



Humanity Link 

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Accountability Without Paralysis

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A sector built for control is struggling to deliver speed. Humanitarian and development agencies operate inside an ecosystem designed for assurance: compliance, documentation, auditability, and risk management. That structure made sense when funding was growing (or at least stable), when crises were more “manageable” in number and

scale, and when the operational model assumed time to plan, procure, deploy, and report.

But we are now in a period where speed and adaptability are not luxuries. They are the difference between protecting lives and missing the window. At the same time, the incentives still reward the opposite: write longer proposals, produce more granular reports, maintain parallel systems, and add layers to reduce perceived risk.

The result is predictable. Tools fragment and data entry is duplicated. Compliance consumes operational capacity. Contracting and disbursement slow down. Reporting requirements vary wildly by donor even for similar interventions. This is not a moral failure. It's a structural one.

It helps to say out loud why bureaucracy looks the way it does, because the reasons are not irrational. A lot of humanitarian and development funding is public money. Donors have auditors, oversight bodies, watchdog media, and political opposition to answer to, which drives requirements designed to withstand scrutiny rather than optimize delivery. Risk also rarely disappears; it gets pushed down the chain. Donors protect themselves with conditions, agencies protect themselves with internal controls, and implementing partners inherit complex compliance obligations with the least resourcing to manage them well.

On top of that, the system has grown by addition rather than replacement. New mandates, coordination mechanisms, and compliance frameworks come in, but old ones rarely leave. That is how we end up with multiple reporting formats, multiple assessments, multiple verification processes, multiple databases—and no single “source of truth.” Meanwhile, expectations have expanded faster than operational infrastructure. We ask programs to prove more—value for money, localization, inclusion, safeguarding, climate, protection mainstreaming, accountability to affected people—and those demands are legitimate. But too often the response is to add reporting instead of improving the data architecture that could make assurance simpler, faster, and more credible.

The proof that reporting has become too heavy is already in the reform agenda the sector itself has agreed to. The Grand Bargain includes explicit commitments to harmonize and simplify reporting requirements, and there have been concrete efforts like simplified templates (often referred to as “8+3”) developed to reduce bureaucracy while maintaining quality. Work under the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative has examined how reporting requirements create burdens and inconsistency across donors, and the UN system’s own oversight body has repeatedly recommended more standardization and streamlining, including common formats and templates. So the question is no longer “should we streamline?” The question is why we still haven’t done it at scale.

What should streamlining look like in 2026? First, reporting needs to be standardized the way other high-trust, high-scrutiny sectors standardized accounting. If we can agree on shared principles, we can agree on shared structures. That means common narrative and results templates across donor groups, a small set of shared indicators for recurring program types, and a “report once, use many” approach that allows the same verified information to satisfy multiple stakeholders. It also means stopping the quiet normalization of asking partners to translate the same story into five different donor formats, and stopping the habit of treating format diversity as “customization” rather than cost.

Second, we need to shift from document compliance to data assurance. We produce endless PDFs partly because our systems don’t trust their own data. When program data is verified, traceable, and well governed, assurance gets easier. Reporting can be built on top of operational records—case management, payments, call logs, distribution records—supported by audit trails like timestamps, approvals, and change logs. Privacy and safeguarding need to be designed in from the start, not bolted on at the end. This is the difference between bureaucracy and assurance.

Third, procurement has to become lighter and faster, especially for low-risk digital services. Procurement is where agility often dies, not because diligence is wrong, but because processes are built for maximum defensibility rather than proportionality. Pre-qualified vendor lists for common digital

components, standardized due diligence packages that are reusable, and smaller rapid contracts with clear renewal gates would cut months out of delivery timelines without lowering standards. The goal is not to bypass governance; it is to right-size governance to the risk and to the urgency.

Fourth, the sector needs to reduce duplication by agreeing what “good enough” looks like. So much bureaucracy is duplication dressed up as caution. Mutual recognition of partner due diligence across donors and UN agencies, shared assessments where feasible, and fewer approval layers for changes below a defined risk or financial threshold would free up capacity across the entire chain. This is also one of the most practical ways to make localization real, because local partners are often the ones paying the highest compliance cost per dollar delivered.

Finally, streamlining must keep safeguards strong by making them simpler and more usable. Safeguarding, accountability to affected people, protection, and CHS commitments are not optional, and the Core Humanitarian Standard was updated in 2024 with an emphasis on being more people-centred and accessible. Streamlining should strengthen safeguards by embedding them in daily operations: feedback loops treated as core program data, clear escalation pathways, and minimum viable documentation that is consistent and enforceable, rather than sprawling requirements that are impossible to execute well under stress.

The uncomfortable truth is that bureaucracy is now an affordability issue. When funding was plentiful, the system could absorb inefficiency. During funding collapse, bureaucracy becomes a form of rationing because time, staff, and attention are scarce resources too. If we keep the same administrative burden while budgets shrink, we force a perverse choice: either reduce delivery or reduce standards informally, which is worse. The only credible option is to modernize how standards are met: fewer forms, better systems, faster cycles, and more trust built through transparent data.

For those of us building practical infrastructure—communications, verification, feedback loops, payment rails, interoperable case systems—this moment is a mandate: make delivery easier, make accountability real-time, and make bureaucracy smaller than the crisis. The sector doesn't need less accountability. It needs accountability that moves at operational speed.