitarianism' (Brun & Horst 2023). Common for these conceptualisations is that they highlight how humanitarian acts are highly relational, emerging from existing social, cultural, and economic networks (Horst 2006; Cretney 2015; Jansen 2018; Pincock *et al.* 2021).

Three key relational elements emerge from this body of research. First, *proximity* — both geographical and sociocultural — shapes humanitarian responses, as long-term social ties and shared community identities foster obligations of care. Second, witnessing plays a critical role, where humanitarian acts are often motivated by direct encounters with suffering, creating a moral imperative to act. Third, the experience of having received assistance in the past contributes to *a cycle of reciprocity*, where individuals who were once recipients of aid later become providers, and those whom they help then help others again. These dynamics disrupt the binary between helper and helped, revealing humanitarianism as an evolving, interdependent process rather than a static act of charity.

Unlike mainstream humanitarianism, which is structured around aiding distant strangers, relational humanitarianism recognises that assistance is embedded in pre-existing relationships and sustained through mutual obligations. In many contexts, assistance is facilitated through kinship networks, rotating credit associations, cooperative societies, and self-help organizations, where support is expected to be reciprocated over time between individuals within a socio-cultural collective (Bankoff 2007; Ikanda 2019). These informal mechanisms are particularly vital where formal safety nets are weak or absent, functioning as critical humanitarian infrastructures (Tan-Mullins *et al.* 2007; Bornstein 2012). Similarly, diaspora communities engage in humanitarian acts — through remittances, refugee-led organisations, and advocacy — demonstrating how relational responsibilities extend across borders (Horst *et al.* 2010, 2016; Olliff 2018; Ademolu 2020).

Rather than seeing aid as an external intervention delivered by formal institutions, relational humanitarianism reveals how assistance is an ongoing, embedded practice shaped by lived experiences, social ties, and mutual responsibilities. Recognizing these dynamics challenges the dominant humanitarian model, which often prioritises neutrality, standardisation, linear planning and technocratic efficiency over the realities of care and reciprocity that sustain humanitarian action on the ground. By shifting the focus to relational forms of aid, we open up new ways of understanding how humanitarianism operates; not as a fixed system but as a set of evolving, interdependent practices. This perspective invites a re-evaluation of power, accountability, and legitimacy in humanitarian work, urging a move away from top-down models towards approaches that are grounded in the social, cultural, and political realities of those directly involved. A deeper engagement with relational humanitarianism is thus not just an academic exercise, but a necessary step in

reimagining humanitarianism in ways that can meaningfully shift power and accountability within the humanitarian field.

## Power and accountability

In humanitarian settings, accountability is shaped by complex and often uneven relationships between a diverse set of actors with differing resources, mandates, capabilities, aspirations and forms of authority. Questions thus arise not only about who is accountable to whom, but also about how accountability is understood, enacted, and contested across different sites and scales. These issues are especially relevant as local associations, refugee-led initiatives, and transnational networks operate independently of, alongside, or with formal humanitarian institutions.

Accountability in mainstream humanitarianism is most commonly defined through frameworks such as the 2010 Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) Standards, which describes accountability as

the means through which power is used responsibly. It is a process of taking into account the views of, and being held accountable by, different stakeholders, and primarily the people affected by authority or power (HAP 2010, 1).

While this definition acknowledges multiple stakeholders and the responsible use of power, its implementation often reduces accountability to procedural reporting. This reinforces hierarchies that keep power concentrated within international institutions and donor agencies rather than with the communities most affected by crises (Bennet *et al.* 2015).

Together with Eyben (2008), we argue that the absence of mutual and collective accountability in humanitarianism reflects a limited engagement with alternative understandings of responsibility. While there has been increasing emphasis on two-way and downward accountability within the sector, these discussions often remain framed within predefined structures that continue to privilege external oversight and standardised reporting (Hilhorst *et al.* 2021). As a result, accountability is still frequently conceptualised as a process in which those in power define the terms, while those receiving aid are expected to comply. This overlooks the ways in which responsibility is continuously negotiated and co-constructed in humanitarian settings.

