From the Ground Up: Taking A Needs Based Approach to Humanitarian Transparency

Research Plan

Background & Rationale

The Grand Bargain was launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016 with the ambitious goal of achieving $1 billion in savings to address the gap in humanitarian financing. This was to be achieved through a series of commitments in ten key areas (work streams) as to how humanitarian actors deliver aid. The commitments included increased transparency in humanitarian spending, a reduction in earmarking and increased support to local and national responders.

The co-convenors of the transparency work stream, the Dutch Government and the World Bank, decided to focus on implementing the first paragraph of the Grand Bargain transparency commitment (commitment 1.1) by May 2018. This called for all signatories to publish timely and high-quality data on humanitarian funding to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) Standard. It also states that the data must be of appropriate quality to ensure data analysis, including the ability to identify the distinctiveness of activities, organisations, environments and circumstances.

Three years on from the World Humanitarian Summit, gains have been made in the transparency work stream's agenda. According to self-reporting, 76% of Grand Bargain signatories or their affiliates are now publishing open data using the IATI Standard.[1] In their latest progress report, Development Initiatives – who are leading on implementing the transparency work stream's work on behalf of the Dutch Government – recommended that ensuring the relevance of, and access to, data should be the next step for the transparency work stream.[2] The full potential of more transparent humanitarian information can only be unlocked if the data goes beyond publication and is actively used. The Grand Bargain has to show how it can benefit actors in the field, and eventually crisis affected people themselves, in order to be truly effective. This, however, cannot be fully realised unless the range of stakeholders is broadened, specifically to include on-the-ground actors.[3]

Funded by the Dutch Government, Publish What You Fund and Ground Truth Solutions will conduct research into the information needs of humanitarian actors on-the-ground as part of Phase II of the work stream's agenda.[4] The overall objective is to increase our understanding of the information needs of these humanitarian actors in protracted emergencies and the main challenges they experience in accessing and using this information,[5] as well as engaging with existing inter-organisation information sharing processes. It will include national and local aid actors, international

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[1] Metcalfe-Hough, Victoria and Poole, Lydia (2018), Grand Bargain annual independent report 2018, Overseas Development Institute

[2] Development Initiatives, (2018), Supporting Grand Bargain signatories in meeting commitments to greater transparency

[3] Ibid.

[4] Publish What You Fund has ultimate responsibility for the project and its outcomes. It will lead on the development of the methodology, desk-research, implementation of the in-country research and production of final analyses and reports. Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) will be primarily responsible for ensuring the delivery of the online survey, conducting comprehensive stakeholder mapping and lead on the planning for the in-country research trips. The in-country research will be conducted jointly by both organisations.

[5] The study decided to focus on protracted emergencies because they account for approximately 85% of total humanitarian aid and the number of protracted crises is growing year-on-year. They also more closely overlap with the development space, which would therefore enable these situations to gain the maximum benefit from the development community's established experience and learning in the field of aid and development transparency.

humanitarian actors, host country governments and other key stakeholders on-the-ground as relevant.

The research will also identify, and assess the usefulness of, existing open data standards, platforms and tools currently available to the range of humanitarian actors on-the-ground. Based on this needs assessment, we will provide recommendations for improving both what information is made available to the range of humanitarian actors on-the-ground, as well as how they can best access it.

Data collection will combine desk-based research with quantitative methods – notably standardised questionnaires to assess the information needs of humanitarian national aid actors – and qualitative methods, which will include more in-depth key informant interviews with key actors in two protracted humanitarian settings to gain as in-depth a perspective as possible.

The research and its recommendations will provide crucial information to Grand Bargain signatories as they seek to improve the usefulness and usability of the data they publish. Notably, it will inform how the data they publish and the platforms and tools that they use – and those developed in the future – can better reflect and respond to the needs of local and national humanitarian actors. As such, this will help the transparency work stream to build on the progress made to date at the global-level, enabling the necessary broadening of humanitarian transparency efforts to encompass local and national data needs in the coming years.

