The influence of design thinking tools on NGO accountability

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There is continued criticism regarding the over-reliance on donor-centred accountability mechanisms in aid projects. Conversely, there is increasing interest in Design Thinking as an approach to support greater beneficiary-centred accountability. Accountability can be conceptualised as ‘felt’ virtue which privileges internal motivations of decision-makers; and as ‘imposed’ mechanism which privileges externally enforced structures on decision-makers. However, there is limited understanding about whether Design Thinking tools can influence the accountability of decision-makers. This participatory action research study utilised semi-structured interviews and observations. The analysis revealed decision-makers perceived two tools, being Personas and Journey Maps, as having influenced their ‘felt’ accountability. Suggestions on how the tools may be contributing to the ‘felt’ accountability of decision-makers include: building a shared picture among diverse groups, humanising complex information, grounding discussions in realities, and deepening empathy. This study contributes to extant literature by showing that Design Thinking can enhance, decision-makers’ ‘felt’ accountability through new sense-making practices and tools.

Keywords: Accountability, NGOs, Design Thinking, HCD, Personas, Journey Maps

Introduction

For the past 20 years, there has been increasing scrutiny of developmental Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) to assess the impact of their projects on beneficiaries (Andrews 2014; O’Dwyer & Unerman 2007; Ebrahim 2009; Madon 1999). As a result of this increasing scrutiny, NGOs have been institutionalising a host of accountability mechanisms (Ebrahim 2009; Schmitz et al. 2012; O’Dwyer & Boomsma 2015). To date, the mechanisms employed are often founded on quantitative-heavy and linear, cause-effect models of change in human systems (Ronalds 2012; Britton 2005). However, decision-makers within NGOs who oversee projects have protested that imposed donor-centred accountability practices have become too dominant and undermine more beneficiary-centred accountability practices (Schmitz et al. 2012; Murtaza 2012; Porter & Kramer 2011). With this ongoing accountability tension as a backdrop, individual decision-makers within NGOs have turned to Design Thinking for new inspirations and tools that could support them in aligning with beneficiary needs and preferences (see for examples, Bazzano et al. 2017; Toyama 2017; Jackson 2015; Amatullo 2015; Fotso & Fogarty 2015; Catalani et al. 2014). Since this is a recent development, not much is known about the effects of using Design Thinking within NGOs. This paper seeks to fill this gap by examining the effects of Design Thinking may have on accountability within two different NGO contexts. The two cases
highlighted in this paper are snapshots of longer-term design processes facilitated by professional design firms who were commissioned for the projects.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Accountability**

Tetlock (1985, p. 307) defined accountability as ‘a critical rule and norm enforcement mechanism: the social psychological link between individual decision-makers on the one hand and the social systems to which they belong on the other.’ This definition is somewhat limited in scope because it does not encompass the possibility of self-accountability (Dhiman, 2017). Building on the definition of Frink and Klimoski (1998, p. 9), we see accountability as “perceived need to justify or defend a decision or action to some audience(s) which has potential reward and sanctions power”, which may also include the perceived need to justify or defend a decision of action to ‘the self’.

A useful way to break down accountability as a concept is to distinguish between its most common uses; firstly, as a ‘felt’ virtue and secondly, as an ‘imposed’ mechanism. As a virtue, accountability is perceived as a characteristic where a decision-maker demonstrates a willingness to accept responsibility, while as a mechanism, accountability is perceived as a process in which a decision-maker is obligated to explain their actions to another party who has the right to pass judgment on the actions as well as to subject the person to potential consequences for their actions (Bovens 2014; Tetlock et al. 1989).