A more relational approach to accountability shifts the focus from procedural compliance to the interplay of obligations, expectations, and trust that emerge in everyday interactions. This aligns with participatory accountability, which incorporates non-Western perspectives, values diverse ways of knowing, and prioritizes dialogue and collectivity (Dillard & Brown, 2014; Viga & Refstie 2025). Such relational and participatory approaches highlight how accountability is not merely a technical mechanism for compliance or a set of predefined indicators but also a social and political process shaped by power dynamics, contested knowledge systems, and differing understandings of responsibility. Accountability is embedded in relationships and shaped by the distribution of power — not just power over, but power with.

This reframing challenges the conventional notion of power as a finite resource held by institutions and wielded over others (Allen 1999). Instead, it is understood as relational and dispersed throughout society, operating in all interactions and shaping what is possible within different contexts. Power is an expansive force that can enable both social change and the reinforcement of existing structures. Hayward (2000) argues that when power is not seen as something attributable to specific actors, attention shifts to the ways people mutually shape each other's capacities and possibilities. In this view, accountability is not simply about holding institutions or individuals to account but about recognising shared responsibility in shaping the social and political conditions in which humanitarian action takes place. This perspective opens up new ways of thinking about how accountability can be enacted.

Acts of mutual assistance between people affected by crisis, and between those directly affected and those witnessing, provide a different vantage point from which to understand how accountability emerges and is sustained. Locally embedded mechanisms often rely on proximity, reputation, and long-term engagement rather than formal reporting structures, raising questions about how different

models of accountability intersect, reinforce, or contradict one another. Relational humanitarianism also provides a bridge between different temporalities by showing how immediate acts of care and solidarity are connected to longer histories and futures of displacement and recovery. These aspects of temporality have significant implications for how accountability is understood and practiced, and also for how power is shared within the humanitarian landscape (Brun 2016).

Relational forms of accountability have been conceptualized as social or socializing accountability (Joshi 2014; Chynoweth *et al.* 2018; Dhungana, 2020; Frey-Heger & Barrett 2021). This focus offers a perspective on how accountability operates through face-to-face interactions, participatory engagement, and relational interdependence (O'Dwyer & Unerman 2007, 2010; Jayasinghe & Wickramasinghe 2011; O'Leary *et al.* 2023). It shifts the emphasis from bureaucratic oversight to interpersonal processes in which individuals hold each other to account through mutual recognition, trust, and dialogue (Roberts 2001, 2009; Ebrahim 2003, 2009; Romzek *et al.* 2013; Chynoweth *et al.* 2018). Roberts (2009, 958), drawing upon O'Neill (2002), suggests that socializing accountability has value as an "intelligent and compassionate form of accountability" in which hierarchy is broken down and active enquiry is valued over adherence to pre-set indicators or scripts. Accountability is here construed as an interpersonal process, engaged with both the self and the other, in which honesty about one's vulnerabilities and insecurities is promoted. Other people are seen as resources rather than threats, and fantasies of control through technical standardization are let go (Roberts 2009).

Key behaviours that strengthen socializing accountability include frequent and sustained communication, information-sharing, acknowledging mistakes, taking corrective action, following through on commitments, relationship-building, individuals acting as champions or leaders, and providing favours (Romzek *et al.* 2013). These behaviours are not simply procedural actions but are embedded in the quality of relationships and the broader social fabric in which humanitarian work takes place. Additional factors of importance include informal collaboration and the private exchange of constructive criticism, both of which contribute to accountability as a dynamic and negotiated process rather than a fixed set of rules (Chynoweth *et al.* 2018).

Instead of seeing accountability as something imposed from a distance through external reporting structures, relational conceptualizations reveal how accountability is enacted through ongoing relationships and embedded in the social environments in which crisis response unfolds. In this sense, accountability is not an abstract principle but a lived practice, constantly shaped by interactions, negotiations, and shared experiences. A relational perspective to accountability raises important questions about how different forms of responsibility coexist, intersect, or come into tension in humanitarian settings, because it challenges conventional humanitarian notions of distance, proximity, and temporality (Brun & Horst 2023).

## Reimagining humanitarianism: article contributions

An emerging critique of humanitarianism is that localization is often framed through a binary that defines local actors as fixed in place and international actors as mobile and global (Melis & Apthorpe 2020; Roepstorff 2020). This framing reinforces hierarchies, obscures translocal dynamics, and overlooks the ways in which humanitarian responses are shaped through complex relationships and movements across scale (Amin 2004; Massey 2004; Viga & Refstie 2024). The contributions in this special issue push back against such binaries by approaching the local as relational — produced through connections, negotiations, and interactions rather than predefined categories. While their disciplinary starting points differ, the papers collectively speak to concerns in relational geography and political geography more broadly: that space is not given but made (Massey 2005), and that humanitarian action must be understood within the landscapes of practice in which it unfolds (Feldman & Ticktin 2010).

