HPG Report

ReliefWatch

Designing a new accountability service for people affected by humanitarian crises

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HUMANITY UNITED

sonder collective

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About the author

John Bryant is a Senior Research Officer at HPG.

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Acronyms

AAP	accountability to affected people
C4D	communication for development
CCEA	communications, community engagement and accountability
CCEI	Communication and Community Engagement Initiative
CwC	communicating with communities
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IIC	Iraq IDP Information Centre

Executive summary

This report summarises the experience and lessons of the first year of designing and developing a service for people affected by humanitarian crises, including its underlying rationale, guiding principles and concept. The concept has been developed in response to a perceived lack of a means for affected people to hold the humanitarian system to account. While being able to hold those exercising power accountable for their actions is commonly considered a right across much of public life, it is not reflected in the current reporting mechanisms of humanitarian organisations. However, there is a growing appetite for affected people to access information and provide feedback to aid providers in a more direct manner, facilitated by a proliferation of digital tools and review platforms outside of the sector. Calls for a 'participation revolution' in global policy initiatives involving donors and aid organisations, such as the 'Grand Bargain' that followed the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016, have highlighted the pressing need to correct the imbalance of power between affected people and the humanitarians that provide them with aid and services.

Beginning with early ideas for an 'ombudsman' or 'watchdog' function for the sector, the project team – comprising designers, humanitarian practitioners and researchers – used an iterative design process to create and refine the concept with affected communities and humanitarian staff. Northern Iraq was selected as a single context in which to ground the concept and which presented a range of considerations that impacted the design process. With a diverse population of aid recipients living in displacement camps and damaged urban areas, the affected people interviewed had attempted to contact humanitarian organisations in many ways. Social media, complaints boxes and the Iraq IDP Information Centre (IIC) hotline were some of the channels already used by aid recipients, with varying success. Many humanitarians interviewed in the country recognised the lack of effective channels for receiving feedback, with surveys and assessments suggesting affected people have been insufficiently consulted on assistance provision (Ground Truth Solutions, 2019a; OCHA, 2019). The design process yielded a number of key insights that informed the design of the ReliefWatch concept:

- In the interests of creating an inclusive service that a diverse population with differing needs could use, the means of collating feedback would need to be flexible and open-ended, utilising technology already in use in that particular context but also carefully considering inequalities in access to the internet and mobile phone-based tools.
- Such a service would need to be both independent of, but act as a complement to, existing assessment and accountability apparatus currently working in Iraq. It would therefore exploit the clear gap that exists for enabling affected people to voice their feedback and experiences, while being informed by, and feeding into, the approaches humanitarians already use to understand needs.
- Any service aiming to be useful and sustainable for affected people would need to deliver a 'closed feedback loop' that ensures questions and complaints are heard and responded to. As a voluntary service, the ReliefWatch concept cannot ensure this, but can collate and present feedback in a manner as useful as possible to responders, ensuring replying is as easy as possible.

This concept has been designed as a means by which affected people can give their feedback directly to humanitarian organisations. Comprising both a digital channel, in the form of a chatbot hosted on pre-existing messaging applications, and in-person interviews and fora facilitated by Service Coordinators, affected people can provide feedback on the assistance they have received or report unmet needs. For affected people, ReliefWatch would provide a way for them to comment on what they have received in a safe and open manner as well as, in the case of the 'analog' channel, a space in which to discuss priorities with other members of the community. These functions have been designed to be as inclusive as possible, taking into account the differing levels of access to technology and preferences of those included in the co-design process.

The service would then collate this feedback and present it to organisations and the public. Though anonymous, data on the poster's general location can assist humanitarian organisations in assessing the impact of programmes and in planning future responses. The quality of such feedback would be an important asset for the service and offers people the opportunity to provide less restrictive qualitative data, comprising the kind of rich experiences and stories that have the power to highlight people's agency, priorities and wishes for the future. For many humanitarians who were interviewed and co-designed the concept, this type of information was lacking and very different to the 'tick-box' exercises that often comprise current accountability tools.

Fostering a two-way dialogue between affected people and humanitarians was also a key principle of the concept and much of the design process was spent ensuring data was presented in as useful a manner as possible for organisations to find and respond to. The approach proposed by ReliefWatch has no power to sanction humanitarian actors or enforce greater accountability, however. 'Top Listener' badges can recognise organisations that respond to feedback, but the real incentive for humanitarians that engage with the service is the offer of a more complete and direct understanding of those they seek to help, and the opportunity to put into practice commitments to be more accountable to affected people. To complement existing methods of assessment, the ReliefWatch service offers an additional source of information for planning programmes that could, over time, increase their effectiveness and legitimacy.

The latest iteration of ReliefWatch can be seen at www.reliefwatch.io.

Street corner in Erbil, Iraq. Photo: Ciarán Duffy

1 Introduction

This report details a design project for a new independent service for the users of humanitarian assistance. ReliefWatch allows aid recipients to provide qualitative feedback on the assistance and services they receive, and collates their responses to provide useful and actionable feedback to humanitarian staff and donors. In doing so, it works to facilitate a more direct relationship between humanitarian organisations and the communities they work with.

ReliefWatch was designed to address key gaps in the humanitarian sector by facilitating greater participation and providing accountability to affected people (AAP). Accountability is a crucial basic facet of any authority exercising power responsibly, and the means to hold governments, businesses and other authorities to account for their actions is commonly considered a basic right. The global trend towards online rating platforms is indicative of a growing appetite for users to be able to send feedback directly to companies, and provides incentives for businesses that rely more upon maintaining reputation than the threat of punitive measures.

While the humanitarian system is configured quite differently to the private sector, the lack of any similar direct, independent services for users themselves is increasingly prominent. The dominance of accountability mechanisms oriented towards donors marginalises the voice of affected people and contributes to damaging narratives that position those affected by 'humanitarian disasters' as victims without agency. It also denies humanitarian responders the opportunity to hear directly from those they seek to help, meaning assistance often does not meet pressing needs. While there has been a recent increase in the number of reporting mechanisms in the sector, some have been criticised as not reliably answering submitted questions and complaints (a 'closed feedback loop') and the Core Humanitarian Standards have assessed progress on commitments to provide such mechanisms as generally poor (Austin et al., 2018: 10).

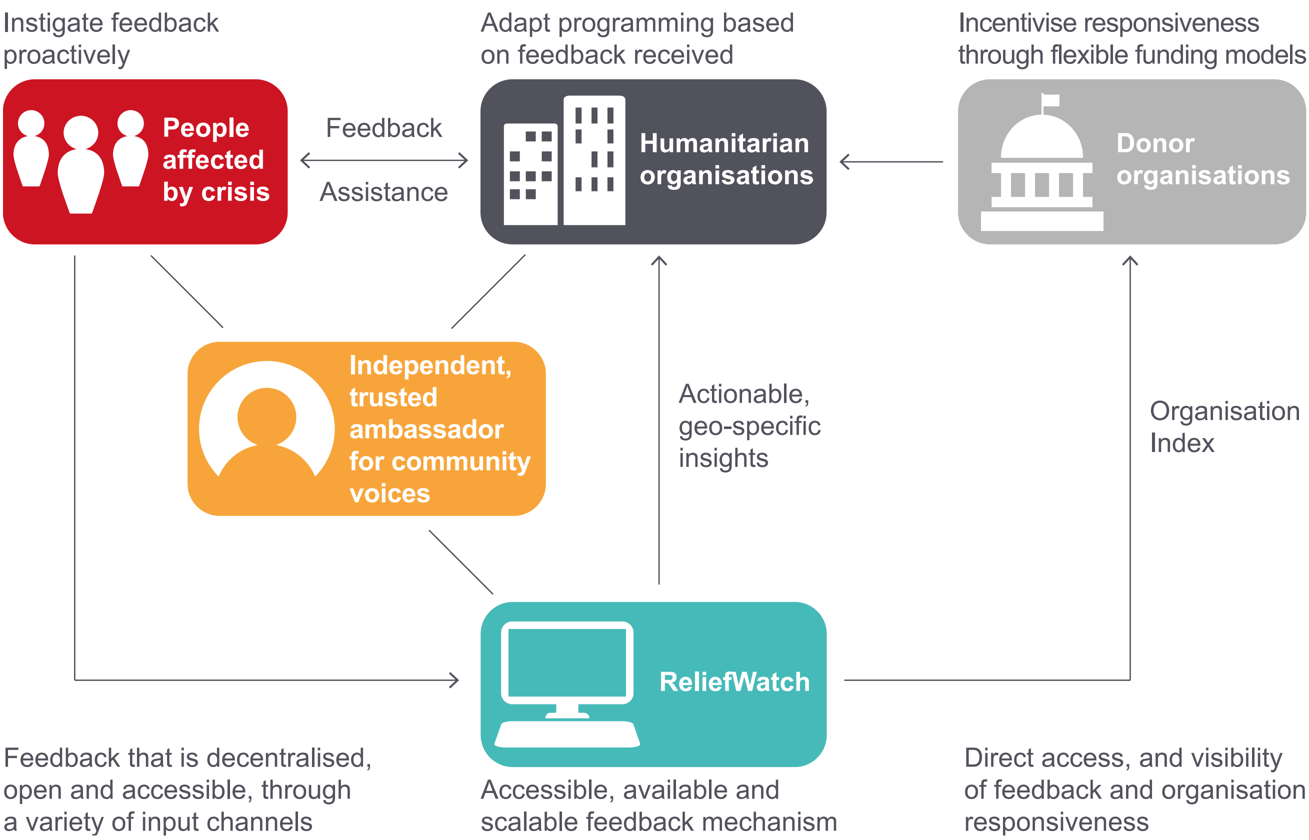
The ReliefWatch project began in December 2018 as a collaboration between design experts Sonder Collective, HPG and Humanity United, a foundation dedicated to cultivating the conditions for enduring freedom and peace. ReliefWatch builds on a concept elaborated in a previous project known as *Constructive deconstruction*, which utilised design thinking – an approach to problem solving that gives prominence to empathising and co-designing with potential users, and adopts an iterative approach to building and testing – as its methodology. ReliefWatch also used this approach, and drew upon a global steering group of experts, funders and humanitarian professionals in a co-design process throughout 2019. The project focused the prototyping phase in northern Iraq, where stakeholders from affected communities and the humanitarian sector participated in the design of the concept in parallel with the global steering group.

Through the ReliefWatch platform, people affected by crises can express their needs and provide feedback on humanitarian services in their area through a combination of digital channels, comprising a chatbot system built on Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, and face-to-face interviews and fora. These channels are facilitated by Service Coordinators, who build trusted relationships with communities, listen to their expressed needs and feedback, and ensure the integrity of their voices are maintained while they translate what they hear onto the ReliefWatch platform. People's stories are anonymous, but organisations can see metadata such as the author's location and date of posting to make following up on reports easier. If organisations respond to a story, the original author is notified. The collated data can then be shown in the form of a heatmap, which identifies the general area where the feedback was submitted while preserving anonymity.

This concept has been designed to independently provide an additional channel for humanitarians to hear directly from affected people, while providing humanitarian organisations with a complementary source of information to existing methods of assessing needs and impact. Organisations can receive recognition, not based on their perceived effectiveness and performance, but based on their engagement with feedback and the frequency of their responses. An organisation marker can suggest to affected people how likely it is that the relevant assistance provider will follow up on the feedback they submit, with the intention of creating incentives to foster a 'two-way dialogue' between those that provide and those that use aid and services.