In aid project settings, imposed accountability regimes are predominantly made up of formal oversight and control mechanisms placed on NGOs and their individual decision-makers (O’Dwyer & Boomsma 2015, Edwards & Hulme 1995; Najam 1996; Roberts 2001; Sinclair 1995). In this type of regime, people need to justify their actions through ‘the giving and demanding of reasons for conduct’ (Sinclair 1995, p. 221). This translates into compliance-based accountability that takes the form of short-term accounting for resource use, activities and outputs (O’Dwyer & Boomsma 2015). In contrast, ‘felt’ accountability regimes would privilege the internal motivation of decision-makers instead of the external pressures placed on them by funders and/or their own NGO structures (O’Dwyer & Boomsma 2015). Within this type of regime, individuals possess an intrinsic responsibility to ‘feel’ accountable or answerable to themselves in the form of their own values, ethics and morals, which they seek to align with those of other key stakeholders (Lewis & Madon 2004; Sinclair 1995). In practice, ‘felt’ and imposed accountability regimes co-exist to varying degrees (O’Dwyer & Boomsma 2015). Given the very different characteristics of both regimes, decision-makers will need to manage their co-existence by attempting to balance externally imposed accountability demands with internally driven ‘felt’ accountabilities (Dempsey 2007; Fry 1995; O’Dwyer & Boomsma 2015).

Accountability literature proposes several elements that influence the process of an individual decision-maker’s accountability. Frink & Klimoski (1998) have identified different elements, which include social context in which agent is situated; observation and evaluation by a principal; standards and expectations against which agent’s behaviour is judged; agent’s belief that they will have to answer, justify or defend the decisions; decision related outcomes highly valued by agent (specified or unspecified, objective or subjective); and actual decision or action. Typically, decision-makers can find themselves in situations with conflicting accountabilities due to a number of contradictory elements coming from different directions and stakeholders (i.e. being pulled in different directions based on NGO, donor, beneficiary, and self).

It has been argued that decision-makers of aid projects tend to prioritise donor-centred accountability, at the expense of beneficiary-centred accountability, as they depend on donors for professional survival (Edwards & Hulme 2002). Some of the institutional pressures most commonly referred to in the literature include logical planning approaches (Golini, Landoni & Kalchschmidt 2018; Bakewell & Garbutt 2005), linear project processes (Edmonds & Cook 2014), and quantitative-heavy data dependencies (O’Dwyer & Boomsma 2015). Many decision-makers of aid projects have adopted these traditional management practices which have brought with them stringent audit cultures fixated on procedural numbers and obligatory reporting (Angus 2008). However, these practices of accountability are susceptible to criticism for expecting decision-makers to sacrifice their personal empathy and sense of solidarity. This kind of personal empathy often comes from shared experiences and qualitative activities such as storytelling and collaborative future-making (Gair 2012).
Design Thinking

Design thinking’s role in aid was recently highlighted by Escobar (2018) as supporting the ‘collective determination towards transitions’ that is based on a pluralism of perspectives. What Escobar refers to as the ‘pluriverse’ in his book is specifically referring to pluralism of perspectives without pre-existing universals (Blaser, de la Cadena, and Escobar 2009). In this book, he asks, could a new breed of designers be thought of as ‘transitions activists’? (Escobar, 2018: 7). There is extensive discussion in the broader management literature where decision-makers from other sectors have turned to Design Thinking for new inspirations (Liedtka 2000, 2004).

Within the broader management literature, Design Thinking has been described as the best counter to constrictive management approaches – and as the best way to be creative and innovative (Liedtka 2000; Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla et al. 2013; Boland & Collopy 2004; Dunne & Martin 2006). The term ‘Design Thinking’ has varied meanings depending on its context. According to Dunne and Martin (2006) and Liedtka (2015), Design Thinking is a human-centred and open-minded approach to problem-solving, based on the way designers think and work. In contrast to conventional management approaches, Design Thinking therefore offers decision-makers a ‘human-centred’ knowledge system rooted in empathy with users, a pluralism of perspectives, experimentation and co-design of solutions (Liedtka 2018; Liedtka et al. 2013).

A large number of possible design methods and tools can be used to facilitate a Design Thinking process in a project setting. Alves and Nunes (2013) created a taxonomy based on a study of ten sources and review of 164 methods and tools used by designers. The 10 most commonly used and referenced Design Thinking methods and tools according to Alves and Nunes (2013) are: Service Blueprint, Journey Map, Focus Group, Interview, Observations, User Personas, Prototyping, Scenarios, Shadowing, and Storyboarding.

