

THE USE, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES ASSOCIATED WITH DIGITAL PLATFORMS

(aligned with commitment 1.3 of the
Grand Bargain Transparency Workstream)

June 2020

Publish What You Fund is the global campaign for aid and development transparency. Launched in 2008, we envisage a world where aid and development information is transparent, available and used for effective decision-making, public accountability and lasting change for all citizens. Publish What You Fund combines effective research, evidence-based advocacy and technical knowhow to improve the quality and usefulness of data. We continue to campaign, to amplify and to extend the benefits of aid transparency for better development and humanitarian outcomes.

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Ground Truth Solutions is an international non-governmental organisation that helps people affected by crisis influence the design and implementation of humanitarian aid. It developed out of Keystone Accountability, which helps social change organisations improve their performance by harnessing feedback from the people they serve. It also captures the perspective of field staff and local partner organisations as a counterpoint to the views of those caught up in humanitarian crises. Find out more at <https://groundtruthsolutions.org/>



Development Initiatives (DI) is an independent international development organisation that focuses on the role of data in driving poverty eradication and sustainable development. DI wants to help build a world without poverty that invests in human security and where everyone shares the benefits of opportunity and growth. They work at global, regional, national and subnational levels, and have strong in-country partners. Find out more at <https://devinit.org/>

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SECTION ONE

Research overview and approach

Background and project overview

The Grand Bargain¹ was launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016. Its goal to achieve \$1bn in savings to address the gap in humanitarian financing was to be realised through a series of commitments in nine key areas.² In the area of transparency, a 'Transparency Workstream' was co-convened by the Dutch government and the World Bank to support signatories in implementing their commitment to publish timely and high-quality data on humanitarian funding and how it is allocated and used to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) Standard (commitment 1.1; deadline May 2018).³ This data had to be of appropriate quality to support data analysis, including the ability to identify the distinctiveness of activities, organisations, environments and circumstances. Signatories also committed to make use of available data in their programming and decision-making, to improve the digital platform and to support partners to both publish and access data.

BOX 1: What is the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI)?

The standard is a set of rules and guidance for publishing standardised development and humanitarian data. Organisations can publish information on their finances (e.g. project budgets, funding allocations) and activities (e.g. locations of projects, project results). Data needs to be provided in the XML format. A range of organisations publish to the IATI standard, including donor governments, some UN agencies, and NGOs.

In the first phase of its activities (2017–2018) the Transparency Workstream focused on the commitment to publish data (commitment 1.1) in order to stimulate data availability, by enhancing the IATI standard to support the publication of humanitarian data and by providing support to signatories in publishing their humanitarian data. To unlock the full potential of transparent humanitarian data, it must not only be published but actively used to inform evidence-based interventions and efficiently allocate limited humanitarian resources to crisis settings. Therefore, the range of stakeholders had to be broadened to include humanitarian actors on the ground, to fully track financial flows and other information.

¹ For more information on the Grand Bargain, including the name of all signatories, please see:

<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

² The Grand Bargain was signed by 61 signatories (24 member states, 21 NGOs, 12 UN agencies, two Red Cross movements, and two inter-governmental organisations)

³ When the team talk about IATI, this includes the IATI standard, the actual data that comes out of IATI, and the platform(s) that use IATI data (e.g. d-portal). For more information on the IATI standard, please see: <https://iatistandard.org/en/>

BOX 2: Grand Bargain Transparency Workstream commitments:

1. Publish timely, transparent, harmonised and open high-quality data on humanitarian funding within two years of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul. We consider IATI to provide a basis for the purpose of a common standard.
2. Make use of appropriate data analysis, explaining the distinctiveness of activities, organisations, environments and circumstances (for example: protection, conflict-zones).
3. Improve the digital platform and engage with the open-data standard community to help ensure:
 - a. Accountability of donors and responders with open data for retrieval and analysis;
 - b. Improvements in decision-making, based upon the best possible information;
 - c. A reduced workload over time as a result of donors accepting a common standard data for some reporting purposes; and
 - d. Traceability of donors' funding throughout the transaction chain as far as the final responders and, where feasible, affected people.
4. Support the capacity of all partners to access and publish data.