This report sets out the rationale, design process and concept behind ReliefWatch. Chapter 2 considers the lack of accountability to and participation of affected people in humanitarian responses, and their impacts: that as a result aid can be inappropriate and unresponsive and that the sector's unequal power dynamics are reinforced. It also considers why current approaches to accountability are limited in scope, considering political and cultural issues that mean data is rarely open and funding is restricted. Chapter 3 sets out the development of the ReliefWatch concept and how it offers a way to fill these gaps. This includes an explanation of how an iterative design thinking approach was utilised during creation and testing of the concept and some key insights from the design process. Chapter 4 details ReliefWatch, including considering its primary audiences and the key principles that informed how it evolved over the design process, before describing the feedback collation process and its organisation marker function. Chapter 5 considers key questions of integration, incentives and sustainability, as well as next steps for the initiative following its prototyping and development.

Figure 1: Diagram of the concept for ReliefWatch and its key groups of users



Source: adapted from ReliefWatch

Resident of a displacement camp, Erbil governorate. Photo: Patrick Kohl

2 Background and rationale

Problems with the humanitarian sector have been apparent across so many responses and organisations for so long that they are often considered 'systemic'. These issues are well documented: humanitarian action is 'inadequate, inappropriate, inefficient, untimely and inflexible' and, as a result, 'not fit for purpose' (HPG and ThinkPlace, 2018: 21). A supply-driven model that treats people affected by crisis as passive consumers, the sector continues not to adequately listen to its users or allow them the power to make decisions over the assistance and services they use and receive. Without a common understanding of needs, efforts to coordinate responses are often limited and there is little by way of collective governance and accountability. Just as fundamentally, the sector has also been accused of 'forgetting the human in humanitarian' and not investing in the kind of human relationships and trust-building that can help mitigate the historical paternalistic attitudes that continue to manifest themselves in contemporary responses. These issues have been diagnosed in detail but limited progress has been made on alleviating them, primarily due to the incentive structures that currently drive the humanitarian system. Many of these commonly cited problems stem from poor AAP.

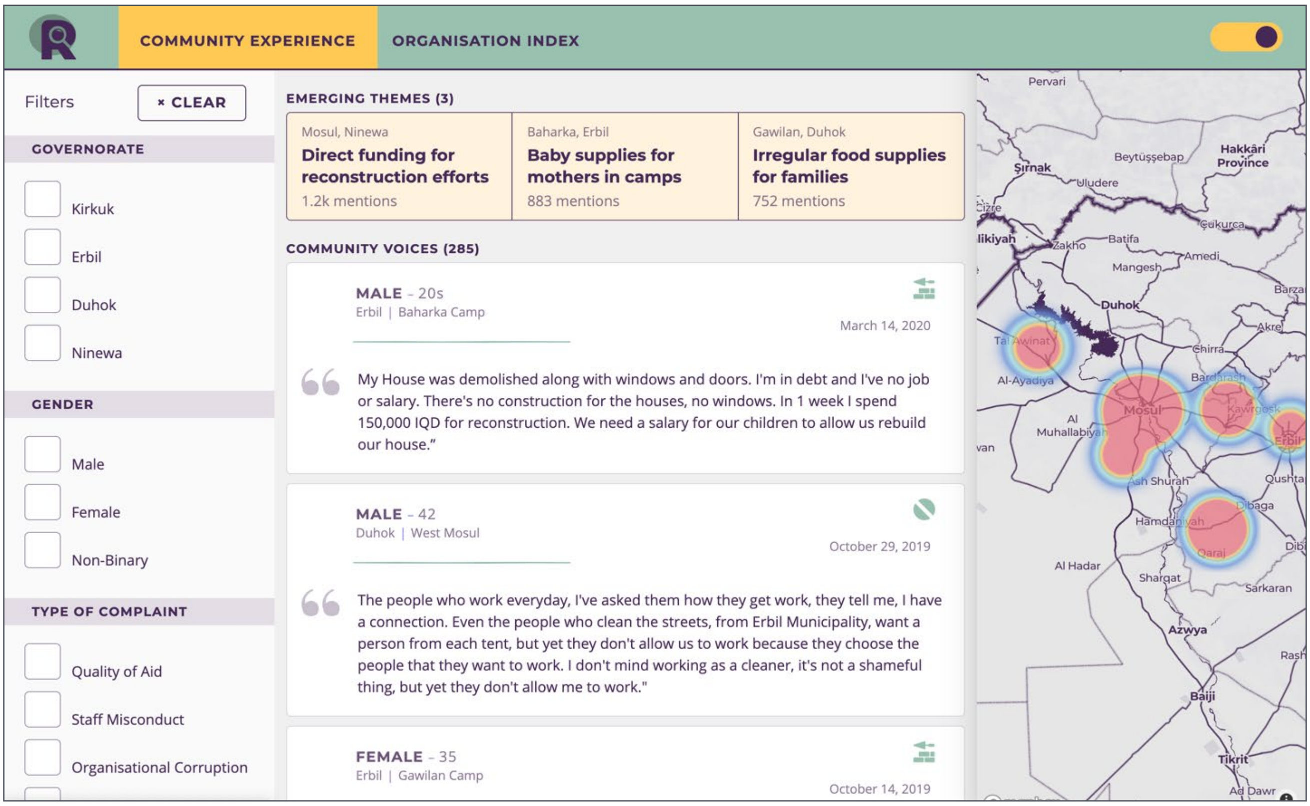
Accountability could be defined as the 'process of holding actors responsible for their actions' in applying the notion that 'individuals, agencies and organisations are held responsible for executing their powers according to a certain standard' (Tisne, cited in McGee and Gaventa, 2010: 4). The internet and social media offer new means for users of products and services to feed back directly to businesses, bypassing more bureaucratised processes of auditing and surveys. Ratings platforms such as TripAdvisor and Google Reviews compile hundreds of millions of reviews of services, with the former receiving 456 million visits a month and radically changing many of the previous dynamics of the tourism industry (Kinstler, 2018). Unlike other forms of accountability, such tools rely less on legalistic notions of 'subjecting power to the threat of sanctions' and rarely contain an explicit 'enforcement' mechanism (Schedler, 1999). Instead, the accountability exercised by tools such as ratings platforms and feedback forums looks to the power of the market and consumer choice to reward companies that do well and dissuade customers from badly performing actors. Though seen as a key test in governance and private businesses, the humanitarian sector lags behind in meeting and facilitating the right of those it claims to serve to hold them to account. Aid recipients are currently unable to submit questions, complaints or feedback and be sure that they are listened to, acknowledged and replied to (Bonino et al., 2014: 4).

While the means to voice opinions and provide feedback does not constitute the entirety of accountability, insufficiently listening and harnessing affected people's perspectives creates numerous problems within the humanitarian sector, and a considerable imbalance in a system that risks its reputation and sustainability. The impacts of this key gap can be set out around two central themes: that a lack of accountability to aid users results in assistance being both inappropriate and unresponsive, and that this reinforces power imbalances and paternalistic relationships.

2.1 The current state of the system

In the current humanitarian system, the people most affected by crisis have the least involvement in decision-making and holding others to account. While humanitarian organisations have organised a range of initiatives and

Figure 2: A screenshot of the latest ReliefWatch prototype webpage with map, comments and filter



Source: ReliefWatch

funds intended to increase the influence and participation of affected people, various structures and incentives of the sector (and how it has evolved and been funded) mean radical and larger-scale changes to its fundamental dynamics and relationships are very difficult.

While systems of accountability do exist in the sector, such mechanisms tend not to be oriented to affected people themselves: since aid users cannot exercise the same kind of consumer choice and power as buyers of goods and services elsewhere, reporting and monitoring in the humanitarian sector is oriented 'upward' from service providers to donors. These processes have been criticised as disconnected from accountability to affected people, as well as not sufficiently informing project-level decision-making and learning (HPG and Thinkplace, 2018; Dillon, 2019). Conversely, so-called 'downward' accountability is still largely comprised of newer and less stringent mechanisms that have been described as 'tokenistic at best' (Konydynk, 2018: 6). The particular features of the humanitarian sector that direct systems of accountability towards donors, in addition to the extreme imbalance of power between aid users and providers, present a compelling case for a more ambitious interpretation of accountability whereby affected people are at the centre of these mechanisms.

2.1.1 Aid is inappropriate and unresponsive

The most obvious consequence of not having an effective means of engaging with, and being held to account by, affected people is that assistance is often not aligned with what is needed. The 'appropriateness' of aid is a common source of criticism and unnecessary non-food aid, low-quality supplies and inadequate shelters continue to be a feature of almost all humanitarian contexts. From the perspective of affected people, responses often leave much to be desired, with 75% of surveyed people in seven crises reporting that the aid they receive does not meet their most pressing needs (IFRC, 2019: 3). This is demonstrated by the scale and frequency of affected people selling some or all of the assistance they receive in order to buy more useful goods and services. This constitutes a sizeable black market that surrounds displacement camps in humanitarian contexts across the world (Spiegel, 2017; Poole, 2019).

De-contextualising diverse situations as 'humanitarian emergencies' and assessing need on the basis of organisational mandate has resulted in a limited set of 'life-saving' siloes that fails to capture many of the needs cited by affected people (ALNAP, 2018: 146). It masks the 'greater spectrum of human aspirations' with all of its complexity: good livelihoods, providing children with a decent education and the ability to live in peace are frequently cited by affected people as priorities, but are less common areas of focus for humanitarian agencies (DuBois, 2018: 6). However, with humanitarian emergencies becoming increasingly protracted and the divide between it and 'development' work becoming more blurred, the neglect of more complex and longer-term goals is increasingly difficult to justify. With limited monitoring tools, the sector is poor at recognising shifts in needs among affected people over time.

A lack of accountability therefore helps to preserve a 'universalism' of both context and needs. This incentivises business-as-usual, with humanitarian responders still disconnected from the contexts in which they work (Collinson and Duffield, 2013: 7). With little engagement or understanding of the specific causes of political failures that cause humanitarian crises, this disconnect often manifests itself in physical barriers between aid 'users' and providers, and the disparities in staffing and wealth that remain stereotypes of the sector. As Austin and colleagues (2019: 34) summarise, there is a general lack of questioning of the unconscious biases 'that affect the attitudes, behaviours and actions of different humanitarian actors', a symptom of an exclusionary humanitarian system caused by a lack of opportunity for affected people to influence how it operates.

Consulting directly with affected people has been demonstrated to be beneficial to both aid users and humanitarian organisations: it informs programming decisions to reduce waste or inefficiencies, builds legitimacy among affected communities and likely leads to greater community involvement through labour and resources, and can be key in generally improving the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian programmes (Brown and Donino, 2014: 20). But, as the humanitarian sector is effectively a supply- rather than demand-driven service, the systems of accountability remain oriented toward those with financial power.