Approach

The study will use a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. This sequential design involves four phases: (1) a desk review (2) an initial quantitative instrument followed by (3) qualitative in-country key informant interviews, which will build directly on the results from the quantitative instrument, and (4) the production of a final synthesis report.

Research Objectives

- To increase understanding of the information needs and challenges of humanitarian actors on-the-ground, in particular local and national responders.

- To identify existing open data standards, platforms and tools, and assess their accessibility and usefulness in relation to meeting the needs and addressing the challenges identified.

- To identify possible improvements to open data standards, platforms and tools to better provide the information needed and in a way that makes it accessible to these actors.

Research Questions

1. What are the information needs of humanitarian actors on-the-ground?

    a. What are the main activities of on-the-ground humanitarian actors, particularly national and local responders?
    b. What information do they need to carry out their activities? How is it used and what for?
    c. Do they have access to the information they need? If yes, through what mechanisms and who can access it? If no, what information is missing or can't be accessed?
    d. What significant challenges do on-the-actors face? Can improved transparency help address these challenges? If so, what information can address these and how?

2. How, and to what extent, are the identified needs being met by existing open data standards, platforms and tools?

    a. What open data standards, platforms and tools are available to on-the-ground actors? What information is available on them?
    b. Are these actors aware of existing open data standards, platforms and tools? If so, which, and do they use them? If so, how and for what purpose? If not, why not? How do different sources differ in their usefulness?
    c. In each case, is the information available and accessible in order to meet all or any of the identified information needs? If so, which? Are there any gaps in the data? If so, what?

3. Can changes to open data standards, platforms and tools help meet the needs of humanitarian actors on-the-ground? If so, what changes would be required?

    a. Can any identified gaps be filled? If so, with what, how and by which actors?
    b. Would filling these gaps require any changes to open data standards? If so, which standards, what needs to change and how?
    c. Can existing platforms and tools be modified to make information more accessible to on-the-ground actors, including national and local responders? If so, in what way?

Research / policy questions	Hypothesis	Themes to explore	Sources of evidence	Policy implications
	The information currently available to on-the ground actors is insufficient to meet their needs. Open data standards, platforms and tools will need to adapt to provide the information needed and to be made more accessible.	What information do humanitarian actors on-the-ground, including national and local responders, need? Is this information available and accessible? If not, can it be made available and accessible, including through open data standards, platforms and tools?	Desk review; Published data; Global interviews; Online survey; Interviews with local agencies, community organisations, government and other aid actors at the field level.	By July 2020, Grand Bargain signatories and the humanitarian community have a greater understanding of the data use needs of in-country actors in protracted emergencies, and the current usefulness of existing open data standards, platforms and tools to meet those.
Research question 1: What are the information needs of humanitarian actors on-the-ground, including national and local responders?				
	Humanitarian actors on-the-ground, particularly national and local actors, would benefit from improved information. For example, this could include information on the needs of affected populations, what others are doing, where, how and to what effect.	What are the main activities of on-the-ground humanitarian actors, particularly national and local responders? What information do they need to carry out their activities? How is it used and for what for? Do they have access to the information they need? If yes, through what mechanisms and who can access it? If no, what information is missing or can't be accessed? What significant challenges do on-the-actors face? Can improved transparency help address these challenges? If so, what information can address these and how?	Desk review; Online survey; Interviews with local agencies, community organisations, government and other aid actors at the field level.	Better understanding of what the information needs and challenges of humanitarian actors on-the-ground, in particular local and national responders.