This relational lens draws attention to how accountability is practised in everyday settings through forms of trust, obligation, and reciprocity that may not align with institutional frameworks. The articles foreground actors who are often marginalised or made invisible in humanitarian discourse, including civic humanitarians, community groups, and refugee-led organizations. In examining how these actors define and enact accountability, the papers open up important questions about who holds

power, who speaks for the local, and how claims to legitimacy are made and contested. Taken together, the contributions demonstrate why relational perspectives matters for humanitarian studies — not only as a spatial frame, but as a mode of analysis attuned to the uneven terrain of aid, the politics of representation, and the everyday geographies through which humanitarianism is practised and reimaged:

Robin Vandevoordt (2025) examines how citizen collectives in Europe navigate accountability in their efforts to support people on the move. He explores four theses of how the collectives engage with accountability and which indicate different relationships: First, how citizen collectives can hold state actors to account by challenging migration policies and exposing their real-world impact. Second, how citizen collective's close relationships with migrants create opportunities to listen and speak for people on the move in public spheres which the latter have limited access to and little desire to participate in. At the same time, citizen collectives are rarely held to account for how they speak about the people they support, which can reinforce paternalistic relationships and dynamics. Third, citizen collectives may shape the actions of professional non-governmental organisations (NGOs), influencing both their operational strategies and advocacy agendas. Finally, how these collectives function as spaces where power relations are constantly renegotiated through informal social control, relationships of dependency and autonomy, and varying levels of political awareness. These internal dynamics highlight both the possibilities and contradictions in how accountability is practiced in relationships of assistance outside formal humanitarian structures.

Heidi Mogstad's commentary to Vandevoordt builds on his argument that cultures of humanitarian accountability can be fostered in the absence of formal oversight and regulation. Having studied volunteer humanitarianism and refugee activism in Greece and Norway, a vital contribution Mogstad makes is her observation that informal efforts to support refugees must be coupled with political action and advocacy to hold states and institutions accountable for their actions and inactions. Drawing on Chomsky, she argues that rights-bearing citizens in democracies have a responsibility to focus their political critiques and actions on their own nation-state, carrying some level of personal responsibilities for the actions of that state and being able to make a tangible impact there. Mogstad sees great value in further studying discourses and approaches that align with a more radical social justice agenda, while acknowledging the uneasy dilemmas and humanitarian-political compromises present in a world increasingly hostile to migration and aid work. Finally, she advocates for scholarly accountability and deeper dialogue and collaboration with aid organizations, solidarity networks and affected communities themselves.

Marie Godin and Cadeau Heritier (2025) challenge the conventional Global North–Global South divide in diaspora research by focusing on 'near diasporas' — communities geographically close to their countries of origin. They examine how these diasporas forge transnational and trans-local connections through their involvement in humanitarian action and development efforts. Through a study of the Banyamulenge Congolese refugee community in Nairobi, Kenya, they explore new forms of technology-mediated diaspora humanitarianism and demonstrate how social media platforms, particularly YouTube, are reshaping power relations between the 'near-and-far diaspora,' especially among the youth. Importantly, they highlight how traditional support systems, such as the 'mutuality system', have been successfully adapted to the digital age and integrated into platforms like WhatsApp. They also show how multiple overlapping crises—including protracted displacement, economic hardship, the COVID-19 pandemic, and legal precarity — have further altered roles, relationships and responsibilities in diaspora humanitarianism.

Nell Gabiam (2025) contributes to ongoing debates about the definition and purpose of localization by showing how Syrian individuals and NGOs have played a major role in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding assistance to war-affected Syrians. They have also acted as a crucial link in the cross-border aid effort targeting Syrian civilians living in rebel-controlled parts of the country, areas that were deemed too dangerous to work in by most international organizations. Drawing on the narratives of members of Syrian refugee-led NGOs whose past lives in Syria, diasporic experience as refugees in Turkey, and aspirations for Syria's future informed their cross-border assistance to fellow Syrians, she shows that the work of these refugee aid providers is informed by a grounded temporality that differs from the linear donor-centric temporality of institutionalized international aid. Based on

this finding she argues that, when it comes to the Triple Nexus of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding assistance, localization as empowerment should prioritize coordination with local actors through equitable partnerships over their incorporation into existing international aid structures.