2.1.2 The sector's unequal power dynamics are reinforced

The current state of responses and the system creates and preserves unequal power structures. Despite this, it also cements a 'humanitarian exceptionalism' and symbolic differentiation between international humanitarians and everyone else in a crisis, with the former claiming a monopoly on 'neutral' and 'impartial' assistance. While this difference can be justified in distributing aid in complex conflicts, it reinforces a hierarchical system that places affected people at the bottom of a supply chain with little power; prevents international actors from working with often more effective local responders; and reinforces unhelpful labels that marginalise aid users from the system that supposedly serves them. Those who respond in order to relieve human suffering exercise considerable power; in the absence of effective checks or a way for users to complain of poor-quality services or practices, this power can, from the perspective of affected people, often go unchecked. By not including affected people's voices as a central component of all programmes, the current system usually does not allow them the right to hold powerful groups – in this case, humanitarian organisations – to account (Brown and Donino, 2014). Denying a degree of meaningful choice in what assistance is received goes against the assertion of humanitarian organisations that their work supports 'dignity' and 'empowerment' while improving the material existence of affected people – ideas frequently used among aid providers.

Instead, a lack of accountability to affected people ensures the basic structures and incentives of the system are kept constant and continues to reinforce the perception that affected people are victims without agency (in a manner similar to stereotypical depictions of victims of famine still used in the fundraising campaigns of international agencies). In this understanding of crises, affected people are grateful for receiving life-saving assistance from 'saviours' from wealthy countries, a patronising and infantilising depiction that reinforces neo-colonialist attitudes of 'we know best' that can influence programming and delivery. This is a particularly egregious stance in the present day, when more people affected by crises are taking active roles in wider civil society, activism, fundraising and enterprises than ever before. They make large but poorly recognised contributions to humanitarian responses, using social media and other technologies to speak directly to potential donors and policy-makers to tell their own stories, holding the powerful to account and inspiring change. In contrast, by not providing a means for affected people to shape their own services and societies, the approach of traditional aid actors can look outdated and reactionary.

With the numbers of people affected by crises and using aid and services rising, the need to put them at the centre of accountability mechanisms in the humanitarian sector becomes even more pressing. Engaging with communities could also increase the expectations and demand for accountability more generally, and over time bring about positive shifts in power structures and dynamics in an emancipatory manner (Brown and Donino, 2014: 22). Without this, the sector will continue to frustrate affected people, making it increasingly illegitimate. In recent years, high-profile safeguarding scandals have accelerated a wider crisis of legitimacy for humanitarian organisations and demonstrated the worst of what can occur in a system dominated by extreme imbalances of power.

2.2 Why are current approaches to accountability limited?

In contrast to these power imbalances, most humanitarian organisations agree that accountability to and participation by affected people are important objectives of their work. Terms such as 'accountability to affected people' have been used widely and explicitly for at least the past decade. The demand for greater consultation, participation and accountability across the sector has led to a number of approaches being implemented, albeit in a mostly ad-hoc manner. Various humanitarian feedback mechanisms are becoming established, collecting information for several purposes including taking corrective actions in responses and strengthening accountability to affected people (Bonino, 2014: 4). Global policy initiatives and leaders among the large humanitarian agencies also drive change within the sector.

However, a recent CHS Alliance report that rated progress on accountability commitments by its members concluded that, while stakeholders believe changes are necessary and there is significant evidence of the negative impact of current practice, commitments are still vague and 'some processes and systems [are] not conducive to change' (Austin et al., 2018: 29). The ability to change the deeper-seated incentive structures described above is ambiguous, with few attempts to 'rebalance the underlying power disparities between aid providers and recipients' (Konyndyk and Worden, 2019: 5). Varying interpretations of what constitutes meaningful accountability, persistent gaps in 'feedback loops' that leave many complaints and questions from affected people unanswered, and the lack of scale of such mechanisms suggest that current approaches may not be as effective as required. The sector has experienced a recent proliferation of independent platforms for feedback that are not affiliated with response organisations, perhaps indicating both the desire for the voices of affected people to be heard and the sometimes delayed response from the formal sector in developing accountability services that are seen as effective and credible. This section sets out this landscape and proposes that current approaches are limited by a range of political, operational and financial barriers.

2.2.1 Meaningful accountability and participation requires ceding power

The most significant barriers to greater accountability and participation are political and cultural. Placing greater emphasis on affected people in deciding on assistance provision means humanitarian actors giving significant power away. Humanitarian actors could argue that they are already under threat from demanding donors and host governments, and losing further power to a more empowered, informed and active group of users with the means of influencing the reputation of projects and organisations may impact their own funding and longer-term viability. Arguably, the lack of binding accountability mechanisms in the sector is indicative of this incentive to keep the current status quo (Kelly, 2019: 4). Existing accountability tools are limited to voluntary mechanisms and have been criticised as overly technocratic: a set of 'tick-box' exercises that divert energy from grappling with substantial questions over power (Knox-Clarke, 2017: 22). The system is capable of change: new ways of organising responses such as the cluster system or delivering assistance in the form of cash, for example, have transformed the sector since their adoption. However, changes within the sector are largely a result of 'top-down, bureaucratic' agendas that do not suit proposals to cede power (Kreuger et al., 2016: 9).

2.2.2 Existing accountability efforts are uncoordinated

The degree to which humanitarian organisations engage with affected people in the process of implementing responses is considered to be slowly improving. A recent study reported 'improving participation in the reporting period centred around establishing systems of consultation' in assessment and feedback systems, citing that 51% of affected people surveyed said they had been consulted on what they needed prior to distribution (ALNAP, 2018: 157). Many humanitarian organisations now have their own AAP systems in operation. UN agencies such as UNHCR are members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) task team on Accountability to Affected Populations, which seeks to institutionalise AAP through the creation of guidance and policies. Large NGOs have also developed their own systems, such as Oxfam's 'Your Word Counts' project, which trains its staff to best categorise feedback in order to be picked up by relevant programmes. In 2019, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement adopted the 'Movement Commitments for Community Engagement and Accountability', which commits the IFRC, ICRC and national societies to integrate community engagement and accountability into their work, and 'commit to systematically listening to, responding to and acting on feedback' from aid users (ICRC and IFRC, 2019: 7).

However, while AAP appears to be increasingly recognised as important and in demand, the manner in which it is conducted is perceived as uncoordinated and often ad-hoc. This is illustrated by the multiple terms in use for accountability initiatives, such as communication for development (C4D), communications, community engagement and accountability (CCEA) and communicating with communities (CwC) (Brown and Donino, 2014). While a proliferation of such approaches may be beneficial for improving programmes, from aid users' perspectives it is likely to be less useful. With often complex layers of subcontracting arrangements, it can be difficult to identify individual projects or organisations; collecting survey and interview data can often be a slow process, meaning respondents may have to recall the impact of older interventions.

While there are growing numbers of AAP initiatives carried out by organisations, *collective* approaches implemented at scale are rarer. Common feedback services, whereby a single entity receives requests and manages the response, including by forwarding on to the relevant organisation, have been implemented in instances such as the Nepal Common Feedback Mechanism (CDAC, 2019). The 2017 formulation of the Communication and Community Engagement Initiative (CCEI) between UN agencies (led by UNICEF), the IFRC and key INGOs was similarly developed to support 'system-wide collective accountability to affected people' (OCHA, 2016: 3) and aims to collate feedback and provide technical assistance and guidance to country programmes on how to improve community engagement. However, there are fewer instances of efforts to institutionalise AAP across sectors and organisations, and mechanisms by which to feed information from multiple agency mechanisms into decision-making are largely absent (ALNAP, 2018: 177). This is despite ambitious global pledges such as those in the Grand Bargain that call for 'a participation revolution', where signatories committed to 'include people receiving aid in making the decisions which affect their lives'. Despite the enthusiasm for accountability tools, efforts have often been duplicated and uncoordinated, with one evaluation of the regional response to the Syria crisis identifying more than 150 feedback hotlines in Lebanon alone (Lavey and Searle, 2014: 7).

2.2.3 Collected data is limited and not open

There is more data being captured and circulated in the humanitarian sector than ever before, with the stringent demands of donors upon organisations meaning surveys and assessments are becoming a more important and sophisticated element to the planning and monitoring of responses. However, while there has been an increase in reporting mechanisms, these tools are not sufficient to improve the participation of and accountability for affected people (ALNAP, 2018). A key reason for this has been the limitations of collected data, including a lack of openness in sharing among humanitarian actors, and the often narrow scope of needs assessments and surveys that are the primary means of collecting data. While the humanitarian sector has generally made considerable progress in ensuring data generated by assessments is publicly available, in a competitive funding and operational environment data can often still be seen as an asset to hold onto rather than share (OCHA, 2020: 6). While the results of assessments and feedback mechanisms could inform future project design or donor reporting, not having data publicly available leaves affected people out of debates on the aid and services they use.

Keeping data hidden on what people think of aid means that there is less pressure on responders to answer such feedback from public questions and complaints – and so close the 'feedback loop'. Aid users are provided with few channels to put their perspective across and progress on changing this is slow. While commitment 5 of the Sphere Standards proposes 'communities and people affected by crisis have access to safe and responsive mechanisms to handle complaints', and commits signatories to communicate these functions to affected people, protect complainants, and to ultimately close the feedback loops, a recent assessment gave progress on this goal the lowest overall score of the nine commitments (Austin et al., 2018: 10). Not making data available hinders progress on this goal.

The lack of publicly available data on what users think about the aid they receive is one of the drivers behind a recent proliferation of feedback mechanisms outside of the formal humanitarian sector, independently working to hold the responders and authorities in humanitarian contexts to account. Kuja Kuja, for example, collects feedback in refugee contexts and makes findings publicly available. Re:Viewed allows users to provide feedback on NGOs they interact with, primarily focusing on the refugees hosted by and travelling through Greece. These independent organisations combine both ratings systems – in the case of Kuja Kuja, a simple traffic light scale – with opportunities for affected people to provide more detailed feedback. They join the survey work of organisations that directly ask aid users a predetermined set of questions on the assistance they do or do not receive, outside of any humanitarian agency or specific programme. These platforms are disruptive to the underlying dynamics of the humanitarian system, with many built around and using business intelligence and market research dynamics, such as net promotion scores, that originate in the private sector.

However, many of these channels are also limited in scope, and whether such approaches help further the kind of 'participation revolution' that many humanitarian organisations are committed to is less clear. Many such mechanisms operate in a centralised manner, often in the global North, and rely upon purely quantitative survey data. This entails affected people being found and asked for their opinion on the aid and services they have received, rather than actively participating in a more open-ended consultation. Like the closed surveys that often inform needs assessments, such tools are vital from the perspective of humanitarian responders with limited resources, who need to identify priority areas and sectors. However, restricting the accountability process to more limited questions and surveys risks missing the full picture of needs and priorities, and does not provide the space to facilitate more pro-active and propositional (rather than merely reactive) voices and advocacy from affected people.

2.2.4 Funding is restrictive

Funding in the humanitarian sector is tightly controlled and limited in size and scope, leading some organisations to assert that these kind of accountability initiatives are difficult to justify to many donors. Although there are reform initiatives that seek to increase the flexibility of funding, much of the money flowing into the sector remains 'earmarked' to specific outputs, crisis contexts and projects. Despite explicit Grand Bargain commitments to make funding more flexible, the proportion of unearmarked contributions to the nine largest UN agencies fell to 17% of their funding in 2018 (Development Initiatives, 2019: 67). Funding is also often strictly time-bound and can last less than a year, meaning there is little by way of time and space in programme cycles to incorporate AAP mechanisms, have them feed back information, and change the implementation of projects as a result.

