Karen Peachey: Hello, I'm Karen Peachey and you're listening to CashCast. In our last episode, we looked at people centered aid. Throughout that episode, one thing that really stuck out was that we're not listening to people receiving aid, or if we are listening, we're not always acting on what they say. That's something Caroline Tetti, the Director of Recipient Advocacy at GiveDirectly talked about,

Caroline Tetti: We sit in boardrooms, we design programs, then we determine how long it will take us to deliver that design that we have built in our boardrooms. When we are discussing our programs with our donors, it's very unlikely that we are building in time and resources in our planning for listening to communities and building a community centered approach and design to our programs. We bundle the solutions on them, and then monitor how our solution has worked for them.

Karen Peachey: So in this episode, we're looking at a topic that comes up again and again across the aid system. Accountability and engagement. It sometimes seems that we have a problem with this.

But where do those problems come from? Is there an easy fix, or is there a more deep rooted problem? And where does Cash and Voucher Assistance, CVA, fit into that? There are two things to consider. First, are the issues the same as for the rest of the sector? And second, might cash have a role to play in terms of addressing accountability issues?

Let's find out.

So what is the problem? Let's break it down. To help us unpick the problems, here's innocent Shalombo again. If you've missed him in previous episodes, Innocent is a humanitarian who has been on the receiving end of different forms of humanitarian assistance when he was in Kukuma refugee camp.

Innocent Tshilombo: Good accountability is first that people should know uh, what they're entitled to. Because I know I'm entitled to this, then I can measure it against everything that they are going to receive.

Karen Peachey: Okay, so issue number one, people don't always know what they're entitled to. This causes problems in multiple ways. It makes it difficult for people to know if they've received less than they should do. And it makes it harder for them to plan their finances and think about the future.

Innocent Tshilombo: Another aspect is, uh, where people receive assistance from. Who is providing what? Which organization is providing what? You

know, that's a very big question. How else do we enable people to understand who is providing what? How organizations are communicating their mandate clearly to the people? And, uh, how to help people understand that this is what they're entitled for, so at least they can be able to manage their own expectations. They'll manage those expectations well themselves first if they understand what they're entitled to and where to get that assistance.

Karen Peachey: Issue number two. In addition to not knowing what they're entitled to, it can be difficult to understand who is providing what, and from where. As Innocent has just described, in some situations, there are many organisations working in the same area, and it's not always clear who is doing what.

Innocent Tshilombo: People at, in some, uh, extent, they're tired of giving feedback, because they don't hear back. You know, you feed, but you don't get feedback. You give recommendations, you make complaints, Or you ask questions, no one is attending.

Karen Peachey: So issue number three. Innocent also feels that feedback often appears to be a one-way street. People will often provide insightful inputs on to how things could be done better, but there's often no acknowledgement of this or drive to find out more as a result. Feedback fatigue often sets in, and there's more.

Innocent Tshilombo: Whenever there is a feedback or there's a complaint, it's easier to be addressed in a community language. Because, you know, when someone is very professional they'll come to speak to the community in a language, simple, in the same language but in a more technical language that the community can't understand. But if they can listen that from a local language, in a local way, then it'll be something that they'll feel, uh, satisfied about.

Karen Peachey: This highlights a fourth issue. When engagement does happen, it's often not tailored to the audience needs. And so, much as there is talking, the communication isn't working. For Innocent, it seems like it's a fundamental problem with the way the humanitarian organisations communicate with the people they're giving aid to. This is something echoed by Caroline.

Caroline Tetti: Organisations have good intentions, but then the impatience that you see in the communities, some have even scripted what should be asked of community members. But officers are in such a hurry. to finish up work and they consider community members as wasting their time. They want to do work. They want to deliver cash. We want to respond to this humanitarian situation

quickly. You are speaking too slowly or you're not speaking very good English or you are, you're wasting our time.

Karen Peachey: Caroline also feels the failure to communicate and engage effectively is actually a huge missed opportunity for aid providers.

Caroline Tetti: We keep coming in with resources and solutions. And then we bundle the solutions on them and then monitor how our solution has worked for them. Think about it. If you give the communities an opportunity to speak about their situation in the lens or in the context of the experiences at the time you're going to work in their communities.

Think about the local solutions that they could come up with. Think about how they could help you even to get better efficiency by letting you know where to target. Who to target, when to target, what to do to get the highest impact and what they could do themselves to help take the resources you're taking to their communities even further.