For this reason, the Grand Bargain Transparency Workstream, with funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, commissioned Publish What You Fund and Ground Truth Solutions to conduct research into the information needs and challenges faced by data users on the ground in protracted humanitarian response settings, to inform the efforts of the Transparency Workstream and Grand Bargain signatories.

Research methodology

The team conducted a combination of desk, online survey and key informant interview (KII) research of two case study countries – Bangladesh and Iraq – to make recommendations on how to increase transparency and to better meet the information needs of humanitarian responders, especially at a national and local level.

The research team chose Iraq and Bangladesh as its final case-study countries through a number of criteria (see methodology⁴ for more on this). **Throughout, the team endeavoured to explore the research, and then present its findings, in a way which was consistent with what it heard from the mouths of those on the ground. As such, any omissions, for example regarding specific platforms or initiatives, should be interpreted with this understanding in mind.** While this provided an opportunity to compare and contrast two different protracted crises, the team recognises the limitations of this approach when trying to draw global lessons and insights.

⁴ Methodology: www.publishwhatyoufund.org/projects/humanitarian-transparency/

The survey (187 responses) and KII (66 participants) provided information about the challenges faced by humanitarian responders across a range of roles and types of organisations in accessing, submitting, sharing and using data from over 100 organisations across Iraq and Bangladesh (acknowledging that the limited sample size results in some challenges regarding the statistical significance of individual findings). The number of survey and KII respondents is broken down by organisation type in the methodology document. The study was weighted in favour of national and local actors,⁵ but included interviews with governments, UN agencies, cluster coordinators, international NGOs,⁶ and donor mission offices. For more information, please see Publish What You Fund's full methodology in footnotes.

Overall key findings

The research findings are presented across four themed briefing papers, as set out below. It should be noted while reading these reports that a key theme throughout is the cross-cutting issue of data quality. While there are agreed components of quality data, we haven't produced a definitive definition because this research illustrates the extent to which quality is largely a local construct and requires engagement and feedback loops to understand and address.

Research Brief 1 – Publication of humanitarian funding data (aligned with commitment 1.1 of the Grand Bargain Transparency Workstream)

In this paper the research team presents its finding that funding data is of greater relevance to “coordinators” (e.g. recipient government officials and country-level coordination groups) than to “implementers” (usually the local level personnel who design and execute programmes and in turn report their activities “up the chain” to coordinators). The team also found that the quality of the available funding data is a serious concern and awareness and use of IATI data is lower than for data from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) Financial Tracking Service (FTS), which is itself used minimally (by only 1% of stakeholders in Iraq and 3% in Bangladesh had used IATI, while 3% in Bangladesh and 15% in Iraq reported regular use of FTS). In addition, however, it was noted that non-financial IATI data could be of use to a variety of actors within humanitarian response, for example 3/4W, results and outcomes data.

Research Brief 2 – Data collection, analysis and use in protracted humanitarian crises (aligned with commitment 1.2 of the Grand Bargain Transparency Workstream)

In this paper the findings relate to issues of data quality and the differing needs of “coordinators” versus “implementers”; the former require more oversight information while the latter require management information to help design and implement their programmes. The lack of defined information management roles (including the people to fill them) inhibits collection and use of a range of different data types, including needs assessments, 3/4W, impact data, and monitoring data. Effective data sharing is undermined by limited and inconsistent data sharing practises. How best to treat sensitive data was found to be another challenge that all stakeholders needed to overcome when collecting, analysing and using data. Finally, data collection methodologies were found to often be unclear, or without rigour, suggesting that minimum quality control standards for data collection would be of value.

⁵ The research team defines national NGOs as operating in a single country, but in several regions of that country and local NGOs as operating in a single region within a country.

⁶ The research team defines international NGOs as organisations which work in multiple countries.

Research Brief 3 – The use, challenges and opportunities associated with digital platforms (aligned with commitment 1.3 of the Grand Bargain Transparency Workstream)

In this paper the research team presents its findings around awareness and use of different digital platforms for programming and publication purposes. The team found that the number and usability of existing platforms is, in the eyes of users, sufficient for accessing the operational and financial data they need. The team found that users want to be able to download raw data in easily accessible formats such as Excel and to be able to download the underlying methodologies to understand how data was collected, and thus more accurately determine its legitimacy and value. The team identified the most commonly used data platforms and considered issues around data quality and sharing, finding that inconsistency in reporting and underlying data quality issues inhibit data use.