Funding is also extremely competitive, which drives a market-like environment operating on the basis of 'supply, demand, competition, monopolies and investor bias' (Slim, 2013). Initiatives to collaborate, complement the work of others and carry out joint advocacy are often subsumed by the incentives to compete, defend mandates and sell an image of impact at scale. This marketplace does not, therefore, lead to affected people being provided with choices regarding various trade-offs and goods and services offered by a range of providers. Instead, the 'benefits' of competition are, like accountability mechanisms, oriented toward donors. Restrictions and incentives have traditionally meant a lack of available funding for the kind of longer-term, participatory approaches and engagement that have been identified as important for filling gaps in humanitarian programmes. Building more egalitarian and open engagement with affected communities – what has been referred to as 'tea-drinking' relationships – is considered a valuable investment but is difficult to measure (MSF, 2014). AAP activities that are funded tend to be limited to particular projects, intended to measure the impact of a particular intervention, and as such cannot necessarily be said to benefit the wider affected community.

To change this, donors need to make their funding more flexible, which seems unlikely in the wider context of demands for greater scrutiny of where aid funding is allocated. Some donors have made progress on providing more unrestricted funding through means of pooled funds, with others explicitly stressing the need for AAP: Canada and Sweden now require the NGOs they fund to identify points where affected people are involved in decision-making, UK core funding to UN agencies includes a payment by results performance indicator on AAP, and Denmark – along with many other humanitarian actors, such as the Disasters Emergency Committee – have integrated Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) commitments into its own humanitarian strategy (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2019: 45). For donors that are increasingly emphasising AAP as a measure of the effectiveness of the programmes they fund, more tools to assess this independently would be a valuable complement to existing means of reporting and assessment.

2.3 Conclusion

There are considerable financial, behavioural and regulatory barriers to the sector overturning some of its traditional dynamics, and the design team for this project were repeatedly told that ReliefWatch was not a feasible approach. The reasons for this differed depending on where various representatives were situated, but both structural barriers like funding and incentives to hold onto power in the sector were cited as limiting the scope for the accountability initiatives proposed within humanitarian organisations (Austin et al., 2018: 34). These have reduced the impact of reform initiatives, as the underlying incentive structures and configuration of the sector remain unchanged (Collinson, 2016). Yet encouragingly, change can happen in response to external processes and pressures. Some of the most ambitious attempts at developing AAP have come from new organisations outside the system, driven by demands for accountability by local organisations or affected people. A combination of new technologies, companies and start-ups that place high importance on customer satisfaction, as well as independent media and advocacy initiatives, are already beginning to change the dynamics of a still-hierarchical aid system, and may provide the means to build more accountable humanitarian responses.

While the humanitarian sector usually limits itself to incremental tweaks around mandates and systems, disruption through external pressures and initiatives also plays a key role in providing the means and motives for change. An approach that puts an emphasis on changing the external environment, rather than focusing on the systems operating in it, suggests also looking outside of the humanitarian sector in seeking to drive change (Bennett, 2018: 15). While the system has many advocates for reform working within it, pressures from outside – in the form of more visible and technologically-enabled aid users, civil society and media organisations – are likely to be the primary drivers for more ambitious changes. It was this reasoning that eventually led to the ReliefWatch design project.

Trialling a ‘town hall’ feedback session with Mosul residents. Photo: Patrick Kohl

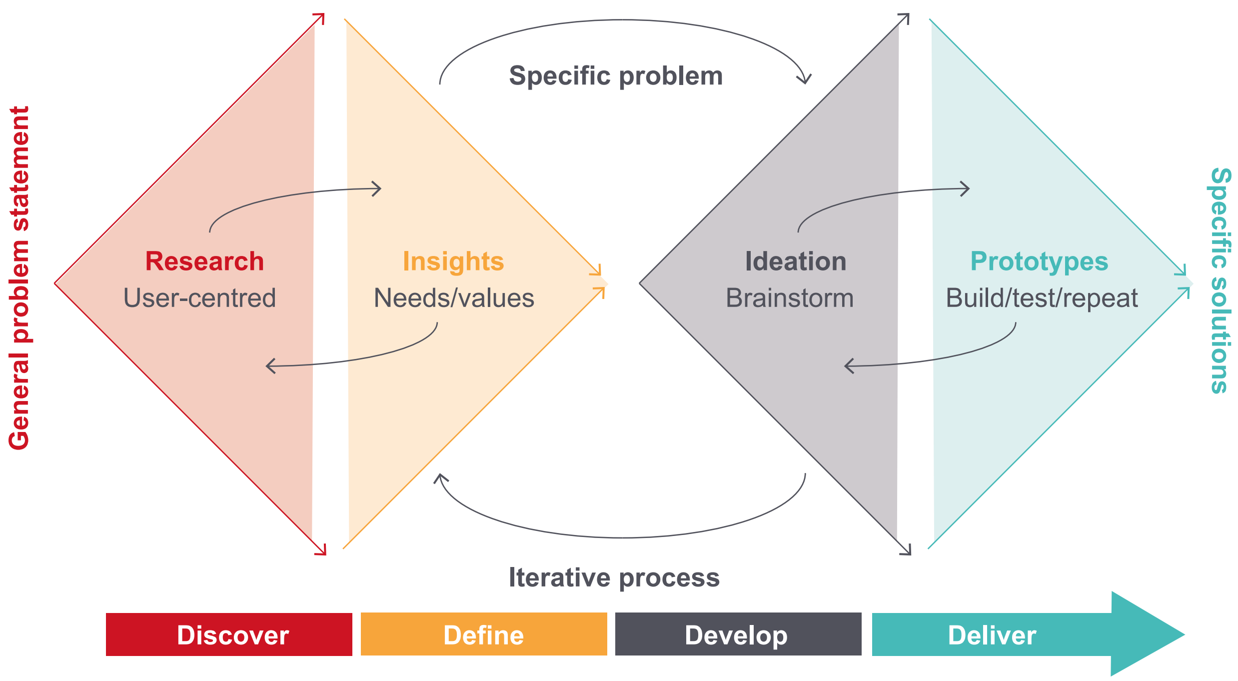
3 Developing ReliefWatch

3.1 The design process

This project utilised an approach called design thinking as its core methodology, from diagnosing the problem through to creating and testing the ReliefWatch concept. This approach is informed by an alternative ethos to more traditional and empirical approaches to problem solving. It places great importance on direct input from end-users of a product or service, empathy-building,and discovering underlying beliefs and patterns of human behaviour. Above all else, the design process focuses on the needs of users of an existing system or product and their experiences in using it. In this case, the primary focus is on affected people who receive humanitarian assistance, and their positive and negative experiences in using aid and the sector's various accountability systems. As well as aid users, the ReliefWatch team sought the perspectives of the humanitarian staff, to consider what this accountability service would mean for them and how it could drive change within their respective organisations.

A key advantage of applying this approach in the humanitarian system is the emphasis on human experiences, rather than bureaucracies and institutions. For example, affected people in a humanitarian crisis may not be familiar with the underlying logic and language created by the 'internal experts' of this particular system – indeed, the sector is infamous for its jargon, acronyms, buzzwords and 'silos' (Andrawes, 2018: 14). While often argued as necessary from the perspective of organising a humanitarian response, this language can appear arbitrary and exclusionary to those outside the system. The design process helps shift the focus of designers within an organisation or system to confront the assumptions they make in their usual work and be more outward-looking in finding and developing new ideas.

Figure 3: The design process used by the ReliefWatch project



Source: adapted from ReliefWatch

Box 1: Constructive deconstruction

The concept of a ReliefWatch-like service for the humanitarian sector was one of the outputs of a previous HPG research programme. In 2015, HPG in partnership with ThinkPlace began *Constructive deconstruction*, an initiative that employed design thinking to reimagine the humanitarian system from the perspective of aid users. Over the course of the design process, including 75 user interviews and seven co-design workshops with a range of affected people, funders and policy-makers, a set of key functions required in a future humanitarian system were developed, and from them a series of specific initiatives to reimagine how these new roles and objectives could be delivered. ReliefWatch sought to fill the accountability gap identified in the humanitarian sector and, though its design was developed further, its focus on end users and proposals to collate feedback and quantify 'responsiveness' remained core concepts.

Constructive deconstruction concluded with both a specific set of proposals and calls for a shift in behaviours necessary in order to reform the existing system. This new ethos is comprised of three elements that underpinned much of the later ReliefWatch project (HPG and ThinkPlace, 2018: 133):

- **Thinking differently** called for a new humanitarian worldview that emphasised the need for transparency, shared power, trust that was earned, and human-centred, downward accountability. In this, affected people are seen at the centre of the humanitarian system, with their voices and perspectives needing to be actively sought out. For example, it rejects unhelpful dichotomies such as 'saviour' and 'victim', or passive aid 'recipients' and active aid 'givers'.
- **Speaking differently** proposes a more thoughtful approach to labelling humanitarian terms, emphasising that many terms are disenfranchising and exclusionary. For example, 'beneficiaries' in particular was rejected as a term that implied a lack of agency, and a position within the system as a non-actor.
- **Doing differently** refers to daily practices and conduct of humanitarians that are often carried out in good faith but support the current unequal order of the system. It calls instead for incentivising trust-building, rewarding collaboration and complementarity to avoid duplication and drive a more locally led humanitarian response, following principles such as 'never about us without us'.

The ReliefWatch design process started with constructing problem statements informed by the range of perspectives acquired during the *Constructive deconstruction* project, before inverting these assertions to create a shared vision of desired change. From there, ideas were developed into more tangible concepts and prototypes, ready for users to test and provide feedback on as appropriate. This process is rarely linear, as ideas and innovations are continuously tested and revised with potential users from an early phase. Several features of ReliefWatch changed over the course of the project, as a result of speaking with affected people and humanitarians. Participatory methods were also employed, to enable users from a variety of stakeholder groups (humanitarians and aid recipients) to create their own visions for aspects of the service, and to test and improve upon existing prototypes. Throughout this process, the need to seek multiple perspectives, including from people who may be disadvantaged or which were less favourable to these changes, were always sought. In this way, the service was designed to meet validated user needs and existing user behaviours.

Along this design journey are a variety of tools that can be used in co-creation and to build empathy with users. Focus group discussions and interviews were used by the designers in the discovery phase to understand user needs, capacities and what potential users would wish to see in an accountability service. These informed user personas: fictional archetypes constructed from a range of interviews into characters that designers can engage with. This understanding is critical to ensure that the accountability service meets real user needs and that it takes into account the needs of certain demographics, or those who require particular features in order to properly engage and participate. From there, journey maps and storyboards can visualise hypothetical user experiences over a period of time, helping to build an understanding of how needs and feelings change over time and to identify key moments where such a service could be most effective.

Developing the concept took place over a year and comprised these stages and tools. Desk research and preliminary interviews on the sector's approach to accountability informed the initial insights. These were put to participants that included donors, policy-makers and humanitarians at an ideation workshop in April 2019, to build a shared understanding of the project approach. Needs and the basic objectives of this service were a key part of this discussion. The core design team took these findings to the humanitarian context of northern Iraq for a design research visit in late April, interviewing affected people in a suburb of Erbil and two displacement camps in the region, as well as representatives from humanitarian organisations. These insights informed the next stage of development for a subsequent steering group and prototyping visit to Iraq in July. Here, the various options for gathering feedback were considered by the team. As the concept took shape further, the team returned to the steering group in later months to allow its members to feed in their concerns and inputs. In total, interviews were conducted with 22 members of humanitarian organisations, and more than 100 aid recipients were consulted as part of the concept comprising three community forums and more than 30 separate interviews across five displacement camps and two urban areas (Erbil and Mosul). The most recent visit to Iraq was conducted in October, where a workshop with humanitarian staff and trials of a community forum approach in Mosul and displacement camps helped further build the concept.