Giving an opportunity for communities to reflect on what their needs are. To think about how far they could go with cash. To help define within themselves how they could push whatever it is that we're giving them in the cash investments into sustainable impact in their communities, then at the time we are going, we are just delivering the means for them to get to the end that they have defined.

If we don't involve them, if they don't participate, if we don't hear their voice. Then they will be receiving our cash as another handout that has just arrived.

Karen Peachey: So far, we've identified at least four big pillars of what's not working. One, people don't always know what they're entitled to. Two, they don't know where or from whom they can receive assistance. Three, their feedback often goes unacknowledged, unanswered, and not actioned. And fourth, and finally, there's a failure to engage or communicate effectively with community. All these seem to be symptoms that show accountability isn't working as it should, rather than the actual root causes of the issue.

That said, it does seem these symptoms are often repeated across the humanitarian system. But still, the root cause is less clear. Perhaps in the discussion of accountability. We're at risk of missing the basics. People just want things to work. Meg Sattler, CEO of Ground Truth Solutions, sums it up nicely.

Meg Sattler: In Nigeria last year when we did some work with cash recipients, we really did see evidence that the more people had felt that there was a level of awareness on their part about the system that they were engaging with when it came to cash assistance.

They knew if they wanted to, how to lodge a complaint or ask a question, but more if they felt that the nuts and bolts of cash were working for them. You know, it was multi purpose. It was coming when it was supposed to. They knew how long they would have it. They not only felt more satisfied, but they also felt like they didn't actually need a lot of engagement because it was kind of there if they needed it and they knew that it would work.

People just want things to work. You know, it's kind of common sense like you and I do. I've had questions this week about a health care card and it's involved hours of me being on the phone and dead end phone calls and snail mail and I still don't have what I need and it's infuriating and stressful.

And I think a lot of those experiences and feelings are very common around the world. And I think sometimes, even though that's very obvious, we don't take that into account when we have these endless discussions about things like people centered aid and accountability. We seem to always be thinking, oh, what we need to do is to set up more feedback mechanisms, or we need more surveys, or whatever it is. Um, but people really just want things to work.

Karen Peachey: According to Meg, if things are working, people are broadly satisfied, and they don't want lots of engagement. They do, however, want to know that they can raise a concern when things are going wrong and action will be taken. In lots of ways, much of this seems quite obvious. If I buy a product or service, I expect it to work in the way in which I'm told it will work.

The same goes for people in crisis. But if the issues are so clear what's going wrong? Is it that people don't know how to do things? They don't have the time or they just don't care? Or is there something else? For Christina Bennett, the CEO of the Start Network, the issue is a much more structural one. It links to the question of where accountability lies in the system and what we focus on.

Christina Bennett: Governments have to be accountable for every dollar or pound spent. Elsewhere, rather than, um, success factors or rather than, rather than accountability being much more about how have we changed society or how have we changed, how have we made something sustainable in whatever aid that we've been giving.

It's a way of, of thinking about public accountability that is narrow and based on measuring things that we aren't really able to measure very well. Like if we have stopped giving in kind assistance, we can't measure tarpaulins or pieces of wood or, or roofing materials or wells built or children vaccinated or things like that, that are, that are much easier to measure than, than societal changes.

Karen Peachey: These are big issues. From Christina's point of view, the very way the system is structured makes accountability to people in crisis difficult. In her view, there are incentives to keep giving in kind assistance even if people prefer cash. And similarly, Meg Sattler feels we may have gone wrong with the overall notion of accountability and projectised it too much. Has accountability become too much about processes and experts? Bottom line, how meaningful is accountability?

Meg Sattler: I think a lot of the reasons underpinning why accountability is failing is that we sort of design it within that very tightly controlled, exceptional system, and we don't open it up.

I, I think one thing where we know, I guess we've kind of gone wrong. Is the whole approach that has been taken to accountability to affected people, because I think that also ignores all of this complexity. And we've, we seem to have spent many, many years now thinking that we could turn accountability into a project.

There will be experts and they will fly in and they will explain how to do accountability and we will do accountability and then everything will, will work. Um, if you look at the, the frameworks of a lot of the big donors, the IASC just commissioned a review of donor policies and practices on accountability.

