

Annual Report 2022

In times of global turmoil, communities in crisis must be supported – but first, they must be heard.



GROUND TRUTH
SOLUTIONS

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Our research partners in 2022 were: Awaaz Humanitarian Helpline Afghanistan, Fact Foundation, Fama Films, Innovative Hub for Research in Africa Burkina Faso, Institut de Formation et de Services, International Centre for Climate Change and Development, International Institute for Environment and Development, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, New Access International, The New Humanitarian, Open Space Works Cooperative, Protyashi, Researchcare Africa, Salma Consulting, Victim's Hope DRC, Alaina Koina, Arsene Merci, Aristide Madjitolngar, Bienvenu Ngas, Crescens Gbongbonbo Kamtha, Doumtoudjimbaye Elysée Moubane, Frederic Ngaramadji, Mireille Denenodji Ngarkodji, Sobdibe Anicet, Stéphane Adisso Dokpohol, Tchindebe Berkeunbe, Yves Wang-Namou Fya, Wesly Jean and Peterly Riche.

Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) is an international non-governmental organisation that helps people affected by crisis influence the design and implementation of humanitarian aid and climate adaptation. We believe that the intended beneficiaries of aid should have more of a say in how it is provided. GTS regularly engages with people affected by crisis to discover whether they find services relevant and fair, if they trust aid agencies and whether they feel empowered. Through our research, we help communicate this feedback to policy-makers and aid providers. Our goal is to make their perceptions the touchstone and driver of humanitarian and climate adaptation effectiveness. To achieve this, we champion the views of people affected by crisis wherever decisions about aid are made.

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Introduction

The year 2022 was the sixth warmest year since global records began. The threat of a changing climate has loomed large over every conversation we've had with people affected by crises since our work started a decade ago. In the face of such a global existential challenge, the silos and short-term activities of the humanitarian system feel increasingly out of touch. On the other hand, working on climate change adaptation last year showed us the power of people on the frontlines of disaster engaging directly with world leaders in conversations about global equity that fly in the face of the humanitarian saviour complex. As many in the aid sector try to cling to an outdated brand of 'emergency exceptionalism', we must keep staring its power imbalances in the face. If people are to hope for more than simply surviving one crisis after another, they need to be supported – but first, they need to be heard.

Our data from last year told a compelling story. It amplified more feedback on how people wanted to engage with humanitarian aid, but it also showed us how they didn't want to engage. In times of crisis, assistance is vital, but that doesn't negate the fact that nobody wants to be an aid recipient, no matter how acute the emergency. Climate change is eliding the distinction between relief and development. The frequency and severity of climate shocks blurs 'disaster' and 'normality'. Commitments along the humanitarian-development-peace (and now, climate) axis are grandiose, a vindication for the many thousands of people we speak with year-on-year who call for the longer-term solutions such commitments promise. But progress is harder to spot. This leaves people in Chad saying, "we have adapted our means of surviving by reducing the number of meals we consume and by selling belongings to buy food as a matter of community solidarity," and in Bangladesh telling us: "We don't want any more rice or lentils. There is no more land to live on."

For a long time, we've noted that improvement in 'accountability to affected people' is lagging. But for that to improve, we need to stop segmenting people's lives. While few of us find ourselves in the awkward and privileged position of talking about transforming a 'sector', people are every day doing their best to transform their own situations. Lofty policy goals are commonplace in conference halls, but what if we all spent a bit more time interrogating whether people's capacity to change their futures is being supported or hindered by humanitarian activities?

When we look back at our work in 2022, we are inspired by the ideas, grit and determination of the thousands of people who shared their thoughts with us. We are also inspired by the many people in positions of power who listened. It was a big advocacy year for us. Important community views were heard all around the world, from the Principals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in Geneva to the government offices of Port-au-Prince to technical working groups in Abuja.

We took on new challenges, more diverse partners and a more critical internal eye. We spoke up even when it was unpopular, and we held our ground when independent perception data felt increasingly endangered. Now we need to go further, to ensure that research priorities are driven more by crisis-affected people and advocacy efforts extend beyond humanitarian silos. Next year, much of our work will look a bit different.