3.2 The context of northern Iraq

At the onset of the project, the ReliefWatch design team were faced with the choice of whether to develop the concept with or without a specific context in mind. There are trade-offs to either approach and this affected the development of the project and the various issues and challenges faced over the course of its prototyping. However, following consultations with humanitarians and designers, the team decided to focus on a specific context. Though ReliefWatch is potentially global in scope, the concept was initially designed for one key context to demonstrate its concept and value before being refined and altered for additional settings. What this approach lost in easy replicability, it gained in a deeper understanding of the dynamics of a particular crisis and affected population, and consequently the project was more likely to work and be adopted. In valuing this, the project also more closely follows the ethos of a more local and contextually specific humanitarian response as proposed in the *Constructive deconstruction* project, as well as following a central tenet of design thinking.

Northern Iraq was selected as the context in which to develop ReliefWatch because it shares a number of characteristics with other humanitarian contexts. As of the end of 2019, more than 4 million people across Iraq require some form of humanitarian assistance and the response remains relatively large (OCHA, 2019: 5). Having experienced recurring cycles of conflict and displacement – the most recent being an influx of refugees following the October 2019 Turkish offensive against Kurdish forces in northeast Syria – a large and diverse population has required humanitarian assistance in the region. The 'limbo' experienced by displaced people in northern Iraq, often confined to camps, unable to earn income and separated from family members, is also common to other contexts, as is the inadequacy of strictly humanitarian assistance to meet longer-term needs of those displaced over a period of years. Northern Iraq also provided a diverse range of experiences and priorities for the design team to consider, and a range of feedback that often lay outside of the traditional scope of humanitarian assistance.

3.3 Key insights from the design process

3.3.1 The need for a variety of data collation tools to ensure inclusion

Aid users have access to often dramatically differing levels of service provision.

Humanitarians interviewed as part of the ReliefWatch programme noted the conditions of the various displacement camps in northern Iraq, with some containing permanent brick dwellings with electricity, water and internet provision while others comprised only tents with minimal food distribution. Some of the most vulnerable populations approached by the design team were in urban settings, where displaced people were faced with high rents, discriminatory employment practices and minimal humanitarian support. This diversity of experiences and provision allowed the team to consider how best to design ReliefWatch to meet the needs of these multiple groups. To collate as many testimonies as possible, the means of gathering feedback would need to have sufficient flexibility and be open-ended in order to reach, for example, both a resident of a displacement camp who had received out-of-date medicines, as well as a family living in rented accommodation who had received no assistance at all.

To ensure inclusion, the accessibility of technology and how to utilise technology already in use in the context had to be considered. With mobile applications, mapping technologies and social media playing a key role in driving many new accountability initiatives, assessing how people access and use these tools is crucial to make the service as useful as possible. For example, Iraq has a relatively high mobile phone penetration rate of around 96% in 2019 (Kemp, 2019). Around half of mobile subscribers in the country in 2016 used mobile data, with the rest subscribing to voice- and text-only packages on non-smartphones (GSMA, 2016: 43). Similar to many countries outside western Europe, utility applications of the kind that enable multiple functions for the user are less commonly used. Most smartphone users accessed the internet through the phone's browser and used WhatsApp, Facebook and other messaging tools to contact businesses and services directly. This has implications for the design of a digital collation tool and the likelihood it will be adopted.

In designing an accountability service, it should be recognised that digital tools offer scale and are often accessible for those in displacement contexts: 93% of refugees, for example, are covered by at least 2G mobile network and the global prevalence of such technology is increasing rapidly (UNHCR, 2016). The tools offered by ReliefWatch would present a low barrier for engagement and the freedom to provide feedback at any time. Digital channels also provide greater anonymity, which was a concern for several interviewees. For example, one aid user in Iraq explained she would 'prefer the phone, rather than face-to-face conversation, because they won't see or remember your face'. In providing multiple channels in accessible formats and languages, ReliefWatch would enable these aid users to put forward their feedback through unsolicited ways and/or open-ended questioning, and therefore be as inclusive as possible.

However, it was also important to consider the inequalities of technology access and design alternative channels for those without autonomous access to the service. In Iraq, rates of mobile ownership among displaced people in camps may be lower than the national average. Yet phone ownership appeared to be common and interviews with residents of displacement camps reinforced the importance of internet access, with most interviewees listing the buying of mobile data as one of their largest and most important monthly purchases. For those that met the design team, families frequently shared a mobile phone between them and, in general, women in a male-headed household had fewer opportunities to use mobile services autonomously (Lancaster, 2019). The role of gender in technology access remains under-analysed, but studies of refugees elsewhere in the MENA region observe lower rates of mobile use and ownership among women and adolescent girls than their male counterparts (Crabtree and Petronille, 2018: 4).

Such considerations were analysed by the team and led to a number of key changes in order to develop a concept that was as inclusive as possible. This was the reasoning behind the development of an alternative means of gathering feedback that was not dependent upon mobile usage, employing instead tools such as group fora and trained interlocutors. The development of face-to-face tools was just as important as mobile-based messaging services, and this would be vitally important in more remote humanitarian contexts, where internet and electricity access is less prevalent.

3.3.2 The need for a complementary service alongside existing mechanisms

As well as giving any service a low barrier to entry for affected people, the design team recognised that ReliefWatch would need to both be independent of, but act as a complement to, the existing assessment and accountability apparatus of the humanitarian sector. In the case of Iraq, there were a range of existing feedback mechanisms operated by humanitarian responders, with many possessing similar limitations to those outlined above. Some agencies operate dedicated complaints offices in displacement camps, while others have trialled 'pop-up desks' to disseminate and receive information from aid users (UNHCR, 2018: 2). Community Resource Centres, administered by the International Organization for Migration and the Norwegian Refugee Council, also provide information for aid users in non-camp settings and use surveys to gauge levels of satisfaction. The IIC, based in Erbil and administered by UNOPS, is a toll-free and confidential hotline, with a system of referral that passes on feedback to the relevant organisation if the operator cannot resolve the issue. The system is seen as a broadly successful initiative and has been credited with influencing cash programming modalities in Iraq, following operators receiving requests for cash directly from affected people (STAIT, 2017: 3; UNOPS, 2019). In a recent survey, 13% of the internally displaced people, refugees, returnees and host communities surveyed had heard of the IIC (Ramizova, 2019: 7).

The design process led to many valuable lessons being learnt from mechanisms such as the hotline and other initiatives, which are pioneering in their approaches to AAP and are becoming increasingly prominent examples across the sector. Co-design workshops held in Iraq with humanitarian practitioners explored how the ReliefWatch service could be used to complement internal mechanisms run by UN agencies and other aid providers. A key lesson from this process has been better understanding the value of quantitative tools integrated into the processes of assessing needs, and their important role in decision-making among responders with limited resources. A service that does not actively solicit feedback, in a manner that can claim to be representative of the wider population, fulfils a different role to these existing tools, and so its results should not be taken as a replacement for established assessment mechanisms. It instead fulfils a different and much-needed role.

A key insight from the design process was that, despite existing mechanisms, even in a relatively large humanitarian response such as Iraq, there is clearly space for a service that allows affected people to voice their needs, concerns and experiences. Many humanitarian interviewees did not hear directly from affected people at all, and rarely from the users of their services and projects; the majority were enthusiastic at the prospect of being able to hear more from affected people in a manner useful to inform their programmes. Conversely, few affected people interviewed had been asked for their opinion on the aid they received. They had valid concerns and ideas about what should be provided, and expressed frustration at the few accountability mechanisms in place. Those who disagreed with the notion of giving feedback, owing to security concerns, were in a minority. Many interviewees had complained of poor services to camp authorities, and to specific international organisations who had offices on site, and their experiences with these channels were generally negative. Residents complained of limited opening hours and delays. Others who wished to complain of services would go online, using the dedicated sites of aid providers and Facebook to search for relevant staff to talk with or leave messages, with little results. One resident of a displacement camp reported 'I try to go on the internet and look for the name of the INGO and look for a complaints line ... I call them and it can take over six people until I get to somebody who can actually take my complaint, and even then I don't know if it will be responded to or not.' A minority of those interviewed had also submitted written messages via complaints boxes, but these were reported as being insecure and easily vandalised.

In general, there was limited evidence of awareness and take-up of existing accountability mechanisms among interviewees, with the majority of aid users reporting they had not been approached or had used dedicated feedback services. One resident of Baharka camp reported: 'They [organisations] only take our information because they say they are going to bring us aid, but nobody has ever asked us our opinion on the aid they are providing.' Such testimonies are consistent with Iraq's latest Humanitarian Needs Overview, which reports that affected populations feel 'insufficiently consulted', as well as a survey carried out across six governorates that found 69% of respondents were 'unaware of how to make suggestions or complaints about the aid they receive' (OCHA, 2019: 23; Ramizova, 2019: 1).

Since the ReliefWatch service's most important intended primary users are affected people, the design process also emphasised that independence from any existing humanitarian organisation was necessary in order to build trust and be free of any institutional agenda. This independence would also be advantageous for the holistic ethos of the service: that feedback would not be collected and stay in humanitarian silos, but was freely available to all service providers and open for public use. It was also important for the viability of the concept that any mediation of the voices of aid recipients was kept at a minimum, and not filtered or facilitated by aid providers or other parties, to ensure people felt free to discuss responses in as open a manner as possible. This emphasis is consistent with an approach to change that alters the surrounding external environment of the humanitarian sector, rather than being limited to internally reforming systems and behaviours (Bennett, 2018: 15). A majority of the humanitarian staff of organisations engaged in this process understood the need for and potential of the service as an independent body.

3.3.3 The need to encourage a 'closed feedback loop'

The design process also reinforced how crucial responses to feedback are in both providing meaningful accountability and for the sustainability of the service. A recent survey of aid recipients in Iraq that submitted a suggestion or complaint found 64% did not receive a response – in sharp contrast to 96% of humanitarian staff working in the country who believed complaints would get a response (Ground Truth Solutions, 2019b: 3). For those who had used various accountability channels, the most common frustration was the lack of reply or acknowledgement of their complaint, and no possibility of positive changes to assistance as a result of submitting feedback.

The design team were repeatedly told of instances where aid users did not hear back from the feedback channels they used, and consequently would not try again. These reports reinforced findings from other studies that a key test for effective accountability is ensuring that questions, complaints and feedback are adequately listened to, acknowledged and analysed, and an individualised answer is provided. A common response to the prospect of using the service from affected people interviewed was a straightforward 'yes, if it works'. It was clear that being able to contact the relevant people and those best placed to respond was a major consideration of those who submitted feedback through existing channels, and having the means to engage with aid providers in this manner was of interest, provided there was a response that that would, ideally, lead to meaningful, positive change.

From the perspective of humanitarian responders, a key issue that affected the likelihood of responding to feedback was it not being specific enough in terms of geographic location or sector to be sufficiently 'actionable' for their programmes or sectors. Though initiatives such as the IIC provide a rare means of collecting feedback, the route from an aid user calling the hotline to the relevant cluster, organisation, staff member and an action or reply was described as 'hazy' and cumbersome. Humanitarians interviewed voiced concerns that this means feedback loops are not often closed, and information regarding the status of submitted claims is lacking. Multiple representatives of UN agencies and INGOs working in northern Iraq described these current accountability systems as in need of improvement, and were positive about the prospect of a system that would provide sufficient specificity in terms of location or sector to make it easy to forward to those most likely to provide an individual reply.