Research Brief 4 – Data use capacity in protracted humanitarian crises (aligned with commitment 1.4 of the Grand Bargain Transparency Workstream)

In this paper the team identifies that data needs and corresponding capacity issues were similar across the two case study countries. The research finds that current funding models and reporting requirements inhibit data use capacity, particularly in local NGOs (but also INGOs) as they tend to receive less base funding, outside of projects, than other organisations, and do not have the time to report to multiple donors/platforms. Additionally, there is usually no explicit funding allocated to carry out needs assessments (a key requirement of on-the-ground organisations) and often either they cannot finance information management officer roles at all, or they lose their IM staff to bigger organisations. If data use capacity issues are addressed properly then it is likely that the use and publication of data (e.g. needs assessments, 3/4W, nutrition assessments, facility assessments, monitoring and evaluation data, and IATI data) among humanitarian organisations will also improve in the longer-term.

SECTION TWO

Use, challenges and opportunities of digital platforms

Report purpose and scope

The purpose of this brief is to help Grand Bargain stakeholders better understand the challenges and opportunities associated with humanitarian data platforms today. To achieve this, it will explore the current landscape of humanitarian data platforms, and cross reference this with users' sentiments from the field.

Specifically, this brief is informed by questions around awareness of individual platforms, actual use of these for uploading and downloading data, and the perceived usability and quality of that data. As such this investigation covers a number of different types of platform including broad, cross-cutting platforms such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (UN OCHA) ReliefWeb website, thematic platforms which provide data for a specific sector or issue such as the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix, and functional platforms such as ReportHub that enable users to undertake a specific task such as uploading an evaluation or sharing 3/4W data. Note: systems for tracking financial data including IATI, FTS and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee Common Reporting Standard (OECD DAC CRS)⁷ are explored in Brief 1 of this series.

Each of the platforms identified through this research serves a unique purpose for users. The broad, cross-cutting platforms are frequently used by stakeholders to stay up to date with news and developments, and to access multipurpose data sets, dashboards and reports such as humanitarian response plans, contact lists, demographic data, access data and maps, and weather and security updates. Thematic platforms, often underpinned by the efforts of individual clusters/sectors, share granular and sector-specific data focussing on such unique aspects as cluster meeting minutes, needs assessments and guidance on vulnerability criteria. These allow users to see the detail of ongoing activities, review the latest needs assessments, and interpret granular data relating to their specific thematic focus areas. Finally, functional/data sharing platforms provide users with a means of uploading and sharing their activity data in order to contribute to the wider data landscape and keep partners abreast of their activities.

There is significant overlap between the findings of this paper and Briefs 2 and 4 in this series which relate to data use more broadly, and the capacity of actors to publish, access, analyse and use data.

⁷ Common Reporting Standard (CRS)

Findings

FINDING 3A – AWARENESS AND USE OF PLATFORMS TENDED TO FOCUS ON A FEW SPECIFIC PLATFORMS

When analysing the data, it was reassuring to see that a broad range of stakeholder types ranging from UN agencies and large INGOs to smaller NNGOs were aware of and using a range of platforms. Across the two countries, awareness and use of the main platforms mentioned by users were as follows:

TABLE 1: AWARENESS AND USE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS USED FOR ACCESSING DATA IN THE RESPONSES (PERCENTAGE OF STAKEHOLDERS RESPONDING POSITIVELY)

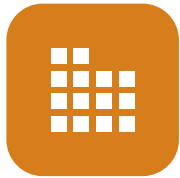
PLATFORM	IRAQ		BANGLADESH	
	AWARENESS	USE	AWARENESS	USE
Needs and Population Monitoring/ Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM)	77	61	65	45
HumanitarianResponse.info	69	63	64	45
ReliefWeb	74	49	55	23
UNHCR Operational Data Portal	43	21	53	30
HDX	0	0	47	28
REACH Resource Centre	59	50	46	13
Bangladesh Government Aid Information Management Systems	N/A	N/A	28	18
Iraq Returns Working Group Dashboard: http://iraqrecovery.org/RWG	45	15	N/A	N/A