Research question 2: How, and to what extent, are the identified needs being met by existing open data standards, platforms and tools?				
	Information is shared during the response but information currently available on open data standards do not fully meet the information needs of on-the- ground actors, including national and local responders . Existing platforms and tools available at the country-level are utilised but there are prevalent data gaps.	What open data standards, platforms and tools are available to on-the-ground actors? What information is available on them? Are these actors aware of existing open data standards, platforms and tools? If so, which, how and do they use them and for what purpose? If not, why not? In each case, is the information available and accessible in order to meet all or any of the needs and if so which? Are there any gaps in the data? If so, what?	Analysis of published data; Global interviews; Online survey; Interviews with local agencies, community organisations, government and other aid actors at the field level.	To determine the extent to which existing open data standards, platform and tools are currently meeting the needs of on-the-ground actors.
Research question 3: What changes to open data standards, platforms and tools would be required to help humanitarian actors on-the-ground overcome pressing challenges?				
	Open data standards, platforms and tools will need to be modified to accommodate the information needed by on-the-ground actors and to provide it in a way that is more accessible to them.	Can any identified gaps be filled, and if so, with what, how and by which actors? Would filling these gaps require any changes to open data standards? If so, which standards and how? Can existing platforms and tools be modified to make information more accessible to on-the-ground actors, including national and local responders? If so, in what way?	Analysis of existing platforms and standards; Global interviews with open data community, data experts and tool providers; Interviews with local agencies, community organisations, government and other aid actors at the field level.	To identify possible improvements to open data standards, platforms and tools to meet the information needs of on-the-ground actors, and do so in a way that makes it accessible.

Country Selection

The study intends to answer the research questions, in large part, by using insights from two protracted crises. The two case studies (and two back up) will represent two contrasting contexts, although neither should be considered representative of a particular 'type' of response. While the study intends to learn as much as possible from this approach, it is likely that some of the findings will be particular to the respective setting and will not be easily generalised.

Due to the lack of comparability between disasters, for the most part, case studies will be identified on the basis of desk-reviews and discussion. The early analysis is aimed primarily to help create a list short enough so desk analysis is feasible. This will include a data analysis which combines INFORM's risk assessment for humanitarian disasters and data on type of disaster;[6] needs; total funds; risk; and major donors. The outcome will be a short-list of potential case studies. The following phase will be based around a desk review of available literature to understand the specifics of the on-going humanitarian context in each case – with a focus on access to on-the-ground actors, including national and local responders, potential lessons learned, ensuring some variability between options (including type of response and geographic location) and a review of who else is conducting similar research in these countries and to what effect.

Methods

Project Preparation and Desk Review

After case study selection and other project preparation, the team will conduct expository research. This will include a familiarisation with the selected case study countries, the humanitarian contexts and develop a deeper understanding of relevant cultural and political situations. It will also include a literature review / remote interviews on other relevant research and insights, an analysis of what open data standards, platforms and tools exist (at both global and national / local levels), what is shared and how complete the data is. The phase will also include an in-depth stakeholder mapping of key global and national actors, which will inform both the desk-review and online survey.

Sampling

The study will use a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods. The research will initially conduct a comprehensive stakeholder mapping to identify individuals or organisations within our intended sample group: national and local humanitarian actors,[7] international humanitarian actors operating on-the-ground, relevant host country government officials and other key stakeholders as relevant. To mitigate potential bias caused by purposive sampling, the study will also include an element of snowball sampling.

The study will categorise respondents to the online survey and interview participants. This will seek to place a greater emphasis on engaging with national and local actors in order to best address our research questions. The study will also focus on those individuals directly involved in the operations / delivery of humanitarian assistance, across all humanitarian clusters themes. It will also attempt to minimise those with historic experience only, to address recall bias.

[6] A global, open-source risk assessment for humanitarian crises and disasters conducted by INFORM. Access at: www.inform-index.org

[7] We will disaggregate national NGOs into those who regularly work with INGOs and those who don't.

Online Survey

The objective of the online assessment would be to broadly quantify the types of information humanitarian actors need, what they have access to, what they regularly use and collect, as well as what the gaps are. The study will implement an online survey targeted at national and international non-governmental organisations, host government, coordination bodies, UN agencies and community-based organisations active in humanitarian assistance. The survey will reach a wider network of actors than possible with key informant interviews alone. The survey will contain a variety of close-ended, open-ended, Likert-Scale and rank-order questions, with space for some qualitative explanation at the end of the survey. The data will be cleaned, checked and analysed to produce a summary report of both quantitative and qualitative findings to inform the key informant interviews for the on-the-ground research.