A Framework on accountability in aid projects

When the notion of accountability is understood more broadly than an institutionally imposed mechanism, but also as an individually felt virtue that is driven by personal ethics, then this may present an opportunity to re-calibrate the accountability debate taking place in the aid sector to a more balanced one that includes both interpretations. Very few accounts explore the notion of ‘felt’ accountability at the individual level which may be considered to hold a great deal of promise for decision-makers in allowing them to continue their ‘vital’ work (McGann & Johnstone 2005). Although the criticality of accountability in aid projects has long been acknowledged, and there are some decision-makers turning to Design Thinking to support more beneficiary-centred accountability, there remains limited academic attention to examining the role of Design Thinking tools in this context.

The theoretical concepts from the accountability body of knowledge have been consolidated into Figure 1.
Based on this consolidation, the primary question guiding our research is:

**Can Design Thinking tools influence ‘felt’ accountability of decision-makers in aid projects? If so, which ones and how?**

This paper demonstrates how design thinking tools support the ‘collective determination towards transitions’ by opening up decision makers within NGOs to a variety of new sense-making and accountability practices (Escobar 2015, 2018).

**Method**

The researchers sought to observe and construct explanations based on ‘real world’ phenomena (Guba & Lincoln 1994). The notion of constructing explanations based on ‘real world’ phenomena pointed the research design to inductive processes, which produce theory rather than a clear conclusion or hypothesis (Cooper & Emory 1995; McMurray et al. 2004). The theory produced is based on an ‘inferential jump beyond the evidence presented’ (Cooper & Emory 1995, p. 27) and is described by McMurray et al. (2004, p. 70) as ‘the only sensible manner of proceeding’ when too little is understood about the phenomenon being researched. Taking an inductive approach has meant this study is unable to provide a truly valid theory because there still stands the potential for many other alternative explanations (Abercrombie et al. 2000; Cooper & Emory 1995).

The combined action research and supplementary qualitative methods involved a cycle of ‘plan-act-collect-reflect’ (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988) in two ‘real world’ projects. The plan stage involved research design and case/participant selection. The act stage involved the researcher actively engaged in the project by facilitating the Design Thinking process. The first author engaged in natural observation as a participant in the projects, especially in relation to non-verbal behaviour in day-to-day activities while part of the teams (McMurray et al. 2004; Ticehurst & Veal 2000; Baily 1978). The observe stage involved the researcher conducting semi-structured interviews with decision-makers. Using semi-structured interviews enabled the
capture of stories, feelings, values and relational aspects (Engel & Schutt 2009). The reflect stage involved grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1994), which provided the systematic guidelines for gathering and analysing data using inductive strategies (Bryant & Charmaz 2007). It was used to guide the manual analysis of category themes, supplemented by software-based analysis using NVivo 10. The theoretical analysis of the data relied on key issues emerging rather than forcing concepts into any pre-conceived categories. Lastly, the notion of the ‘case’ as a bounded system (Smith & Johnson, 1973) for this study refers to two particular project cases bounded by geography, timeframe, organisation and sectoral focus. For this study, the notion of a case study provides a bounded focus and real-world inspiration toward new ideas for better understanding the phenomena being studied (Stake 1978, 1994).

We studied two case studies.

The first case study, indicated as Rethinking Humanitarian Action, was focused on rethinking humanitarian action led by a research NGO in the United Kingdom (UK). The Design Thinking process involved over 100 participants, who ranged from aid recipients to funders, to implementers, and policy-makers across 16 locations and 73 organisations worldwide. Although a meaningful effort was made to speak to as many different perspectives as possible, there was a particular emphasis on the protracted humanitarian crisis caused by the Syria conflict, which involved primary research in the refugee host country of Lebanon. This project applied six out of ten of the most commonly used Design Thinking methods and tools, as surveyed by Alves and Nunes (2013). These were 75 x Interviews, 1 week of Observations, 14 x Personas, 12 x Journey Maps, and several co-design workshops with Prototyping and Scenarios (ie. Role Plays).