We invite you to join us: take a critical look at our work, and yours, to find new possibilities.

Meg Sattler, CEO, Ground Truth Solutions

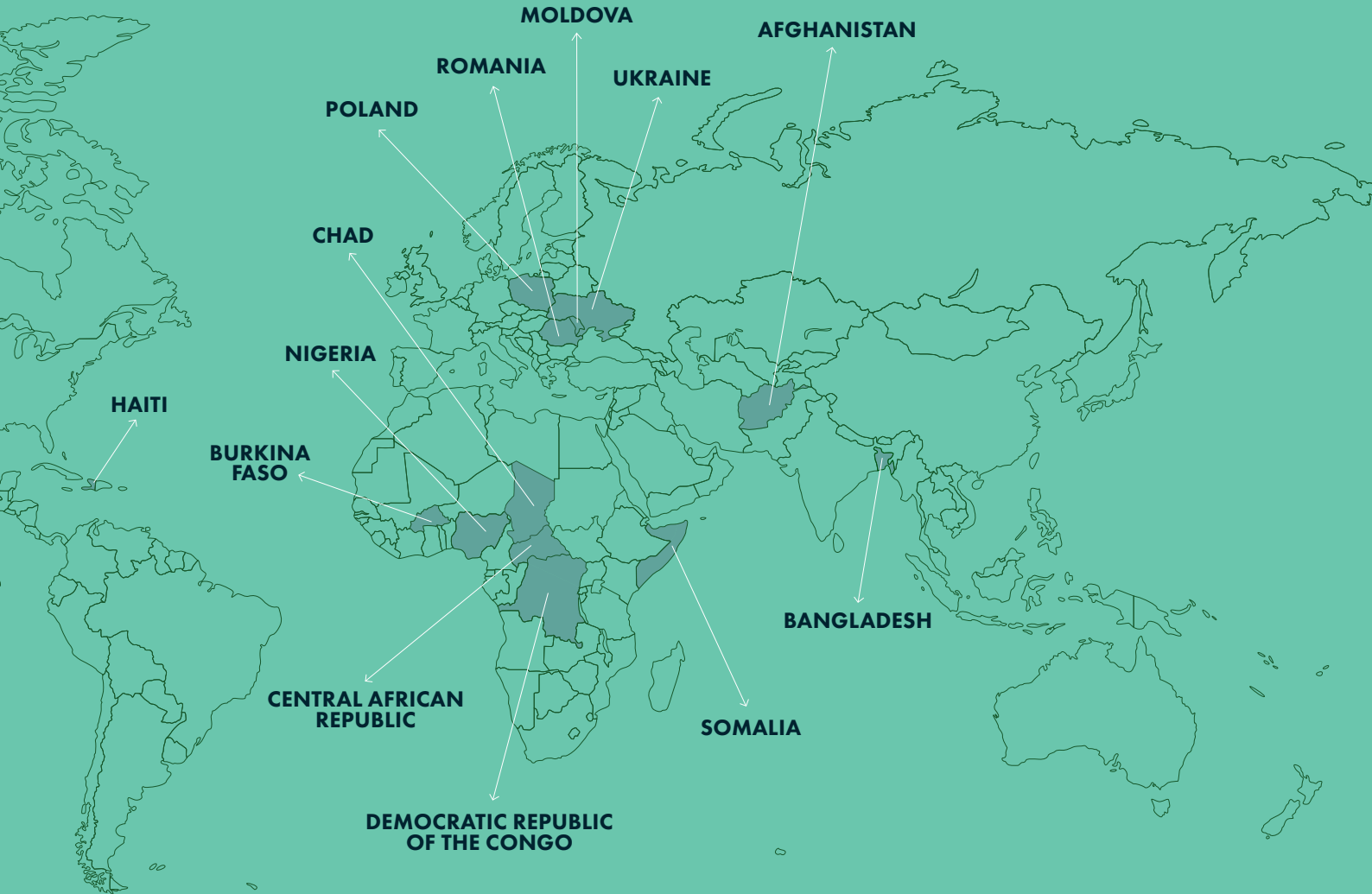
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We don't want any more rice or lentils. There is no more land to live on.