Emmanuel Viga and Hilde Refstie (2025) examine socializing and relational accountability among civic humanitarians in Uganda, focusing on how responsibility is embedded in tribal, clan, familial, and neighbourhood networks of South Sudanese refugees. Through fieldwork vignettes, they show how community groups enact accountability through everyday social interactions and locally grounded practices such as community policing, consensus-building meetings, and the involvement of local leaders, including pastors, chiefs, elders, and refugee welfare councils. While acknowledging that most accountability practices blend elements of both technomanagerial and relational forms, they employ this distinction to highlight their contrasting logics. Drawing on Ubuntu philosophy, they demonstrate how socialising and relational accountability — more prominent in the practices they studied — is rooted in embedded social ties and culturally specific understandings of obligation. These forms, they argue, offer important insights for reimagining localisation and the decolonisation of aid bottom-up.

Ahmed Musa and Cindy Horst (2025) ask how local responders are held accountable by those who provide them with funds to support collective responses to crisis, and by those they provide assistance to. They focus on collective crisis responses during droughts in Somaliland, where social security is rarely provided by the state, but is rather supplied within kinship- and locality-based networks. Such networks also play a central role in times of crisis. Musa and Horst 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. 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. As Viga and Refstie, they show how 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.

Hassan Aden's (2025) research on refugee-led schools in the Dadaab refugee camps of Northeastern Kenya shows the principles and mechanisms that govern accountability in the refugee-led education system. 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. He argues that technical reporting methods that characterise mainstream 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, creates everyday interpersonal interactions that enable relational accountability.

This special issue explores the relationship between humanitarian practice and scholarship as shaped by both overlap and disjuncture. What is seen as radical or transformative in one sphere may appear routine or unremarkable in another. Practices framed as innovative within academia may be long embedded in local responses, while reforms celebrated within policy circles may be viewed as insufficient or misguided by those on the ground. Furthermore, there is often a lag between critical conversations in scholarship and actual shifts in practice, and vice versa. Recognising these temporal and epistemic gaps is essential to developing a more grounded and plural understanding of humanitarianism. In order to make some of these gaps and potential shifts in practice, the special issue includes reflection pieces highlighting insights from the practice field.

In their reflection piece, Sever Džigurski and Cindy Horst (2025) explore the mental models underlying the formalized humanitarian system and the localization debates within it. They argue that these mental models draw on neoliberal and Eurocentric development logics that have been challenged in post-capitalist, post-development and post-postcolonial theory. A demand for more

radical transformation of the system would entail acknowledging other mental models that de-center the global north while at the same time creating space for conversations about power that recognize historically grounded, structural power inequalities. These alternative perspectives are grounded in a relational ethics that emphasizes interconnectedness and interdependence, is rooted in reciprocity, solidarity, and care, and values long-term relationships shaped by shared histories and collective futures.

A further reflection is shared by Kari Eliassen and Sian Olwen Rowbotham (2025), practitioners at Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), a Norway-based NGO with a long-standing commitment to locally led humanitarian action. Drawing on their experience in Sudan, the authors show how NPA adapts its partnership approach in response to crisis conditions. After war broke out in 2023, Sudanese volunteer networks and local actors led the humanitarian response, forming Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) to deliver food, medical care, and essential services. In response, NPA simplified financial oversight and adjusted compliance mechanisms to ensure direct funding reached these grassroots efforts. The ERRs, grounded in Sudan's tradition of collective action (*nafeer*), operate through horizontal structures that emphasise transparency, trust, and democratic decision-making. Their accountability is first and foremost to the communities they serve, rather than to international donors. The piece argues that these locally-led models not only challenge conventional humanitarian structures but also demonstrate their effectiveness in building resilience and solidarity rather than dependency.