The second case study, indicated as Care Community Hub, was focused on researching, designing, building and pilot-testing a mobile phone application to support community health nurses in delivering care in Ghana. The Design Thinking process involved approximately 110 people comprised of 60 community health nurses, 12 nurse supervisors, 18 pregnant women and nursing mothers, as well as more than 20 stakeholders from the partner organisations in Ghana. This project applied eight out of ten of the most commonly used Design Thinking methods and tools, as surveyed by Alves and Nunes (2013). These were: 10 x Focus Groups, 12 x Interviews, 2 weeks of Observations, 3 x Personas, 4 x Journey Maps, and several co-design workshops of Prototyping, Scenarios (ie. Role Plays), and Blueprinting.

The two cases highlighted in this paper are snapshots of longer-term design processes facilitated by professional design firms who were commissioned for the projects. In both cases, Design Thinking was not aimed at producing new academic knowledge, but rather at framing challenges and developing solutions in a human-centred way, through the words and imaginations of people experiencing them.

Findings

Case Study 1: Rethinking Humanitarian Action

Which tools were identified as most influential?

In this project, Personas and Journey Maps were repeatedly cited by interviewees as being most influential for their individual processes of ‘felt’ accountability over any of the other Design Thinking tools or methods. As will be demonstrated through quotations from the interviews below, both of these tools were mentioned by the interviewees as helping them ‘walk in the user’s shoes’ and identifying more meaningful user experiences (Holmlid & Evenson 2008).

There were 14 Personas created to represent the needs and preferences of six groups of primary and secondary users of the humanitarian system. The Personas were based on patterns and composites of the 75 interviews. The personas were differentiated in way that demonstrated a user’s relative capacity to influence change as well as their relative degree of ‘affectedness’ as it relates to crisis. Other characteristics used to differentiate between the personas included a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic qualities. There were six persona categories 1) Persons affected by crisis; 2) NGO Responders; 3) United Nations; 4) Funders; 5) Hosts; and 6) Knowledge Generators. Each persona was elaborated on (see figure 2 below):
In addition to the personas, there were 12 Journey Maps created to represent the stories and experiences of various users in the humanitarian system. The stories were shortened and consolidated but were maintained in the raw ‘first-person’ verbatim form. In one example (Figure 3), the ‘reluctant host’ being the municipality mayor of a village in northern Lebanon shared his experience.
Figure 3: One example of journey / experience maps

What was the influence on ‘felt’ accountability?

The interviewees shared that for them personally, the Journey Maps (also referred to as experience maps) and Personas were the most influential of the design tools. Interviewees described the influence of the tools in both functional and emotional terms:

[The personas] deepened our empathy to develop a more user-friendly human system – Decision-maker C

Throughout the project, nothing that anyone else said struck me or touched me as much as what was in those experience maps – Decision-maker D

Another interviewee shared that the Journey Maps showed her how human experiences of the same phenomena could be diametrically opposed. This deliberate opportunity to dive deep into many different and conflicting perspectives had significant implications for someone in a decision-making position. She stated that she thinks of humanitarian aid experience as having a certain dynamic where there are ‘givers’ and ‘receivers’. The Journey Maps helped surface those relational differences, making them more explicit when decisions were being made.

Because I am part of the givers, and although I could see the benefits and drawbacks of the system from my giver position, the [design] tools demonstrated to me that the receivers did not see those benefits and drawbacks in the same way. – Decision-maker A

One decision-maker touched on the value of grounding across a ‘spectrum of users’ as it allowed him to better focus on the ‘real issues’ and avoid being side tracked by the usual requirements coming from donors and elsewhere. This interviewee shared how he noticed people regularly referred to the Personas to consider whether to design a certain feature or idea. Another interviewee shared why he believed the Persona tools were one of the main strengths of this project:

The main strength was the immersion in the user experience, and the continued reference back to it; and to thinking across a spectrum of users – like in the personas – rather than one or two stereotypical ones. – Decision-maker C

When looking to make more human-centred decisions, the Personas helped reorient and ground conversations in the actual lives of people who would be affected by those decisions. This interviewee shared they were now more open to making decisions that were not driven by their own assumptions having gone through the Personas. The same interviewee shared how the design tools influenced the way he asks questions and the way he interacts with people on the receiving end of his work.