Highest awareness and/or use

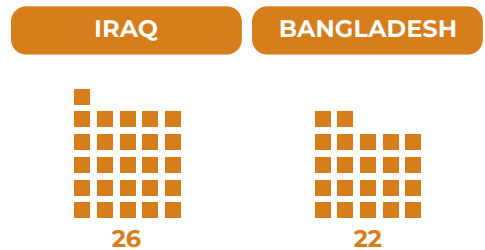
Lowest awareness and/or use

Not applicable

The use of these platforms largely mirrors the results the team obtained on which types of data users access the most each month. In order of frequency, users stated that needs assessments, 3/4W data, mapping and location data, monitoring data, and population and demographic data were their priorities. Further explanation of each of these platforms can be found in the next section, platforms used for uploading data are covered in Finding 3c.



In Iraq, the 61 organisations surveyed were able to list 26 data platforms which they were aware of, while in Bangladesh the figure was 22 platforms.



FINDING 3B – THE NUMBER AND USABILITY OF EXISTING PLATFORMS IS SUFFICIENT FOR ACCESSING DATA BUT USERS WANT TRANSPARENCY OF RAW DATA AND COLLECTION METHODOLOGIES.

“ There is more data here than in any other response I’ve worked on ”
INGO working in Iraq

“ There are limits to harmonisation but ultimately, where no standards exist in a cluster/sector, inter-operability of data is not possible ”
INGO Manager

The number, size and variety of data platforms in the humanitarian context is surprising. There are so many in fact that one stakeholder in Bangladesh asked whether there was a “*platform of platforms*” – a single place where stakeholders could view the range of data sources available. According to one senior source working on humanitarian data at the global level it is understood that UN OCHA alone maintains up to 77 platforms.⁸ Some stakeholders went as far as to suggest that one “*master platform*” should be established to house all response data to improve access and enable easier analysis across multiple datasets.

The researchers had expected to hear technical feedback from platform users; comments about the usability or functionality of different platforms, for example recommendations for improving the visualisation of data, or thoughts on how to link platforms. However, throughout both the survey and KII phase of the research these kinds of comments were not forthcoming. Instead users had two very specific technical requirements – firstly they want the ability to be able to download raw data in easily accessible formats such as Excel. Secondly, across the board, users want the ability to download the underlying methodologies (one user suggested a database of agreed methods) to understand how data was collected, and thus more accurately determine its legitimacy and value.

Overall there was consensus that the number, type and usability of existing platforms was sufficient for users’ needs. Below the research team provides some insights and analysis of the main systems:

Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) / Needs and Population Monitoring (NPM)

The IOM’s DTM/NPM is a system to track and monitor displacement and population mobility. It is designed to regularly and systematically capture, process and disseminate information to provide a better understanding of the movements and evolving needs of displaced populations, whether on-site or en route.

⁸ UNOCHA lists 50 websites, microsites, platforms and services on their own website (www.unocha.org/ocha-digital-services) plus five mobile applications.

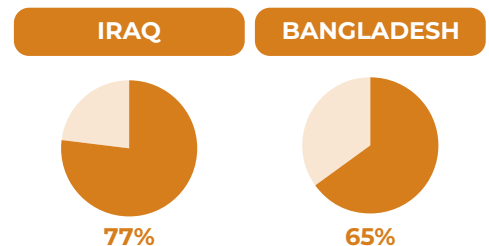
“DTM is a bit of an outlier in that it produces and shares high quality data that is widely used”

INGO, Iraq

In Iraq the DTM was the single most cited source of information for stakeholders at the front lines of the response. Confidence in the data is high by virtue of the presence of about 300 monitoring staff on the ground. One stakeholder said that the data is “*fantastic and endless – you can literally get down to the numbers of individual returnees in individual camps*”. Perhaps because of the nature of the Iraq context, the sheer number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees coupled with the rapidly evolving situation, the DTM seemed to be in use by almost every stakeholder interviewed. In Bangladesh meanwhile, while the platform was as highly respected for the integrity of its data, it was not referenced as much. In the Rohingya response there were concerns among local actors that the skills required to interpret and analyse the underlying datasets simply did not exist among smaller frontline organisations.



In both Iraq and Bangladesh, the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix/Needs and Population Monitoring platform was the source of data most actors were aware of (77% in Iraq and 65% in Bangladesh).