Woman living in Bangladesh



Where we worked in 2022



At a glance



JANUARY

With likeminded partners, we gathered people from across the Rohingya response in Bangladesh to tackle big accountability questions and make a collective plan.



FEBRUARY

We spoke with women in Somalia about their experiences of mobile money, and how their services could be improved.



MARCH

We entered a new partnership with Global Affairs Canada.



JUNE

With the World Health Organization, we released our flagship report on access to healthcare in Afghanistan.



MAY

We began working in Ukraine in partnership with the UK's Disasters Emergency Committee.



APRIL

In a global event with The New Humanitarian, leaders of the response in Haiti (both government and UN) came together to candidly discuss community feedback from our perception studies. Our report was published in Creole to be used by local advocates.



JULY

The leadership of GTS changed. Founder Nick van Praag stepped back from leadership and joined our Board. Meg Sattler became Chief Executive.



AUGUST

Sida became a core partner. We released our first report specifically focused on the perceptions of people living with disabilities.



SEPTEMBER

We launched our work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in partnership with UNICEF and USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA).



DECEMBER

Our report 'Listening is not enough' was presented to and discussed with the IASC principals, sparking a flurry of new interest in our work, and informing initiatives like the Emergency Relief Coordinator's Flagship initiative on more accountable humanitarian action.



NOVEMBER

With local leaders and sector experts, we presented our climate change research at COP27 to an engaged audience.



OCTOBER

Our work on the effect of 'interviewer ethnicity' was published in the journal Survey Practice, reshared widely and increased global understanding of the challenges of tackling biases in refugee environments.



Humanitarian reform, according to who?

Our work across humanitarian responses

We believe humanitarian reform should be driven by human priorities. As debates raged in European conference rooms about localisation, people-centred aid and a new iteration of the Grand Bargain, in 2022 we spoke with more than 13,000 people in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Haiti, Moldova, Nigeria, Poland, Romania, Somalia and Ukraine to get their take. The resulting data, our analysis and community recommendations were discussed from rural Haiti to the highest levels of humanitarian policy in Geneva and New York, making 2022 one of our most successful years ever in terms of advocacy and reach.

New contexts, new approaches

A war broke out just a train-ride away from our headquarters. We quickly set out to understand how people were experiencing aid in Ukraine after the Russian invasion. That work had expanded by the end of 2022 to include an extra focus on cash and voucher assistance, as well as neighbouring Poland, Romania and Moldova.

The DRC was another new context for us. We kicked off our programme there under the rare, favourable conditions of committed and active coordination colleagues and an influential donor on the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). With little need to convince anyone of the worth of perception tracking, we could hit the ground running with a brilliant new partner, *Victim's Hope*.

Honing in on specific groups

Our ability to aggregate data globally has at many times pushed the envelope when it comes to humanitarian policy, but we know that communities are not homogenous, and neither are their perceptions. With so many people impacted by disasters under the age of 18, in Burkina Faso we expanded our scope of research to youth, partnering with local organisations to understand young peoples' realities and priorities across the country.

In Bangladesh, we looked specifically at the experiences of *people living with disabilities*, and in Afghanistan we honed in on healthcare, and then women and girls, embarking towards the end of the year on our first project dedicated to female perspectives.

The more we invest in qualitative dialogue, the more we can unpack these specific experiences and help aid providers to act upon diverse views. The downside? This is making our work more time-consuming and more expensive. As we learn more about what best influences change, it is important to keep sharing those lessons with our funders and partners. Proper engagement takes time. It cannot be solved by flashy gadgets or online systems – no matter how appealing such solutions may seem.

The battle for voices to be (properly) heard

Our perception data was included in Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) and Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNOs) across many countries. In Burkina Faso, Bangladesh, Chad, DRC, Nigeria, Somalia and CAR, our data was cited and used in the creation of strategic priorities.

Of course, we always wonder what all of this means for people on the receiving end of aid. In many places, our work continued to be forced into an AAP (accountability to affected people) box, seeing it relegated to the workplans of associated working groups. In 2022, we tried harder to engage more with community groups and civil society, not putting so many of our advocacy eggs in the 'coordination' basket. This laid bare both opportunities and challenges.