Key Informant Interviews

To gain as in-depth a perspective as possible, the study will conduct in-country key informant interviews, as well as focus groups if the latter is deemed useful and / or necessary for the research. The interviews will be semi-structured but based on a common interview guide, which will be the same in both case study settings. Where possible, the study will include interviews with representatives from local and national non-government organisations (NGO), community organisations, the host government, international NGOs and donor mission offices. The study will weigh interview requests in favour of national and local actors, as their perspective is the focus of the study. To ensure that the research is as meaningful and culturally salient as possible, the study will utilise either in-house country experts or recruit in-country consultants – depending on the final case-studies selected.

To help ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings, the study will create a ‘feedback loop’ with research participants by conducting remote follow-up interviews and, potentially, webinars and discussion groups.

Final Analysis

The consolidated findings will be written up in a synthesis report and shall form the basis for recommendations for effective responses to meeting the on-the-ground user information needs identified. Analysis will consider the role of open data standards, platforms and tools, as well as what possible improvements – if any – are necessary to better meet the needs and address the challenges identified. Drafts of the report will be shared with an advisory group for comment.

	Online Surveys: Quantitative	Key Informant Interviews: Qualitative
Analytical Objectives	To quantify what types of information humanitarian actors regularly use and depend on. To quantify and compare the uptake and perceived usefulness of existing platforms, tools and open data standards. To identify characteristics of what information is missing (if any) and, if provided, where this would enhance the response effort. To identify what makes open data standards, platforms and tools are available, useful and accessible. To inform and influence key informant interview questions.	To increase understanding of the information needs and challenges of humanitarian actors on-the-ground, in particular local and national responders. To identify existing open data standards, platforms and tools, and assess their accessibility and usefulness in relation to meeting the needs and addressing the challenges identified. To identify possible improvements to open data standards, platforms and tools to better provide the information needed and in a way that makes it accessible to these actors.
Question Format	Close-ended, open-ended, Likert-Scale, rank-order.	Open-ended, semi-structured. Possibly some focus groups.
Data Collection Format	Numerical, textual to provide minor detail and an open ended comment space for fuller explanation at the end. Inflexible questions but will utilise branch logic. Survey design will be tested before implementation but otherwise remain fixed.	Textual (field notes). Some aspects of the question wording will be flexible, participant responses will affect how the questions are asked, as well as in what order. The process will be iterative and therefore research questions may be adjusted according to what is learned.

Outputs

Outputs on desk-review (April to June 2019)
Communications materials and in-person presentations at various humanitarian, Grand Bargain and transparency events to take forward findings from the desk review and global level interviews.

Summary of Survey findings (July 2019)
Presentations to take forward findings from the desk review and global level interviews.

Final synthesis report (December 2019 and onwards)
A final report bringing together our findings, conclusions and recommendations.
This will be followed by roundtables, presentations and other dissemination efforts to integrate the findings into the Grand Bargain process.

A wider dissemination and communication strategy for the research will be developed by Publish What You Fund’s and Ground Truth Solution’s communications team.

Limitations

Case studies: The study is limited to protracted crises in two case study countries. While the case study approach will afford the research a far greater understanding of the situation, it is unlikely that all findings can be generalised to the wider humanitarian sector. To mitigate this the study will seek two identify two different countries – for example taking into account the geographic location and the government's capacity to respond – to ensure the study identifies lessons which may be applicable to a number of settings.

Sensitive Settings: This research will be conducted in two protracted crises. Consequently, information might be prone to being sensitive and contested. This could limit the applicability of open data standards, as in certain situations relevant organisations, activities and financial transactions cannot be safely disclosed. While this is a clear limitation, it is also reflective of the humanitarian sector.