HumanitarianResponse.info

HumanitarianResponse.info is a specialised digital service of the UN OCHA provided to the community as part of OCHA's responsibility under the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Operational Guidance on Responsibilities of Cluster/Sectors and OCHA in Information Management. HumanitarianResponse.info aims to be the central website for information management tools and services, enabling information exchange among operational responders during either a protracted or sudden onset emergency. At the global level, HumanitarianResponse.info provides access to country sites and a “one-stop-shop” for global information coordination resources, such as normative products including guidance notes and policies, cluster specific information and data, toolboxes and internet links. At the country level, it is designed to provide a platform for sharing operational information between clusters and IASC members operating within a crisis. It provides a predictable set of core features that will be repeated on all sites and will host future tools for streamlining information collection, sharing and visualisation.

In practice HumanitarianResponse.info acts as a one-stop-shop for posting, storing and accessing information ranging from humanitarian response plans (HRPs), needs assessment registries, contact lists and cross-cutting information such as meteorological reports and maps. It also provides a platform for sector coordination with dedicated pages for sharing sector contact details, updates, meeting minutes, sector-specific updates and assessments as well as technical resources including specifications, handbooks and standards. Stakeholders were mostly satisfied with the quality and accessibility of information available but concerns were raised about the timeliness of the information, the difficulty of navigating the site and, relatedly, concerns about whether all of the content was publicly accessible.⁹ That being said, some users noted that the search functionality on the site is quite advanced allowing stakeholders to search both the entire site and/or specific responses, with the ability to filter results by content type, organisation, cluster/sector, theme and publication date.

⁹ Some of the more granular, sensitive or personally identifiable information (PII) data is password protected and cannot be publicly accessed.

ReliefWeb

ReliefWeb was frequently mentioned as a source of general information about the response despite a recognition that much of the non-news related content was also replicated on HumanitarianResponse.info (albeit information on ReliefWeb undergoes a formal review/QA process before being published). ReliefWeb is a humanitarian information service provided by OCHA and managed by the Digital Services Section of the Information Management Branch. ReliefWeb's editorial team monitors and collects information from more than 4,000 key sources, including humanitarian agencies at the international and local levels, governments, think-tanks and research institutions, and the media.

Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX)

HDX is an open data sharing platform managed by the UN OCHA. HDX now hosts over 17,300 datasets shared by 250 organisations (as of December 2019). These datasets include a wide breadth of data, such as population data, administrative boundary information, exchange rates and geo-spatial data, and were downloaded over 154,900 times in 2019. Throughout the year, the site was visited by over 610,000 people from almost every country in the world.¹⁰ However, on the ground awareness of HDX was low, except amongst those specialist organisations who primarily work with data or among information management (IM) staff. For those that did use HDX to share and access datasets, the two main concerns expressed seemed to be: firstly, the amount of effort required to synthesise the data and convert it/analyse it to produce useful information; secondly, a lack of qualitative/written/enriched data such as maps, evaluations and reports. However, this could be down to a lack of awareness among humanitarian actors around the tools available on HDX to convert raw data into potentially useful visual graphics, for example, through the Quick Charts tool.¹¹ HDX is supported by the Humanitarian Exchange Language (HXL) data standard. According to their website, "*HXL is a simple standard for messy data. Use HXL hashtags to speed up data processing and create interoperability across data sources*". In Bangladesh and Iraq, none of the stakeholders the team spoke to directly mentioned that they use this platform.

UNHCR's Operational Data Platform

The UNHCR web portal provides a unified platform for visualising, coordinating and disseminating information on a refugee emergency situation. The web portal displays the latest emergency data, maps, population statistics, demographic graphs, UNHCR and partner reports and factsheets, operational highlights and situation reports, plus quick links to a variety of partner websites. It centralizes all the operational data and information products on a refugee emergency that should be disseminated to partners, donors and governments, who are its primary audience.¹² However, despite being selected frequently during the survey stage, and a recognition that UNHCR plays an important role in collecting, coordinating and disseminating data, in both Bangladesh and Iraq stakeholders did not mention the Operational Data Platform during the key informant interviews.