There was a granularity that tells the story, and you are able to see things that normally you wouldn’t. At the level of director, you don’t read things properly, you read things that summarise up, they are not as grounded, but these experience maps were compelling as they surfaced real issues – Decision-maker B

After my experience with the design tools, it has influenced the way I approach my work. I ask a lot more questions. I ask very different questions. I ask much more granular questions rather than generic ones like ‘how is this service?’ – and I put more people and resources on seeking these more granular answers. – Decision-maker D

The design tools helped change the nature of inquiry processes at an individual decision-maker level, as well as change the nature of conversations taking place on an interactional level. When asked about whether the Journey Maps influenced their sense of accountability, one responded with ‘I just felt it’ and went on to elaborate with the following reflection:

In a humanitarian response, whether you are in London or on the ground, there is a sense that people affected are ‘other’ – they are different to you, they have a different culture, religion, situation, like, they are in crisis and you are not. There are a host of reasons why you distinguish yourself from them. But what those experience maps did was put me at the centre of their crisis. In that moment, I remember feeling like I was transported to their world. And it made me ask myself – What would I do?
And the truth is, instead of turning to the usual technical tools, I just wanted to do whatever I would do for my parents, my brother, my friend – Decision-maker A

The Journey Maps influenced her ‘felt’ accountability in a way that her decision making could be based on what she would want for herself and her family if she were in that situation. The tools clearly influenced her ‘felt’ accountability through facilitating a different position from which to base her decisions:

[The design tools] drove me to consider my role as being more deeply embedded in the human experiences of others – I was no longer separate from them, there was a direct connection – Decision-maker A

She no longer subscribed to her own othering attempts to distinguish herself from ‘them’, rather she was able to connect with others’ experiences in a more human to human way.

I felt frustrated for them, I could see what was happening to them and it just pissed me off... It touched me, I had empathy for people who are in many ways unlike me, and in many ways just like me – it definitely increased my individual felt accountability towards them. – Decision-maker A

This emotional connection provided a strong drive and motivation for seeking a change and feeling more accountability to a particular group experiencing a particular problem. From the viewpoint of another decision-maker, there were still some strong emotional reactions prompted by the Journey Maps for other reasons:

When I read them, they made me very angry and very sad. The corruption ones, the ones from the Syrian refugees in Turkey and Palestine talking about how corrupt the UN system was, that made me angry in that self-righteous way. I wanted to drop everything else and go out and correct that corruption. It stoked the flame of action within me. – Decision-maker B

Though, when asked whether these feelings influenced his sense of individual ‘felt’ accountability, there was some tension in the response:

If you want to save the world, but the feedback from the experience maps told you what you’re doing isn’t right, then it triggers more than a ‘felt’ accountability. For me, it triggered a self-interest to want to do a good job for myself, it is kind of pleasure seeking. – Decision-maker B

The influence the design tools had seemed ‘more than a felt accountability’ and this interviewee questioned whether it had more to do with a desire to do good and look good rather than it being accountability related:

There’s a different feeling that comes out with Design Thinking that makes me act better, make better decisions, change what needs to change in a program... I don’t know if this is about accountability as much as it is about an individual’s moral investment in doing a good job. Accountability, to me, has always been something external to me: It is the ability of someone else to hold me responsible for what I have done. Whereas Design Thinking put me in touch with the fact that I may not be doing a good job, so for me that is about self-esteem and self-interest. – Decision-maker B

However, based on the literature on the six different elements which can influence someone’s ‘felt’ accountability discussed earlier, those elements such as a self-interest to do a good job can still be considered accountability related, theoretically speaking.

Because of the experience with the design tools, not only was a sense of ‘felt’ accountability influenced, but also broader influences on how to approach problems differently in their roles. Solutions to systemic problems in the aid sector should not always be technical, some need to be more behavioural. This contrast between the technical and the behavioural also resembles some parallels with the literature on accountability and the contrast between the mechanism (more akin to technical) and the virtue (more akin to behavioural).
Case Study 2: Care Community Hub

Which tools were identified as most influential?