Sampling: Purposive and snowball sampling are susceptible to bias, since the organisations identified through stakeholder mapping may be limited by pre-existing networks, knowledge and those organisations with an online presence. To mitigate this the study will use either in-house expertise (where available) or local, knowledgeable, researchers who will help identify additional stakeholders.

Lack of previous literature: There is a lack of published research on this specific issue. This limits the study's desk-review stage. To mitigate this, the study will use the online survey results to inform the key informant questions ahead of the research trips, to ensure the questions are as useful as possible. The team will also conduct a series of background conversations and interviews to develop as comprehensive an understanding of the relevant issues as possible.

Timeline: The research timeline is relatively short (seven - eight months) and therefore the research for each country case study must be limited to remote conversations, an online survey and one research visit per case study country.

Activities													
Inception Phase	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
Methodology Development													
Country Selection													
Final methodology / project plan													
Desk Review													
Desk Review & Background Interviews													
Stakeholder Mapping - HQ & Power Analysis													
Produce Internal & External Briefings / Blog Series (Following Desk Reviews)													
Online Survey													
Design survey, incl. methodology, questions, testing and translation													
Develop contact database and outreach strategy for the survey													
Implement survey													
Analyse findings and produce summary of findings													
In-Country Field Trips													
Develop KII questionnaires & research guides													
Road-test KII and research guides													
Identify / confirm interview list (incl. in-country stakeholder mapping)													
In-country research													
Report Production													
Compile in-country analysis													
Validate findings / seek comment from research participants (where possible)													
Synthesis report drafting													
Report copy-editing and final design													
Launch reports													

Ethical Considerations

All research participants will be asked to provide informed consent. Consent will be required before progressing with the online survey, and oral consent will be sought ahead of the key informant interviews.

Any type of communication in relation to the research will be done with honesty. The study will seek to validate its findings with some participants of the research, to mitigate the risk of unintentional publication of incorrect or misleading information.

Anonymity of individuals and organisations participating in the research will be assumed by default, although researchers will request whether the study can publish names / organisations / quotes, as appropriate. Such details will only be shared in instances where the individual has consented.

No participants in the study will receive payment or otherwise materially benefit from engagement. Participating in the research will be entirely voluntary and individuals can withdraw at any time with no negative repercussions. The study does not intend to interview or otherwise engage children or direct beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance. If this changes, the relevant aspects of the methodology will be adapted.

All organisations or individuals involved in conducting the research will have to sign and uphold Publish What You Fund's or Ground Truth Solution's safe-guarding policy.

Definition of Terms

On-the-ground: Humanitarian activities that take place where the need is. This will include co-ordinating or otherwise operating in neighbouring countries, capital cities and regional hubs, but not those operating from the donor country itself.

Protracted crisis: A long-term and enduring emergency. These can be either continuous, for example long-term displacement due to a conflict, or recurring crises, for example, due to the climate.

Operational Information: Information or data that assists actors to make decisions or perform their functions. This information may not be public, structured or even formally written down.

Open data: Data that anyone can freely access, use, modify, and share the data for any purpose – subject, at most, to requirements that preserve provenance and openness.[8]

Open data standard: A set of rules by which data is described and recorded in order to ensure that publishers of this data follow the same standard. This is often done to facilitate easier exchange and use of data. Like the data they describe, open data standards are generally developed "in the open", meaning that anyone who is interested has a way to contribute.[9]

Platforms and tools: Software or websites that allow a user to access, manipulate or download data – Including from data standards. Examples include online portals, aid management systems or spreadsheet builders.

[8] The Open Definition, access at: https://opendefinition.org/
[9] Open Data Standards Directory, access at: https://datastandards.directory/glossary

Accessible data: Data that is provided in a way that relevant actors can meaningfully interact with it. It is plausible, therefore, that data may be publicly available but not in a way that could be considered 'accessible' to most people, for example if that data is provided only in raw xml.