Other data portals used within the response

Launched in 2016, the **Iraq Development Management System (IDMS)**¹³ is the Iraqi government's web-based system for managing the entire cycle of government and donor-funded development projects. The system is available in Arabic and English, and it is also publicly accessible. IDMS was developed in partnership with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), USAID, the EU and United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS). There also exists a data exchange with the **Kurdistan Development Management System (KDMS)**.¹⁴ No stakeholders in Iraq mentioned either of these systems as a source of information. A cursory review of the data held within the KDMS suggests substantial data gaps.

¹⁰ As per the 2019 year in review summary provided by the Centre for Humanitarian Data here:

<https://centre.humdata.org/the-centre-top-10-highlights-of-2019/>; accessed on 11/11/2019. The HDX can be accessed here: <https://data.humdata.org/>

¹¹ <https://tools.humdata.org/wizard/#quickcharts>

¹² <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/40066/operational-data-portal>

¹³ <https://idms.mop.gov.iq/>

¹⁴ http://kdms.mop-krq.org/#/Eng/EXTERNALASSISTANCEPROJECTS/List/1_1_1_1

No stakeholders mentioned **UN OCHA's Online Project System (OPS)** which is a web-based database that allows UN agencies and NGOs to directly upload their projects and funding requests.¹⁵ The database has been designed with the aim of facilitating information-sharing for humanitarian actors and serves as a central repository for appeal projects.

UN agencies and NGOs that would like to submit projects to an appeal can access the database by creating an account, uploading their project(s) for sector/cluster review, and editing them during the course of the year, if required. Each of the uploaded projects contains the name of the organisation running the appeal, a project title, description, list of intended outputs, list of performance indicators, amount requested, and contact details. As an example, 572 appeals were uploaded relating to Iraq in 2018. Of this, 215 were selected as HRP projects and published.

Beyond the DTM, stakeholders tended to use systems specific to their own needs, dependent on the focus of their activities. Examples of such systems include the **Child Protection Information Management System (CPIMS+)** or the **Gender-Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS)** which enables humanitarian actors to safely collect, store and analyse reported GBV incident data, and facilitate the safe and ethical sharing of this data with other local actors. Similar systems included the **Education Management Information System (EMIS, Bangladesh)**, **WHO's Early Warning, Alert and Response System (EWARN)** and **Health Management Information Systems (HMIS)**.

Some of these systems are hosted and maintained by organisations within the response, for example **REACH**, an INGO present in both Iraq and Bangladesh, has been providing analysis and data support. In Iraq, REACH provides IM and data support to UNHCR work with Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan Region. For Iraq, REACH's own resource centre hosts 479 factsheets, 857 maps and a series of presentations, reports and databases.

Stakeholders in Bangladesh also referenced **DEEP**, a web-based platform offering a suite of collaborative tools tailored towards humanitarian crisis responses designed to support secondary data review. It includes common analysis workflows and frameworks for thinking using both structured and unstructured, quantitative and qualitative data. Development of DEEP began in early 2016 and it is a collaborative project governed by UN OCHA, ACAPS, UNHCR, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS). Users of DEEP suggested it could be a good alternative for hosting and cataloguing qualitative data in an advanced system similar to those already available for structured quantitative data.¹⁶

FINDING 3C – WHILE PLATFORMS FOR UPLOADING REPORTING DATA ARE SUFFICIENT, AGREEMENT ON WHICH TO USE, AND DATA SHARING CONCERNS, CREATE CHALLENGES

“ There are no standards for how information should be shared in this context ”
INGO Manager, Bangladesh

“ [It is] important to report as donors use this to monitor outcomes which has an effect on the likelihood of future funding ”
NNGO in Iraq

¹⁵ OPS has recently been replaced by the HPC.tools projects module: <https://projects.hpc.tools/>

¹⁶ It was not possible to ascertain which other similar systems were in use.

In the two case study countries the most prominent data platforms used for uploading /sharing data to and reporting were **ReportHub** (in Bangladesh) and **ActivityInfo** (in Iraq).

ReportHub is a reporting, validation and data visualisation tool which allows stakeholders to establish alerts and contribute to complex dashboards to support advanced coordination. Currently (December 2019), ReportHub has 1,751 users reporting on 20,985 locations for which 8,413 reports have been submitted. ReportHub is supported by iMMAP, an international not-for-profit organisation that provides IM services to humanitarian and development organisations. In large part, Bangladeshi stakeholders approved of ReportHub as a simple means of reporting 3/4W data and while some organisations appeared to be mandated to upload data to it on a regular basis, for others it had become the de-facto reporting portal.