And a lot of the, the ones that are deemed to be very good practice are still very easy to fudge, you know, if you're sort of an implementing agency. It's all about, have you got a plan for community engagement or are you listening to people or are you, whatever it is, but I mean, there's no, there's no real way to see whether that means anything or not.

So I think we need to really start thinking as a sector, if this is really meaningful for us, what incentives or carrots or sticks or punishments or however you want to describe it, are we actually willing and able to put in place. So that we can create some of that accountability that we apparently all are working towards because otherwise it just feels a little bit like we're all just kind of busy, um, but

there's no real pressure to actually make sure that we're moving the needle on this question about people centered aid or accountable aid.

Karen Peachey: So whilst there's a lot of talk about being accountable, it seems there's nothing to really ensure it happens and that things actually change. As Meg says, if there's no credible sticks or carrots in place, then what would really compel us to ensure we're doing accountability right? The issues that stifle accountability aren't just a system problem.

They also exist at the organizational level. In the form of particular pressures on leaders who run organisations to act in a certain way. Here's Laura Walker McDonald, a digital technology and data protection expert.

Laura Walker McDonald: That accountability and transparency and learning piece, um, is really key. And that is a difficult value to adhere to sometimes for leadership.

If you have something that's gone maybe a bit wrong, or you're worried about broadcasting the success or otherwise of something, totally get it. But I think being committed to, um, to understanding and then sharing learning from all of our programs is, is really critical in this space where we're trying lots of things.

In, in context where the power dynamic is, is insufficient and we know feedback mechanisms aren't, aren't as strong as they should be. So I, I really hope that that should be something that leaders really endorse. Because at the end of the day, if we're all sharing what goes wrong, what goes right when we use technology and humanitarian aid and development, we will do, we will make fewer mistakes, we will spend better money, we will achieve better outcomes, and we will all get better at this.

So I think that is probably a tougher one than, than one might imagine. But that would be something I would really love to see, a commitment to transparency and learning from senior leadership.

Karen Peachey: When the problems are this fundamental, it makes me wonder about our current approaches to accountability. Accountability to whom? And for what? From a people centered perspective, the focus should be on what people in crisis are saying and working to adjust things accordingly. While this does happen to some extent, much more time and effort is placed on accountability for resources and accountability to donors, with more emphasis on dealing with issues of risk compliance and financial audit. Do we need to recalibrate things?

So it seems like there are some pervasive problems and counterproductive incentives throughout the humanitarian system, which push against effective accountability to people receiving aid. And, in some cases, the accountability arrow is firmly facing in the other direction. So what started out as a discussion that could have just focused on accountability mechanisms has evolved into something that's much more complex.

This fits in with a recurrent theme across the series, that as well as listening and acting on what people in crisis say, we need to change mindsets and structures within the humanitarian system. So how can we fix this? Is it a case of fixing each of these individual elements and then hoping that accountability will function properly?

Or is more drastic action needed? On this, we heard several solutions from our guests. One in particular that caught my ear involved our good friend cash. As Meg Sattler sees it, greater adoption of cash could tie the humanitarian system into other systems, ones which already have strong systems of accountability.

Meg Sattler: I think money is also an amazing way to think about questions of accountability and transparency because it's the way that we all think about those things anyway. Um, you know, the more cash that we're sort of involving in humanitarian assistance, I think the easier it is for a number of different people to engage with this accountability question.

Cause it's just sort of easier for people to understand. I think that the more that we can see cash being able to live up to its potential and the more we can just try and understand that, the more I think we can see humanitarianism becoming less and less, I guess, exceptional in the way that it is allowed to operate in this sphere where it actually has no accountability.

And the more that humanitarian assistance can be linked to national systems or international systems or community systems that inherently bring with them their own accountability systems because people sort of understand what accountability means when it comes to understanding how we deal with money.

Karen Peachey: And the mechanism for cash to improve accountability could potentially be two fold. Not only would it tie the international humanitarian system into local systems and make it less exceptional, it would also perhaps reduce the traditional role of international humanitarian organizations.

Meg Sattler: I think what we need to do is actually just to get out of the way a lot of the time.

Or to just do things that seem to make more sense in a certain context and not bombard people with the 60 pages of guidance that I've written for several organizations that I now want to set fire to.

Karen Peachey: And if we don't change, then it's possible other things will just force us to change. The way technology has changed how people connect and communicate in recent years is also shifting how people speak up. Let's go back to Meg.