The Design Thinking tools that were singled out and identified by decision-makers as enhancing their ‘felt’ accountability for this project were Personas and Journey Maps. Both of these tools were mentioned by the interviewees as helping them put the user front of mind (Floyd, Jones, & Twidale 2008).

In this project, three nurse personas were created through collaboratively debating the differentiating characteristics and patterns based on real nurse quotes and stories. Two dimensions were prioritised along two axes, where one axes represented if a nurse was purpose-driven (driven to provide care for the sick) or paycheck-driven, while the other axes represented a nurse’s ability to be resilient or become dispirited in the face of challenges (Andrawes, Moorthy & McMurray 2016).

Figure 4: Persona framework and example
Source: CCH Service Design Blueprint (2014), with permission.
A series of process mapping of the steps, the highs, and the lows of the most common workflows were conducted to capture the four journey maps. These included: (1) routine home visits; (2) community outreach or clinics; (3) supervisory visits; and (4) monthly data reporting. See example below:

**Figure 5: Journey/Experience Map for Routine Home Visits**
Source: CCH Service Design Blueprint (2014), with permission.

What was the influence on ‘felt’ accountability?

Interviewees who worked closely together in the field, shared how the Personas helped them place emphasis in their day-to-day work on Mary, Naana and Michael. Instead of adopting the organisation-wide notion of accountability tied to a goal of ‘reaching’ 30 million people, they perceived the Personas as influencing their sense of accountability in a very personal and individual way.

_Taking time out of what is considered to be my job in my job description, and walking in the shoes of the nurses, this changed my entire outlook on the project and whom I am going to work for everyday – Decision-maker IM2_

Their personal goals and targets in their jobs were no longer about reaching the greatest number of people possible to report back on, but rather invest wholly in making a real and marked impact on the lives of people whom they did reach. For another interviewee who was not in the field, also commented on how the personas provided a useful counter narrative to ‘humanise’ the statistics that usually guide their decisions:

_These actual human stories helped humanise our user and kept me thinking about that individual user in mind – or multiple personas if you will – throughout the project, it influenced me in a different way to the usual thinking in statistics – Decision-maker IM5_

Reflections from decision-makers in this project suggests the potential for real and marked impact on the lives of users can be hindered when the interviewees felt like they were being forced to be made accountable based on the number of people ‘reached’ than more meaningful (relational or behavioural) changes that can be more difficult to account for.
The personification of beneficiaries otherwise referred to in numerical terms influenced the interviewee’s sense of who they felt they worked for – from the 30 million number senior management had set or the real-life impact on Mary, Naana or Michael. Decisions became about the latter rather than the former when impact was defined in ways they could relate to and connect with on a human level.

I would wake up in the morning with the nurses’ on my mind. My sense of accountability to them felt different to my sense of accountability on other projects. – Decision-maker IM1

These decisions would take place within the confines of boardrooms and NGO offices, but by putting the personas up on the walls and keeping the nurses’ voices present, it made them feel like they were able to stay accountable to their beneficiaries.

The personas gave us a whole new language to speak about the reasons why behind every decision... because this person is like that, we need to do it like this... This made me feel like I was doing my bit for the nurses. – Decision-maker IM1

One interviewee who was not part of the design research activities early on in the process reflected on the longer-term influence of this:

I wasn’t able to go to the field with the others. But those personas you all created helped bring – and keep – the nurses voices in our boardroom decisions and meetings for months and months after the fact – Decision-maker IM5

For another interviewee who was heavily involved in the early stage design research reflected on how this experience was different for them:

But being able to slip into the nurses’ shoes or the supervisors’ shoes was easier for us to do naturally in the process, but not so much for the newer staff, they had to rely more on the personas and journeys – Decision-maker IM2

For those who were part of the development of the tools, they felt a natural understanding and connection to the users. This made decision-making more naturally human-centred even without referring back to the Personas or Journey Maps as perhaps what they had learned had become intrinsic.