ActivityInfo is a software application for data collection and reporting which is accessible over the internet. Thanks to its flexibility, it is used for monitoring and evaluation, IM, case tracking, inter-agency coordination and more. Due to its design, it is particularly well suited for reporting on activities which are geographically dispersed and which are performed by multiple partner organisations.¹⁷ However, more so than was the case with ReportHub in Bangladesh, in Iraq ActivityInfo was reported to have a higher utilisation among stakeholders in large part because it was understood that the platform was used as a donor reporting tool (mostly for UN funded projects be they HRP or non-HRP funded) and a repository for cluster data as opposed to what seemed to be a more ad hoc reporting tool in Bangladesh.

“ We report to this platform, but we are one of only a few who would regularly update our information... it is difficult to get data from ActivityInfo as not all organisations upload regularly and with accurate data ”

NNGO in Iraq

In Iraq, other platforms that survey respondents mentioned uploading/sharing data to included, HumanitarianResponse.info (22% of respondents), the DTM (17%), FTS (13%) and to individual cluster platforms. Meanwhile in Bangladesh users uploaded data to HumanitarianResponse.info (26%), HDX (26%), IOM's NPM (21%), the Bangladesh Government's Aid Information Management System (AIMS) (21%), UNHCR's Operational Data Portal (15%), and 13% to ReliefWeb. On the whole, across both contexts, users reported most frequently uploading/sharing needs assessment data, followed by population and demographic data, security data and mapping and location data. (Note: IATI, covered in Brief 1 of this series, was not mentioned by participants as a platform to which they uploaded data).

Approximately a quarter of all respondents said they had no challenges when seeking to publish more data. Those who said they have challenges sharing data highlighted issues in three areas: the sensitivity of data, data quality and understanding of the platforms, including which ones they are supposed to report to (see more on this in Brief 2).

Finally, a number of stakeholders highlighted that their limited awareness and technical understanding of the existing data-sharing platforms left them unsure of which platforms to use and how to use them. It was difficult for the research team to ascertain to what extent there was any guidance, or indeed any mandated organisation to enforce such guidance, regarding the platforms which should be used, how frequently, and with what types of data. Without such agreement at the response level it would inevitably be challenging to inform and/or encourage stakeholders to use specific platforms. See Brief 2 for recommendations regarding a data coordination mechanism.

When explaining why they do not upload as much information to data platforms as might be expected, a number of respondents cited issues of competition. The research team explore this issue more in Brief 2 as it represents a real and significant barrier. To quote one seasoned consultant working in Bangladesh, “*data competition was starker in the Rohingya crisis that any other I’ve experienced... there are weak data protocols and competition that is tense enough to discourage data sharing.*”

FINDING 3D – INCONSISTENCY IN REPORTING AND UNDERLYING DATA QUALITY ISSUES INHIBIT USE

“ We need international standards on sharing data, combined with templates for MoUs and data sharing agreements for varying levels (i.e. standards for donors, INGOs, NNGOs, etc) ”

NNGO in Bangladesh

“ The issue does not lie with the systems, but rather with the ability to get people to report their activities, across both humanitarian and development actors ”

Cluster coordinator, Iraq

In an environment where there is uncertainty about which platforms to use, and concerns about the quality and/or sensitivity of data, the overall data landscape in both countries is characterised by inconsistent reporting, patchy data and a sense that much of the data is untrustworthy.¹⁸

Many donors and clusters told the research team that they face challenges with the timeliness of data they receive, such as data platforms not being updated with the latest response information (e.g. ActivityInfo in Iraq and ReportHub in Bangladesh) and partners not submitting their data to cluster coordinators on time, only in part or not at all. According to a majority of stakeholders spoken to, untimely or incomplete data risks the creation of data gaps.

