

Title: Humanitarian governance in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Power and accountability in practice

Executive summary

In this thesis, I explore humanitarian governance in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (the DRC), with a focus on downward accountability, which is how aid organisations provide space to have the voices of affected communities heard and considered in decisions that affect them. In recent years, accountability to affected populations has become a central concern of humanitarian action. Although accountability is implemented in contexts where multiple local factors shape its application, most existing research focuses primarily on assessing compliance with internationally developed norms, standards, and guidelines. Few studies have examined in depth the influence of local contexts on real accountability toward affected communities. This thesis analyses how power relations and stakeholder interactions shape the everyday practices of accountability, enabling affected communities to influence change in humanitarian governance. The aim is to analyse the practices through which the voices of affected communities influence or not the change in humanitarian governance, ensuring humanitarian actions align with their expectations. My thesis is based on interactive, qualitative research, using multiple case studies. To explore the dimensions of the central research question, each case study was defined by a specific research sub-question and analytical focus. Empirical data were collected for a period of 24 months of fieldwork research, through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and storytelling sessions. This process involved repeated interactions and shared learning activities between researchers and participants to ensure the accuracy and validity of the narratives and observations collected before the start of analysis and writing.

The empirical findings show that in the DRC, ‘real’ humanitarian governance is not primarily shaped by formal coordination structures but by fragmented interactions among multiple actors operating within a complex humanitarian arena. This arena is ordered by clientelism intertwining with the rules of the humanitarian order. The interactions are largely driven by unequal power relations and competing interests, that allow actors to avoid responsibility. As a result, accountability (particularly downward accountability to affected communities) remains limited, distorted, and unevenly implemented in practice. Poor accountability has systemic consequences that extend beyond aid delivery. Fraud, duplication, and sexual exploitation and abuse in the DRC illustrate that failures of accountability are not merely operational problems but fundamentally compromise the legitimacy of humanitarian governance itself.

Concerning accountability mechanisms, the findings indicated that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to ensuring accountability to affected communities. Accountability mechanisms are a complex context, where mechanisms are shaped more by local social, political, and cultural factors than by globally defined “best practices”. In this thesis, I argue that, for accountability

mechanisms to become effective, humanitarian actors must move beyond purely top-down, technocratic approaches based solely on international norms, standards, and guidelines, and instead prioritise locally grounded approaches that are socially and culturally embedded, respectful of local norms, and aligned with community communication styles and practices.

This thesis makes theoretical, policy, societal and methodological contributions. From a theoretical perspective, it enriches the existing literature on accountability in general and on downward accountability specifically by introducing the concept of real accountability as an analytical framework for understanding how accountability is translated into practice within the humanitarian sector. This framework applies to both square and round approaches of accountability and is shaped by a combination of formal and informal mechanisms. Using these accountability approaches in analysing downward accountability enables not only the assessment of compliance with donor requirements for intervention quality, but also the evaluation of sensitivity and responsiveness of the mechanisms to the local context and community needs.

From a policy perspective, the thesis provides important insights and takeaways for public policies and downward accountability practices. Beyond technocratic mechanisms, the thesis advocates for recognising and valuing relational and flexible mechanisms, labelled the “round approach” to accountability. The thesis established a humanitarian observatory in the DRC to serve as a space for humanitarian actors, observers, and affected communities to exchange ideas, share experiences, and engage in strategic reflection and actions to support positive change in humanitarian governance and within communities. The observatory has become a symbol for reform from below and advocacy of ethical humanitarianism and solidarity with crisis-affected communities.

Keywords: Humanitarian governance, power, stakeholder interactions, downward accountability, real accountability, affected populations, accountability mechanisms, the DRCL.