As a voluntary service, ReliefWatch cannot guarantee a 'closed feedback' loop for every complaint or comment posted on the site; however, the service should provide humanitarian staff with relevant data in as useful a manner as possible, with the option to filter and categorise feedback according to area or particular demographics. The service would also encourage organisations to respond and shows users when this happens. A function that shows those who posted feedback when the comment ‘has been read’ by accounts belonging to humanitarian organisations serves as a temporary indication that the feedback is understood, and a response may be forthcoming. Individual responses are recognised through the organisational marker, which indicates the frequency with which organisations are answering queries and provides an incentive for humanitarian organisations to reply to feedback.

Resident of a displacement camp, Erbil governorate. Photo: Patrick Kohl

4 The ReliefWatch concept

This section explores the concept for ReliefWatch. Beginning with establishing who the service would be for, this chapter then sets out two problem statements agreed upon by the stakeholder group, before establishing some key principles for designing the concept that the team decided as a consequence of their research and interviews. From there, the concept is detailed, including the various channels by which it collates feedback from aid users and how this data is presented for the benefit of humanitarian staff and others. Throughout this section are discussions of key challenges to the concept raised over the course of its development, and how the team mitigated these issues.

4.1 Who is ReliefWatch for?

The design of the concept was shaped by the experiences shared by affected people and humanitarians, as well as wider research that considered the state of accountability in the sector. From these findings, the design team created two problem statements from the perspective of affected people and humanitarian organisations:

> People affected by crisis do not consider feedback mechanisms as accessible, effective, confidential and/or safe. When provided, feedback is not always investigated, resolved and results fed back to the relevant persons promptly, or at all.

> Humanitarian actors are held to account based on resource use to funders, and not based on the expressed needs and feedback of people affected by crisis.

These two groups constituted the primary audience, who could benefit from the service in a number of ways.

4.1.1 Affected people

Placing aid users at the centre of this service meant reconfiguring the usual ‘customers’ for accountability away from donors and the rest of the sector. Instead, interviews and the co-design process identified some clear needs for affected people using the humanitarian system that were not filled by existing feedback mechanisms. ReliefWatch would offer these users:

- An independent, open and direct means for affected people to either express their needs that are not met at all, or give their perspective on the state of aid currently provided.
- A platform to show questions, complaints and ideas from affected people and incentivise aid providers to provide responses that could include justifications for their decisions or information. The platform would allow users to see other feedback from affected people, potentially increasing power and leverage.
- An unsolicited means of communication that allows people to speak autonomously, not being limited to closed surveys or framed in terms of humanitarian programmes or silos, but considers the broader experiences of affected people and provides the means for communities to suggest alternative ways in which humanitarian organisations could assist in aiding responses.
- Along with providing the means to hold organisations to account, a path to community voices shaping humanitarian action itself, by starting to shift the incentive structures that limit change in the sector.

4.1.2 Humanitarian actors

Among humanitarian actors interviewed during the design process, there was a general consensus that current means of hearing direct feedback from affected people could be improved. The ReliefWatch service would provide a useful tool for responses if it does the following:

- Provides a new, direct source of information from affected people, freely available with the option to present views at the geographic level of particular areas or districts, to highlight areas with positive feedback to learn from, more negative comments to investigate or entire areas that could have been overlooked.
- Allows humanitarians to engage more widely with aid users than through the results of need assessments; that is, if it provides more qualitative data – essentially, longer and more detailed testimonies from affected people, unhindered by the process of donor reporting and the often 'tick-box' nature of surveys.
- Increases community voices in decision-making, either through assessing impact of projects or being used prior to implementation in order to understand what can be done and how best to do it.
- Makes visible previously less well-covered groups such as displaced people living in urban rather than camp contexts, by assisting in advocacy to provide these populations with services.

4.1.3 Secondary users

For donors and governments, the service could be used to uncover potential unmet needs to fund, or see the impact of humanitarian programmes directly and independently. The prototype provides a marker that indicates the responsiveness of humanitarian organisations to feedback, which could be one of a number of factors in considering suitable responders to fund. The notion of making funding dependent upon positive feedback from assessments was controversial, but ReliefWatch could function as a complementary tool to established accountability mechanisms used to assess potential funding partners. Donors interviewed as part of this design process were enthusiastic about the system, with one interviewee proposing such a service would provide a tool to triangulate information from monitoring and evaluation reports and understand which organisations are working responsibly.

Civil society and the media could also constitute a good audience, creating wider awareness of real needs of those affected by humanitarian crisis. Rather than being passive recipients, the ability to see the experiences and priorities for recovery directly from affected people would reduce the distance between actors and constitute a powerful shift in how victims of humanitarian crises are perceived. The issues of many affected people are likely to be highly political and of interest to wider national and global civil society groups. With thousands of local NGOs in Iraq and only a minority partnered with larger INGOs in delivering humanitarian work, the service could also identify gaps for these groups to become more involved in providing much-needed assistance.

4.2 Collating feedback

An important aspect of the ReliefWatch approach is providing affected people with a way to comment on their needs*, as well as* feedback on the assistance they do or do not receive from humanitarian organisations. To do this, information is collated through a variety of means, including digital and face-to-face channels, and this combination would also help the service bring the perspectives of hard-to-reach and vulnerable people into the fabric of humanitarian decision-making. These channels are set out in this section, as is the rationale for including them in the concept.

4.2.1 Digital channel

The primary digital channel consists of a chatbot that takes users through a series of questions on where they are and their experiences of aid. The questions comprise both more structured prompts around general aid satisfaction as well as providing the opportunity for longer-form answers that are not limited to discussing relief on a sectoral basis. Some users intuitively made use of speech-to-text tools to input their

Early ReliefWatch prototype being tested.
Photo: Ciarán Duffy

experiences on their phones. Others used their phone's camera feature to send pictures of the aid they had received, or needs that were unmet. This method of feedback gives space to the kind of experiences the design team heard during interviews with affected people, and those that humanitarian staff explained were particularly missing from their assessments of aid users.

Since utility applications are rarer in Iraq, the team designed chatbots that are hosted on pre-existing platforms such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. This significantly lowered the barrier of entry for users as the services live on platforms users are already familiar with and use features they are already accustomed to. The back-and-forth nature of the automated system allows people to give their experiences of humanitarian organisations conversationally. The feedback discussion prompts are conducted by activity and service, rather than organisation. Categories include camp management, socioeconomic support and livelihoods, but are not limited to them. The design team envision automating this classification of user experiences as the service grows, with certain keywords in users' feedback triggering a particular categorisation.

Key advantages of these kind of digital channels include their permanent availability, responsiveness, their pre-existence on the phones of users and their potential for scale. Prototyping this feature with affected communities in Mosul and displacement camps in northern Iraq helped surface the requirement for features and highlighted the various ways users interact with services on Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. Many participants said they would share the link to this chatbot with friends and family, provided there was a positive impact in terms of replies and action from humanitarian organisations. Those who helped trial the concept generally found the system intuitive and easy to use, and appreciated the mix of spaces in which to provide short- and longer-form answers.

4.2.2 'Analog' channel

ReliefWatch also collects feedback through face-to-face interviews with individuals and groups in affected areas. Group interviews are conducted in a 'town hall' format that take place regularly at camps and neighbourhoods, and provide the space in which to listen to both individual cases and collective community feedback. User testing demonstrated the importance of both individual and group formats in creating a safe and collaborative atmosphere and in revealing different sets of needs and feedback, as well as reinforcing findings from surveys that found most people prefer providing feedback face-to-face (Ramizova, 2019: 6). During prototyping in Mosul, interviewees commented positively on being provided with a space to discuss psychosocial needs that they lacked access to, as well as a lack of supplies for reconstruction. This supports interviews with humanitarian staff, who emphasised the value of qualitative feedback that describes needs, particularly for the Iraq context, where many displaced people have returned and begun the process of reconstruction.

Box 2: Considering how context influences complaint mechanisms

There are undoubtedly cultural barriers to the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms in many humanitarian contexts that require consideration in designing an accountability service. For example, findings from past AAP initiatives such as the 'Listening Project' summarise the understandable point that criticism of assistance is often heavily qualified, with affected people frequently unwilling to fully express their concerns for fear of being denied aid at a later date (Anderson et al., 2012: 2). A study that considers 'influencing factors' of whether people participate in giving feedback in the context of Iraq cited the common mistrust of NGO staff, an assertion confirmed by humanitarian staff interviewed, and so an anonymous, direct channel would be beneficial (Echegaray, 2020: 15). Conversely, some interviewees asserted that the country's history of socialism meant an increased willingness to feed back and hold to account service delivery, including from humanitarian agencies. In their field of health provision, some humanitarian interviewees argued Iraq's 'demand-led' healthcare system means often low user satisfaction of INGO-delivered health services, and complaints relating to that would comprise a large amount of submitted feedback.

The role of *mukhtar* (meaning 'chosen' in Arabic, and referring to a prominent 'head' of a village or neighbourhood) is important in many areas of Iraq, and they often act as a filter for complaints (Echegaray, 2020: 12). Such roles carried a great deal of legitimacy among many of those interviewed for this process, though others criticised their partiality in instances where they had a role in aid distribution. Clearly, their influence requires careful consideration in the process of gathering experiences from group forums. Above all, such issues demonstrate the need for feedback mechanisms to be contextually relevant and secure. The Service Coordinator role should also be mindful of structural and other inequalities that may limit participation and, if in person, create spaces where people can trust they will be heard and be safe to speak freely.

'Service Coordinators' would be team-based facilitators for these discussions, acting as impartial moderators and using language participants can understand and which is open and non-judgemental, making it clear that in this role they are unaffiliated with any organisation. Who Service Coordinators would be was a key focus of the design process, as it was continuously reinforced that international personnel often lack local language skills and turn over quickly, making it difficult to develop trusting relationships with stakeholders. Effective local engagement of the type required for such a role would necessitate a skillset more akin to social work or community organising. Staff and students at university departments and research institutes, and socio-linguistics experts, served as Service Coordinators during prototyping and struck an ideal balance between demonstrating independence from affected communities while having an effective understanding of needs, language and customs.

Service Coordinators would submit and likely translate what they have heard from these discussions, making a note of participant's location, gender and age range that can help make the service as useful as possible for humanitarian organisations. This is then amalgamated with feedback gained through digital channels. Additionally, it is envisaged that Service Coordinators meet bilaterally with humanitarian organisations, ideally including senior staff of the Humanitarian Country Team, to ensure that views and opinions of affected people are represented at the highest level. The role of these Coordinators is also to scale the service using the digital channels, through coaching and transitioning communities towards using digital channels to provide their feedback. Though it is envisaged that a network of Community Fora will be maintained, this transition will assist with scaling the service with a small team.

4.3 Presenting feedback data

Once submitted, feedback data is categorised, geo-located and presented on the ReliefWatch site. The prototyping process revealed the necessity for a layer of aggregation of this qualitative data to allow users in managerial positions to see emerging themes, while letting those working at an operational level identify and respond to details of feedback from one individual theme. Categories that affected people and Service Coordinators will submit can be sorted according to details including relevant area (in the case of Iraq, by governorate), gender, camp or non-camp context, theme (e.g. camp management, socioeconomic support, reconstruction, cash assistance), and 'type' of complaint, if relevant (e.g. quality of aid, staff misconduct, government concerns). Those submitting feedback can name specific humanitarian organisations in their messages, but this is optional and reflects the lack of knowledge of exactly which aid provider was responsible for what programme among those interviewed.