The Personas and Journey Maps were also used to facilitate the generation of ideas and this was noted by one interviewee as enhancing his ‘felt’ accountability towards the nurses:

The ideas were generated directly with a sample of those end-users in the room with us physically, and when they weren’t in the room, the ideas were generated or built upon with a persona lens, so that at least, at a subtle level, the end users were still ‘in the room with us’ and I felt more accountable to them that way because we were still honouring their preferences in their absence – Decision-maker IM6

Quantitative formulations of accountability mechanisms within NGOs, such as defining targets based on number of beneficiaries reached, can influence how the interviewees described their individual sense of accountability. Regardless, all interviewees shared how the Personas enhanced and supported their personal ‘felt’ accountability, whether through informing more user-centred decisions, or having a personified user to remind of the why their work is important, rather than objectified statistics.

Discussion

The analysis points to the use of Personas and Journey Maps as having four influencing factors on decision-makers’ ‘felt’ accountability:

1. Builds a shared picture
2. Humanises complex information
3. Grounds discussions in reality
4. Deepens empathy and connection
**Influencing Factor 1: Builds a shared picture**

Instead of decision-makers having to make sense of contradictory pictures of reality and competing narratives (Liedtka 2004), the design tools were perceived by interviewees to help build a shared picture that supported alignment among decision-makers. For example, when one decision-maker shared that reading all the Journey Maps at the same time solidified how different people experienced the same thing differently depending on where they stand in the system. The Journey Maps helped the decision-maker seem to be less likely driven by individual cognitive bias (Liedtka 2015). In this case study, establishing a shared picture has suggested that it may be more likely for decision-makers to feel an enhanced accountability towards the beneficiaries, without neglecting the other key stakeholders.

**Influencing Factor 2: Humanises complex information**

Instead of the usual over-reliance on statistical and survey data that has been criticised for disconnecting decision-makers from realities on the ground (Angus 2008), the design tools were perceived by interviewees to humanise otherwise complex information for decision making. The visual depictions used in the project were not intended to be accurate representations of absolute realities, they however provided decision-makers with new ways of understanding abstract issues that were lived experiences for the beneficiaries (Andrawes et al. 2016). For example, the journey map tool helped decision-makers get to the ‘granularity’ of stories without getting lost in the complexity of the problem, with decision-makers saying it helped them ‘see things’ they normally would not see themselves. Both tools embodied knowledge that could not easily be articulated using tables, words and numbers (Andrawes & McMurray 2014).

**Influencing Factor 3: Grounds discussions in reality**

Instead of decision-makers basing things on boardroom conversations and rigidly linear project plans (Edmonds & Cook 2014), the design tools helped ground discussions in actual situated stories and realities. This was in contrast to the status quo of basing decisions on ‘expert’ input, or averages and numerical samples from quantitative data sets. Prioritising the design based on the words and ideas of beneficiaries themselves, the Personas and Journey Maps helped decision-makers avoid the trap of making decisions based on what they thought beneficiaries want. Rather they were freed to base their decisions on what beneficiaries actually value.

**Influencing Factor 4: Deepens empathy and connection**

Through both tools, decision-makers shared a sense of a strong, grounded empathy for all their decisions. For example, one decision-maker used words like ‘pissed off’ and ‘sad’ and ‘angry’ to describe what they felt as they read through the Journey Maps. Although the tools were pervasive in the lives of decision-makers, they also provided a safe space, and a guided framework that triggers action for a potential change from the existing situation into a more preferred one (Simon 1967). The Journey Maps allowed decision-makers to walk in others’ shoes, where they were able to better think about the decisions they have to make from those perspectives. Both the Personas and Journey Maps helped decision-makers develop a very personal and deep empathy that is directly traceable to the barriers and opportunities as articulated by the beneficiaries in their own words. From this knowledge, they shared how they were more likely to plan, design and make things with those other perspectives in mind.