A frequently cited challenge for data users is the inability to compare data from multiple sources. Stakeholders explained that this can be a result of:

- Information being shared rather than raw data with no explanation of how the raw data was treated to produce said information;
- Different data providers producing data in different formats, including with different definitions or indeed different spellings of individual towns/communities;
- Data providers using different methodologies for collecting and analysing data (and frequently not publicly sharing these methodologies) even within specific sectors.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the majority of the aforementioned data platforms specialise in storing/displaying quantitative data. Throughout both the survey and KIs there was an expressed demand for more qualitative data; data gained through surveys, interviews and reports which could help provide insight into the less quantifiable aspects of the response such as the perceptions of beneficiaries or the opinions of government decision makers. The demand for more qualitative data is addressed in Brief 2.

¹⁸ While these were the lived experience of interviewees, and specifically local and frontline actors, an alternative analysis of data gaps can be found in recent HNO documents including the 2020 HNO, page 64-65 on data sources, pages 67-68 on methodology, pages 70-71 on information gaps and limitations: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/iraq_hno_2020-fullen.pdf

Conclusion and recommendations

Stakeholders report that on the whole the availability and usability of existing digital platforms is sufficient for their needs. However, the comprehensiveness, timeliness, relevance and validity of the data held within these platforms is questionable, resulting in reduced use of, and trust in, the data. Attention also needs to be paid to interoperability of platforms and data itself – there is little clarity on how data should/does fit together in each response, and whether stakeholders are using similar methodologies to enable data to be logically collated in the first place. Equally, there is often little understanding or agreement regarding the core platforms/systems that are available and/or should be used in each response. As a result, reporting to platforms is inconsistent in terms of both frequency and quality of data, while reporting requirements as stated by donors are rarely harmonised, requiring implementing organisations to report in multiple formats on multiple platforms. These challenges undermine transparency in as much as they can make it difficult for actors in the response to have a full picture of the data landscape, and importantly how that data was collected. In turn this impacts on the effectiveness of the response and can serve to undermine accountability between donors, responders and other actors, and inhibits decision making.

The findings of the research illustrate that in order to improve the usability and value of existing humanitarian data platforms priority has to be given to thinking about the way in which actors agree on standards for data management (data standards,¹⁹ principles and practises) including which platforms will take priority, reporting standards and frequencies, and definitions and guidance for handling sensitive data. Equally it must be recognised that arguably the biggest barrier to more data use, and indeed more uploading and downloading from humanitarian data portals, relates to perceived and real data quality issues.

In Brief 2, which focussed on data collection, analysis and use, the team's conclusion included a recommendation to consider the establishment of a "data coordination mechanism" – an entity with the mandate and authority to deliver improved data governance standards within individual humanitarian responses. Key to the success of this will be full transparency (where privacy concerns allow) of all data; moving from a position of data ownership to data liberation. The conclusions of this brief indicate that such a function could yield extraordinary value; providing a mechanism to address many of the challenges outlined above. However, the findings of this research brief warrant action at the global level in order to raise awareness that arguably the technical development of humanitarian data platforms have reached their limits of marginal utility and as such emphasis now needs to be placed on specific actions relating to data governance at the ground level.

¹⁹ Such as HXL, IATI activity and organisation standards, IATI code lists, the P-codes in CODS, CaLP's cash dictionary, HumanitarianResponse.info's Indicator Registry, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALL GRAND BARGAIN SIGNATORIES ENGAGED IN THE GRAND BARGAIN TRANSPARENCY WORKSTREAM:

- a. Data quality needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency before continued investment in platforms and systems at field level. Publishers must institute data validation processes and user feedback loops to ensure the accuracy of data.
- b. Platforms should provide a download capability providing access to raw data (with adequate data privacy and safety measures in place) in useable formats e.g. CSV, as well as data collection methodologies.
- c. Consideration needs to be given to feedback loops between publishers and users to ensure regular monitoring and continual improvement of data quality.
- d. The Grand Bargain Transparency Workstream needs to consider options for increasing awareness/signposting of existing platforms and data sources

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER RELEVANT GRAND BARGAIN WORKSTREAMS:

- **Workstream 9: Harmonise and simplify reporting requirements**
 - Workstream 9 needs to consider the findings of this work with regards to their role in stipulating specific data reporting platforms for individual humanitarian responses in the absence of a locally mandated function to do that. Grand Bargain signatories that fund humanitarian action should consider the findings of this work and discuss together the feasibility of agreeing harmonised reporting requirements for those they fund in terms of data publishing/uploading on data platforms