Prior to comments being publicly available online, a 'moderator' function performs a basic level of categorising and limiting of submitted comments that are explicitly abusive or relate to especially sensitive issues. To some degree, this process can be automated with the moderator verifying rather than manually categorising feedback. Certain words would constitute tags, which could then be presented to a moderator as comprising an emergent category to present on the site.

A key issue for the design was the means by which the service would distinguish between complaints over services with especially egregious reports of abuse, including instances of staff misconduct or corruption. In such a situation, as with all complaints, the priority is to provide sufficient anonymity to avoid exposing vulnerable populations to more risk and so no data that can be used to identify an individual is presented on the site. In cases

Figure 4: A ReliefWatch 'heatmap' demonstrating levels of feedback provided in specific areas

Source: ReliefWatch

where such a report is submitted, a member of ReliefWatch staff can elevate the claim and directly forward it to the relevant organisation, if that information is available. If not, staff will approach the claimant directly and seek further details before contacting the relevant organisation.

The feedback collated by the ReliefWatch service would be geographically specific and presented as a 'heatmap' that plots the density of submitted data. These maps allow users to identify the specific locality and/or displacement camp where the feedback originated, but not to the level of an individual building, striking a balance between being sufficiently localised for the benefit of humanitarian staff while preserving the anonymity of those submitting feedback (see Figure 4). Heatmaps can demonstrate the frequency and distribution of comments, and be further filtered by topics of concern, gender and other categories. This fulfils a core function of the service in providing an accessible 'monitor' of the tone of particular areas and highlighting key areas of need or neglect. It also enables humanitarians to evaluate whether their current points of service are aligned with locations on the map where unmet needs are emerging.

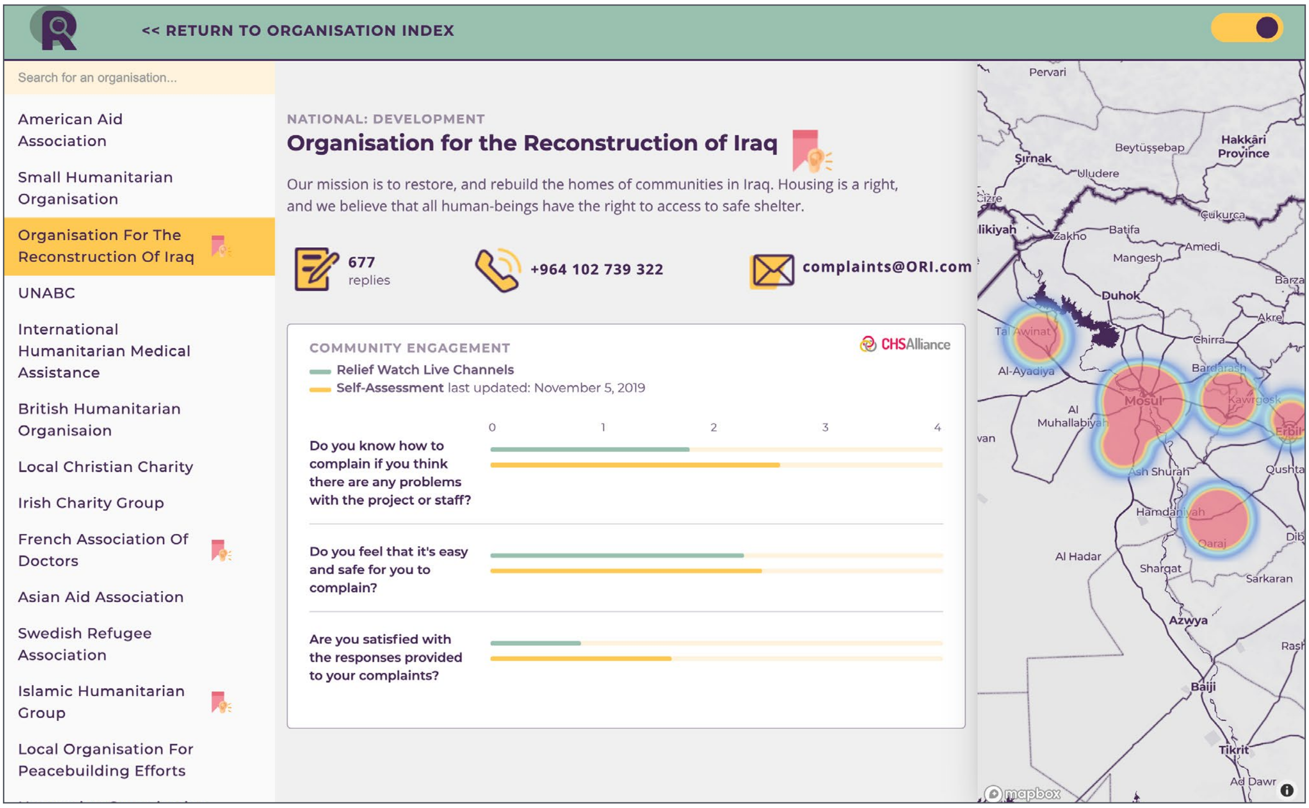
This also assists in the process of ensuring that data submitted from both sources is verifiable and 'real', a key concern of some humanitarian staff interviewed for the project. While the moderator function has a minor role in filtering out the most obvious fraudulent cases, it is not envisaged this will have a 'fact-checking' function. Instead, as has been demonstrated by other crowd-sourced mapping initiatives such as AirWars or Ushahidi, a large number of complaints acts as a means of establishing clear, identifiable trends and gaps. The Service Coordinator also has a data verification role in confirming key findings, and the service's community experience site has the means to assess commonly used words and phrases. Together these methods increase the verifiability of the feedback presented, without constituting a large filter than detracts from the core principle of providing a means for affected people to directly submit their experiences.

4.4 Organisation marker

ReliefWatch also looks at which humanitarian organisations are using the platform to listen to communities. This engagement, indicated by replies to relevant comments and a number of survey questions asked of affected people who submit feedback (including 'are you satisfied with the responses provided to your complaints?'), forms a basis for the organisation's 'responsiveness marker'. Organisations that consistently read and reply to experiences on ReliefWatch can also be awarded with a 'Top Listener' badge that is displayed on their profile.

The notion of an indicative marker system for agencies was seen as an important element of the concept since, for the first time, responsiveness to the concerns of affected people themselves is placed at the centre of an accountability system. Importantly, the ratings system does not measure the overall performance of the organisation or the quality of the assistance it provides. Instead, an indication of responsiveness to complaints can suggest to affected people how likely the organisation will be to follow up claims. The organisational marker required careful consideration regarding a number of issues raised by humanitarian staff. Many were concerned about initial plans for affected people to rate what they received, citing the higher probability that those using the service would leave negative reviews, or would only provide feedback for well-known aid providers. During prototyping, the prominence of humanitarian organisations did vary and the team found a mixed picture of how familiar different organisations were to affected people. While many residents of displacement camps in northern Iraq were familiar with, for example, the Barzani Charity Foundation that had a prominent role in camp management, others could not name specific aid providers. This proposal was also particularly questioned by humanitarians working in the field of protection, who described it as a difficult function to rate the performance of from the perspective of affected people. Those who worked in the field of healthcare proposed that

Figure 5: An example page of the ReliefWatch organisation marker



Source: ReliefWatch

higher order objectives around, for example, reducing antibiotic immunity, may not be popular among individuals but are nonetheless a vital humanitarian objective. Importantly, some saw the idea of comparing the ratings of organisations with each other as dangerous, as those who carried out more straightforward interventions in easier areas to work in would likely receive higher ratings than those doing still critical work in more difficult contexts, creating perverse incentives to conduct and fund the former.

Such points raise similar issues to debates around ‘customer reviews’ of private businesses: that those likely to submit and review feedback are motivated by experiences that deviate from the ‘average’ and so skew ratings. Such challenges led to a significant redesign of a marker system based not on ‘performance’ but responsiveness to submitted feedback, which leaves the space open for organisations to leave comments and justifications for their actions in situations where affected people are dissatisfied with the aid they have received. In addition, as a senior humanitarian staff member in Iraq emphasised, the presence of complaints should not necessarily be a bad indication. When taken in the context of other performance indicators, it could demonstrate an organisation’s presence in a location and show that they are operating under constraints that could be highlighted to authorities and donors. A public marker of engagement with responses provides an incentive to organisations to become more accountable through listening and responding to those they seek to serve, and can be used in a complementary manner to other monitoring and evaluation tools.

A street in Mosul, Iraq. Photo: Ciarán Duffy

5 Key issues for accountability mechanisms

Throughout the design process, humanitarian staff proposed a number of questions and challenges to the ReliefWatch concept. While most agreed with the diagnosis of the various structural problems and incentives within humanitarian responses, the design of the service as an answer to at least some of these issues often proved controversial. Such challenges and predicted limitations of the service have influenced ReliefWatch's design and have wider relevance for accountability and participatory approaches in the sector.

5.1 Integration or independence?

A key question for the ReliefWatch concept concerned its relationship to the international humanitarian system and the various existing means of reporting and assessment. Would such a service be external to the humanitarian sector and, if so, how could it feed into the humanitarian system and drive change?

The service was designed with affected people as its primary users, which influenced its functions and role. In considering the incentives for affected users to engage with such a service, the principle of independence is particularly crucial to establish ReliefWatch as an impartial service that is not restrictive in terms of what experiences it gathers, and which is not formally connected to specific humanitarian organisations. As discussed above, aid providers exercise considerable power and would likely influence responses if affiliated with the service. The channels for collating information, both digital and face-to-face, were designed to make clear this independence to potential users: that although it has been designed to openly listen to, collate and present feedback to aid organisations, it cannot guarantee a change in services. This independence is an important element of ReliefWatch, but would be difficult to demonstrate if the service were affiliated with any aid provider.

The design process and prototyping suggested that formal integration with the humanitarian system presents both technical and political complexities in the case of Iraq, and likely elsewhere. As shown by existing accountability mechanisms, integration with the current system cannot promise a 100% response rate, and establishing a service within, for example, the cluster system would expose it to other existing dynamics and automatically exclude certain actors. A system that only forwards complaints and messages that mention a particular agency to that organisation could miss potentially relevant pieces of feedback from those who were unaware of the organisation whose aid they were referring to. It would also risk missing a key advantage of a service that highlights where needs are not met and where there is a lack of a humanitarian response, as well as more cross-sectoral issues, rather than just feeding back on existing programmes.

For these reasons, the priority for ReliefWatch is its establishment as an independent service alongside the existing system. This approach would benefit humanitarian organisations, as it would provide free feedback directly from affected people and work as a complementary source of information that sits alongside existing tools for assessment that are more quantitative or specific to organisations or programmes. The challenge for the service would be to then deliver feedback to humanitarians that is as relevant to their work as possible, without compromising on the rich and open nature of the qualitative data collated.