Meg Sattler: We're seeing it more and more in places where people are more online. Um, I know that even when I was, I was working in Iraq with OCHA several years ago and, If you opened our Facebook page, you know, it was just full of people sort of sharing their opinions on what the humanitarian system was doing in a way that was public, um, that will continue to increase.

If you look at climate change, climate change has mobilized, you know, millions of people in civil society who are now not only commenting on climate justice, but they're commenting on loss and damage, which we'll see a lot of humanitarians rolling into town, and there will be a lot of people who will say, you need to do what works for us here.

And I think the more that we can support and encourage some of those existing civil society um, movements to kind of raise their voices about humanitarian assistance and do so in a way that cuts through globally, I think there's huge potential there. And I think even if we don't do as much as we can to feed into those things and to relinquish a bit of control and to support some of those more organic accountability movements, they're going to happen anyway.

So, you know, I'm sort of hoping that they enter humanitarian thinking and decision making in a way that's a bit quicker maybe than has been possible before. Um, but I, I certainly think with climate change and with a few other things that are going on in the world right now that at least in certain communities is definitely becoming more and more inevitable and I think that's a really good thing for us.

Karen Peachey: This is a really interesting point. All of our conversations seem to be around discussing what's happening within the quote unquote humanitarian system. But obviously this system doesn't exist in isolation. It's not disconnected from the rest of the world. And whether we give people the means to have their voices heard or not, they will speak up.

Perhaps at some point, it was easier to maintain the fiction that we could operate as an exceptional system. But with the internet and social media, This is no longer the case. Building on Meg's notion of getting out of the way, perhaps the problems with accountability actually points to a wider issue around who does what in the aid system. If that was resolved and the role of international organizations changed, would the discussion around accountability carry the same weight? Over to Christina Bennett.

Christina Bennett: Solutions sit in country, with organizations, with individuals, with coalitions and networks, have a lot of expertise, have contextual knowledge, have such bright ideas about how they want their countries to, to, uh, to operate and grow and thrive. And we should be supporting those ideas and that ingenuity rather than thinking that we have all of the solutions ourselves. And that requires, uh, the shift in mindset that we've been talking about. It requires our organizations to be enablers and partners and not doers and, and being so focused on following every amount of aid that we give to, you know, and, and, and, and log frame it, and, and, uh, account for it in, in such a way that misses the big picture, I think what is doing a disservice to what we are, what we're ultimately trying to do as an, as a society or as an aid sector, which is to save lives, alleviate suffering, and promote dignity. I mean, we all say that in our, all of our strategies and our annual reports and everything. Um, but the way to do that isn't to count, isn't to, to count dollars and cents. Um, It's to recognize that, um, societies have a lot to give themselves and it's to recognize that, that what we all are ultimately aiming for is sustainable, thriving societies in their own right.

Karen Peachey: After this episode, the only thing that is clear is that there's no easy fix when it comes to improving accountability to people in crisis.

Clearly it's a serious and multifaceted problem, with major implications for people receiving aid. But it's also something that has deeply embedded roots within the structure, norms and practices of the humanitarian system. Maybe, as our guests have suggested, the only real fix is one which involves moving away from the idea of a humanitarian system that is separate and an exceptional entity.

And perhaps within this, there's a role for cash to play in rewiring many of the principles on which we currently deliver aid. So while we await for system level transformation, is there something that we can do in the interim? How can we improve our programs in the immediate future towards this goal?

Perhaps the answer is to get back to basics. To think about how we talk with people, consider what we say, and check what we do with the feedback we receive. As our guests have shown. While individual humanitarians and individual responses may do better or worse at this, a more consistent approach across the whole humanitarian system will require huge change, with shifts in power and priorities, as well as changes in what we do and how we do it.

Is there an appetite for such a degree of change? Can cash be part of the solution by helping put more power in the hands of people in crisis?

On the next episode we'll be discussing two topics that have been described by some as being incompatible. That's locally led response and large scale cash assistance. But are they really incompatible? Might it be that progress on cash assistance and locally led response are mutually reinforcing and beneficial?

What's the role of international organizations in the future? How does this all fit together? Join us on the next episode of Cashcast to explore these issues and more. Let's continue the conversation. We want to hear from you. Please share your thoughts and questions with us through the channels indicated in the description of this episode.

Until next time, goodbye.