Below, Figure 6 is a depiction of how these four influencing factors and the use of the Design Thinking tools fit in to the earlier framework derived from the accountability and development aid bodies of literature:
The conceptual model above demonstrates on the bottom right side that when the decision-related outcomes are highly valued, or the social context where decision-makers are situated is in close proximity to the beneficiaries, there seems to be an impact on accountability (Frink & Klimoski 1998; Tetlock 1999). When Design Thinking tools are used the impact is an internally felt, virtue version of accountability that is based on shared understandings, humanised information, contextually grounded discussions and deep human to human connection. Whereas on the bottom left side, when decision-makers believe they will have to justify their decisions (especially numerically) or have certain standards/expectations by which they will be judged or evaluated by another party. These seem to be enabling conditions for institutional pressures based on logical frameworks, linear processes and quantitative heavy dependencies to lead to an externally imposed, mechanistic version of accountability that reports on resource use, short term impacts and is disconnected from reality. It was observed that when decision-makers greatly valued the decision-related outcomes themselves – the use of the Personas and Journey Maps seemed to influence the decision-makers individually ‘felt’ accountability through the four contributing factors to their systematic processing. The four factors in this conceptual model are suggestive as to how Design Thinking tools could potentially contribute to enhanced ‘felt’ accountability in aid projects.

**Conclusion**

Although the debate around accountability in the aid literature has been growing in prominence, NGOs have maintained a track record of institutionalising mechanistic accountability regimes that prioritise donor requirements over beneficiary needs. Consolidating concepts from various bodies of literature and real-world practitioner experience, these action research case studies explored whether Design Thinking tools can influence the ‘felt’ accountability of decision-makers in an aid project.

This study’s findings are timely and relevant because of the growing body of critique mounting against decision-makers in NGOs. The currently dominant model is weighted heavily towards imposed, mechanistic accountability that is not working adequately. New models of accountability need to be tried and experimented with to calibrate towards a more balanced practice of accountability. This study adds to the

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Figure 6: Conceptual Framework combining literature and findings

Source: Authors consolidating literature and findings
specific arguments for an adaptive accountability in aid projects by Ebrahim (2009) and O’Dwyer and Boomsma (2015). Utilising Design Thinking tools and methods have supported decision-makers – according to their own accounts – in being able to practice a more enhanced ‘felt’ accountability towards beneficiaries in their day-to-day work. In this case, the Design Thinking tools that were identified as most influential on decision-makers’ ‘felt’ accountability were Personas and Journey Maps. Findings from the case study show that when decision-makers ‘greatly valued the decision-related outcomes themselves’ (Frink & Klimoski 1998) the use of Personas and Journey Maps seemed to influence the ‘systematic processing’ (Tetlock 1985) of their ‘felt’ accountability through the four influencing factors of building a shared picture, humanising complex information, grounding discussions in reality, and deepening empathy and connection – where more personal and subjective materials supported decision-makers to feel the needs of the beneficiaries as their own.

Escobar’s (2018) most recent analysis of design’s role in development suggests that aid decision-makers ought to engage in a ‘collective determination towards transitions’ that is based on a pluralism of perspectives. Earlier in this paper, we asked, could a new breed of designers be thought of as ‘transitions activists’? (Escobar, 2018: 7). This paper demonstrates how designers can use some of their tools to support aid decision-makers in their ‘collective determination towards transitions’ by opening up to a variety of new sense-making and world-making practices (2015, 2018).

The originality of this study is clear given there has been no prior attempt to understand whether Design Thinking could influence ‘felt’ accountability and supplement ‘imposed’ accountability mechanisms in aid projects. This study contributes to the aid accountability debate as it suggests that the inclusion of Design Thinking tools can influence, and even enhance the ‘felt’ accountability of decision-makers towards beneficiaries. In doing so, it contributes from a unique and interdisciplinary perspective, to the accountability debate in the aid sector. The findings also contribute to the more general, broader body of work on decision-maker accountability by the likes of Tetlock (1985), Lerner and Tetlock (1999) and Frink and Klimoski (1998), and Vance et al. (2013, 2015). For accountability researchers as well as decision-makers in practice, they could benefit from taking this study as a starting point for the use of Design Thinking in enabling more ‘felt’ accountability that balances out the heavy weighting towards imposed accountability.

References


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