To mitigate the potentially large amount of submitted feedback, the concept also proposes a paid model where humanitarians can see specific analytics for areas of interest (for example, 'notify me any time education is mentioned in Duhok governorate'). This addresses a key point raised by humanitarian staff in interviews: that comments and direct feedback from affected people risk being insufficiently specific regarding location in order to be acted upon. A further means of feeding into the humanitarian system could be the ReliefWatch Service Coordinators, who are envisaged to play a role in engaging with humanitarian organisations, as they could meet with senior staff to relay summaries of what they have heard in facilitating feedback fora and interviews with affected people. Through these functions, the service seeks to make engagement with the humanitarian system as easy as possible, while also maintaining its commitments to independence and affected people.

5.2 How to incentivise responding to feedback

An important test for the longer-term viability of ReliefWatch concerns the degree to which affected people who submitted comments feel they have received a satisfactory response from aid providers, and ideally one that leads to positive changes in aid practice. This would, in the first instance, require humanitarian organisations to engage and provide these responses, and so raises questions of how to incentivise organisations to do this with a service external to the humanitarian system.

As detailed earlier in this report, there are already a number of AAP channels outside of the sector, which raises questions as to what would be different with ReliefWatch. Although existing external channels provide an important role, ReliefWatch differs as comments are unsolicited and the approach is open: users can access the service through the digital channel at any time, rather than wait to be approached by a survey. This provides a fundamentally different source of data that is highly qualitative and less restricted. While not providing the same rigour and representativeness of these quantitative surveys, the service would constitute a complementary source of information for humanitarian staff to consider, which sits outside of existing silos and projects. This novel source of data that will likely not be picked up by other approaches is a key incentive for humanitarian organisations to engage with the service.

This report has also noted the lack of incentives to change accountability in the sector, because of the various dynamics operating among aid providers and funders. Since the primary users of this service are affected people, submitted data is publicly available, barring minimal filtering, and so also provides a different set of incentives for change, which centre on public reputation. Since many humanitarian organisations place a high value on accountability to affected people and have committed to be more participatory in their approaches, ReliefWatch offers a means to engage more with their users and take their perspectives into account in designing programmes. While not a punitive mechanism, the organisation marker also provides recognition for responders who have engaged with feedback and comments and replied. Improved aggregation and classification of qualitative data and more user management features are priorities for the further development of the service.

5.3 Considering sustainability and scale

The design of the concept and its voluntary and independent structure also led to questions around pathways to scale, such as how the service can grow and be sustainable.

ReliefWatch has been designed as a service that can be used in many humanitarian settings. Northern Iraq was chosen as the focus for the initial co-design and prototyping, and offered a range of design opportunities and challenges, including a diverse population of aid users, differing levels of technology access and a range of existing accountability programmes. These factors will also be present in other humanitarian settings and the service was designed to be flexible with regard to which channels and means of collating data could be deployed to reach the most people. In Iraq, existing messaging applications were in common use and so the digital channel was hosted on those systems. In designing the service for scale, the priority for taking the service forward into other contexts is to ensure accessibility for affected people, and so making channels contextually relevant. The potential of the community forums was demonstrated in the Iraq context and 'analog' mechanisms will likely constitute a key part of the initial service in contexts less suited to digital feedback collection. While the channels may adapt depending on context, the underlying principles of open data, transparency and independence as articulated in this paper will continue to inform the service at a global level.

Over the next five years, the service is envisaged to expand its scale. Funding remains heavily restricted and earmarked for most humanitarian organisations and this is unlikely to change in the near future. Though some donors have made funding for accountability approaches available and there is growing awareness of the importance of participatory tools in the sector, they remain a minority and the service will need to draw upon alternative funding structures outside of project cycles or individual response organisations. Subscription models from donors or humanitarian agencies, which could include a paid service that offers a greater level of specificity in data analytics, could constitute a viable means of funding once the service is established. Ultimately, however, the real test of the humanitarian sector's commitment to accountability is its willingness to pay for this feedback.

Ultimately, the sustainability of the service is dependent upon its widespread adoption by both humanitarian organisations and affected people. Aid users interviewed for this project were generally enthusiastic at the prospect of being able to submit comments, complaints and ideas to responders. However, over the longer term, ensuring the service is used by affected people will be dependent upon whether their submissions are replied to by humanitarian organisations and positive practices occur as a result. This will necessitate effective engagement and categorising by the service to make replies as accessible as possible for humanitarian organisations, and considered replies and responsive programming by responders. While these are considerable undertakings, they are necessary in a sector that is increasingly scrutinised and committed to be more accountable to affected people.

Service co-designer at a displacement camp, Erbil governorate. Photo: Patrick Kohl

6 Conclusion

Accountability to affected people and participation are difficult to deliver in humanitarian responses, owing to the dynamics and incentives of a sector whose funders are not the same as those who use their services. This leaves affected people insufficiently consulted on their needs and perspectives, leading to inappropriate assistance. The designers of this concept, and the many humanitarians and aid users consulted as part of this project, recognised these issues and sought to fill this gap through a new service, independent to aid agencies, that provides the means for affected people to hold aid agencies to account through a publicly accessible review mechanism.

This is not a new idea, and there are other means of collating user feedback that have been designed both within and outside the sector. Where this service is different is its independence and openness, which focus on those aspects of most use to its primary users: affected people, who can use the service to provide feedback on the issues that matter to *them* rather than to specific projects, agencies or sectors. In doing this, it recognises the centrality, voice and agency of affected people in humanitarian crises, who are already making increasing use of social media and other technologies to speak directly to humanitarians and the wider world.

Box 3: ReliefWatch to Loop

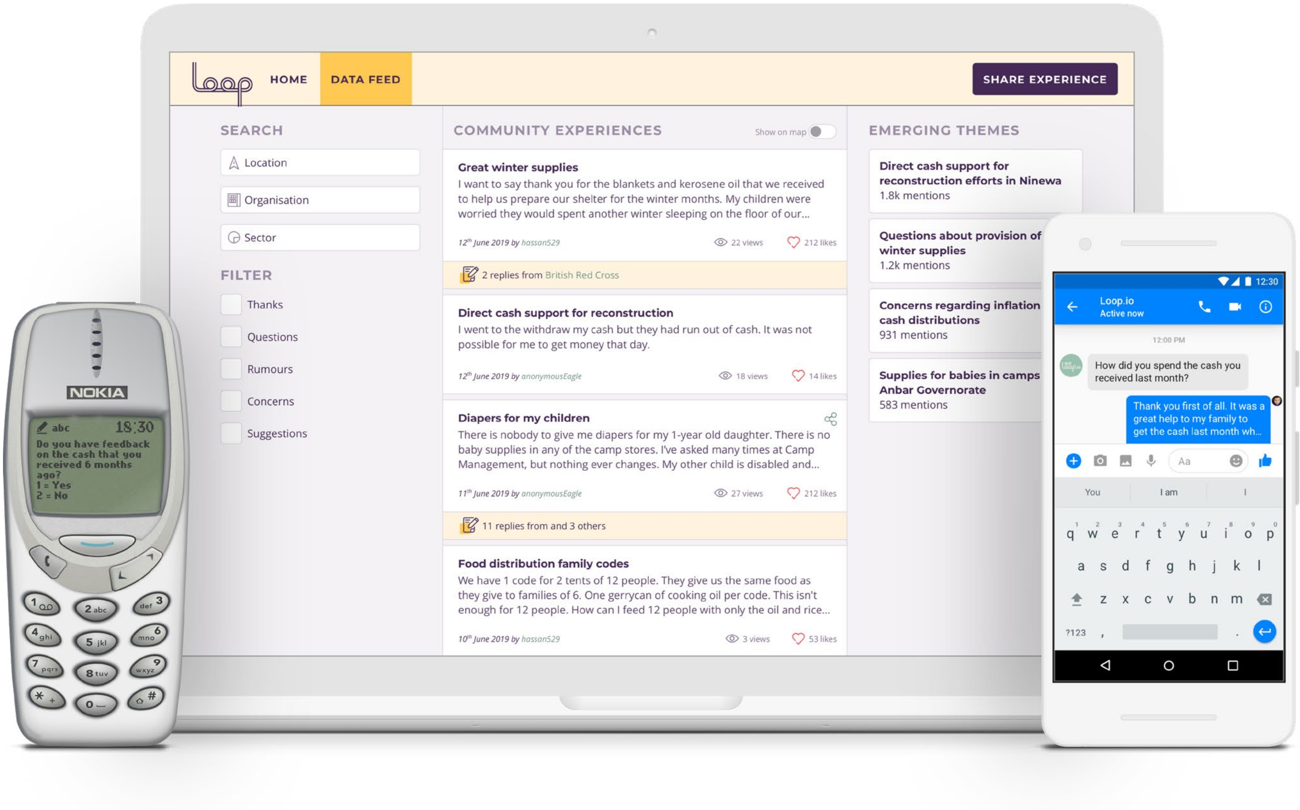
In summer 2019, the ReliefWatch concept was merged with a similar initiative, also in its design stages. Named Loop, the service would enable aid recipients to put their experiences directly to humanitarian, development and local organisations. Many characteristics of ReliefWatch were shared by Loop, with both concepts committing to principles of open data and a two-way dialogue, and stressing the importance of users being able to categorise feedback by geographical or programme area. In addition, Loop has proposed a governance model that reinforces its ambition for greater participation, with affected people and communities taking a key role in deciding how the service would operate and its priorities.

Loop replaced ReliefWatch as the name of this combined initiative, which is more reflective of the final design of the concept. Initial proposals for an independent AAP mechanism originally took the form and title of an 'ombudsman', and later a 'watchdog'. Such concepts suggest a form of accountability that carries with it a punitive function for transgressing individuals or organisations. However, it became apparent that developing a voluntary service with a robust enforcement element would currently be an unrealistic goal. Instead, the design focus shifted towards developing a dialogue between affected people and humanitarian staff and organisations, and was seen by the design team as being of greater benefit for those the service sought to assist.

Co-design and prototyping visits to northern Iraq, and input from affected people and policy-makers, allowed the creation of a minimum viable product (MVP), to allow for a more long-term pilot to run. Since January 2020, the ReliefWatch project team and Loop are intending to launch pilots in five different contexts. These contexts have been selected to allow the team to gradually add additional digital and 'analog' channels for users to input their feedback, and present new factors to consider in designing a service most appropriate and useful for affected people in those humanitarian crises.

The latest prototype of the ReliefWatch platform can be seen at www.reliefwatch.io.

Figure 6: The Loop platform and mobile phone channels for submitting feedback



Source: ReliefWatch

In adopting this approach, the ReliefWatch service is not intended to replace any existing means by which humanitarian organisations assess need or the impact of programmes. Instead the prototype was designed to be a complementary and transparent way for a different group of people – those affected by crises and those using aid – to exercise their voice and hold service providers to account. In doing so, it may make it easier for affected people to participate in decision-making around the provision of aid and services, as part of project cycles. Over the longer term, such an approach could shift thinking until listening and responding to feedback is considered essential to good programming and accountability.

While the concept draws inspiration from the private sector ratings platforms, its underlying ethos is based on the idea that affected people have the right to be heard and be able to exercise greater accountability in the sector. We found growing awareness and frustration among both affected people and the staff of humanitarian organisations that progress on accountability and participation is slow, to the detriment of both groups. We also found a proliferation of means by which aid users are contacting humanitarian organisations, albeit with mixed success, and considerable enthusiasm for an approach that could lead to people caught up in humanitarian crises having a more direct relationship with those that seek to assist them. In doing so, organisations providing assistance and populations in crisis would be more informed and responsive: the remaining question, however, is whether the sector is ready to commit to such independent scrutiny and accountability.

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