Finally, when we discuss relational humanitarianism and accountability, we need to include knowledge production and scholars. Academia, like the humanitarian sector, is entangled in long-standing power asymmetries and colonial legacies that continue to shape what counts as credible knowledge and whose voices are deemed intelligible. Reimagining humanitarianism requires us thus to expand not only our vocabularies but also our ways of knowing — rethinking how knowledge is produced, whose knowledge is legitimised, and how authority is claimed in both academic and humanitarian settings. In the fields of forced migration and humanitarian studies, which occupy an uneasy space between policy engagement and critical scholarship, this means engaging with alternative epistemologies, attending to the politics of authorship and representation, and refusing the easy binaries between academic and 'local' knowledge (Lyytinen 2022). It also means experimenting with practices of refusal and "relating otherwise": modes of engagement that disrupt assumptions of academic neutrality and foreground the political nature of scholarly institutions and practices. These approaches must make space for embodied, affective, and relational ways of knowing and meaning-making (Smith 2013; Spathopoulou & Meier 2023). As such, co-creation of knowledge with civic humanitarians, refugee-led organisations, and other embedded actors are not add-ons to humanitarian critique, but central to any meaningful rethinking of humanitarianism.

This commitment to relational and co-creative knowledge production is evident in the contribution by Alikhan Mohideen and Danesh Jayatilaka (2025) who explore photovoice as a participatory research method developed through a long-term study with displaced northern Muslims in Sri Lanka. The paper describes how methods of photography and storytelling can be used to reflect on the layered experiences of displacement, resettlement, and local integration. The methods became a means to surface shared histories of hospitality as well as tensions and contestations around belonging and support. They made visible the often-unacknowledged forms of reciprocal aid, memory, and care that shape displacement and recovery over time, as well as how researchers can work more co-creatively with displaced communities. Rather than treating photovoice as a neutral technique, the authors foreground how the process itself enabled the building of trust, co-analysis, and new relationalities as part of a longer term and embedded partnership.

Most vital to reimagining humanitarian knowledge production are the direct voices of those most affected. The reflection piece by representatives from Uganda's Refugee Led Organization Network (RELON), Keluel Agook, Kuol Arou, Siham Ahmed, Joyeux Mugisho, and Simon Marot Touloung (2025) challenges the dominant framing of refugee-led organisations as merely filling gaps left by international humanitarian actors, arguing instead that these organizations are leading the way in locally driven responses. The authors explain the challenges they have of accessing direct funding, the impact of donor-driven accountability structures on their work, and the pressures on refugee led organisations (RLOs) to mimic international NGOs. They highlight how they navigate these constraints while engaging

with locally relevant forms of accountability and governance. They conclude with a call for more equitable engagement in both humanitarian policy and research, drawing attention to the exclusion of refugees from key decision-making spaces, such as the denial of visas to attend global humanitarian forums. In research, they advocate for long-term, collaborative partnerships that position refugees not just as subjects but as co-creators of knowledge, influencing both academic debates and humanitarian practice.

### **Accountability as negotiated and co-constructed responsibility**

This special issue starts from the premise that the heart of humanitarian action is found in everyday relationships, not in spreadsheets or audit trails. When neighbours, faith groups, refugee-led collectives, and diasporas help one another, they rely on trust built up over time, on give-and-take, on proximity, and often on shared memories of past crises. Seeing humanitarian assistance through this relational lens turns the usual inquiry on its head: rather than asking how outsiders should police accountability, we examine how communities already negotiate responsibility — through conversation, mutual obligations, and the inescapable reality of living with every decision's consequence.

As demonstrated in the papers, civic humanitarians, including refugee-led organizations, community groups, and faith-based networks, navigate responsibility through webs of expectations, social obligation, and moral accountability. These dynamics challenge dominant humanitarian models based on compliance, and hierarchical oversight, revealing instead how responsibility is co-constructed and enacted through trust, reciprocity, and shared histories.

Approaching accountability not as a checklist of procedural obligations, but as a relational practice offers a powerful starting point for re-thinking humanitarianism. It calls on practitioners, funders, and scholars to move beyond procedural reform and engage more deeply with the social and political worlds in which humanitarianism unfolds. We believe this is essential to respond to the failed promise of power-shifting agendas in humanitarian assistance. It also suggests a broader shift in humanitarian scholarship towards collaborative research that centers the lived experiences of those most affected by crisis and examines how legitimacy, knowledge, and power are co-produced from the inside out. Doing so invites a reimagining of humanitarianism as plural, situated, and shaped by those most directly affected by crisis.

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