In Haiti, the more we worked with local communities and civil society leaders on unpacking community recommendations, the more we wished we had done so earlier. In Ukraine, more informal dialogue throughout our project cycle helped us better tailor our research to the priorities of aid recipients.

In 2022, we more clearly understood and differentiated between the mixed purposes of our work – making sure people's views are transparently shared, as well as

improving humanitarian action. While we increasingly feel the limits of surveys when it comes to catalysing concrete action on the ground, we became more aware than ever of the need for transparent data on people's views, in a global aid environment awash with self-reporting and window dressing. We fought hard to ensure independent data was not co-opted by big agencies or coordination teams, who were asking to take over the analysis in a way that suited them or to leave important feedback out.

Our qualitative focus expanded, with compelling narratives from longer community conversations complementing our numbers-based data. When put in front of decision-makers, it felt much harder to ignore. With every project, we are getting closer to finding the sweet spot between surveys and conversations, where information is detailed enough to inspire action, but still backed by numbers.

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Humanitarian organisations don't involve us in any decision-making, like the strategy for selecting those who receive aid. They give us aid according to their will. No-one has ever asked me what kind of aid I would like to receive.

Woman living in a host community in Goma, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo

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We've expressed our views so many times, but they have never been acted on.

Man in Munshiganj, Shyamnagar, Bangladesh

Ukraine: would a well-funded response be more accountable?

We saw something in the early Ukraine response that we have rarely – perhaps, never – seen before: aid was exceeding people's expectations.

We launched our work soon after the humanitarian response scaled up and found at that time that people had relatively low expectations of how aid should be provided. Almost 60% of people told us that aid met their most important needs, while only 50% of people said they expected it to.

Not all was perfect, of course. Most people surveyed in Ukraine (73%) expected humanitarian organisations to ask about their needs before providing aid, yet only 40% said they were consulted. Cash assistance was the priority, and people (especially women) needed more of it to tackle rising food and heating costs.

Local aid providers were feeling frustrated. “International organisations are extremely burdened by bureaucracy: sometimes it takes several months to approve financial support; thus their support becomes irrelevant with time,” explained a representative of a local organisation in Chernihiv.

As the crisis progressed through its first year, people became more aware of aid and clearer on the need for targeted assistance. Many people (47%) found accessing aid challenging in the largely online response, especially older people and those living with disabilities. A lack of digital literacy hindered their navigation of digital registration and queueing systems. One person told us, “In rural areas, there is very little humanitarian aid. In other, smaller remote locations, people receive no humanitarian aid at all, and they especially need counselling.”

People in Ukraine wanted to know more about how money was being spent and decisions made. But an overload of information in general was leaving them confused about what news they could trust. People's needs are evolving in Ukraine, and there's a call to better support longer-term recovery with psychosocial help, integrating veterans and displaced persons into society, sustainable development of volunteer initiatives, and preventing burnout among people affected by war.

Treading the tightrope between ownership and independence

Sometimes we feel that our work is too embedded in the humanitarian system, and can be used by humanitarian coordination as something of a token box-ticking exercise. We were requested in 2022, not for the first time, to draft entire AAP sections in HRPs, but that is something on which we've learned to push back. While in the past we might have seen such opportunities as visibility wins for GTS, we know for accountability to take hold, response leaders need to show more ownership.

But ownership cannot negate independence. We've also needed to push back on teams who wanted to own, and then pick and choose, perception data. It is not easy, but our independence is critical. We have learned how to build networks of allies in-country to maintain a critical mass of support for independent perception data on community views. But getting the balance right between independence and buy-in, in a sector where there are still pitiful incentives for doing things right, is always tough. To move beyond tokenism, there need to be clearer links between community input and how funds are allocated.

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In particular, us women are not consulted about our views on the programmes. Humanitarians are more interested in the point of view of men to the detriment of women. Humanitarians must involve all categories of people in the planning of programmes.

Women in Bourgouma, Chad, refugee

If nobody acts on data, should we keep collecting it?

We do a lot of self-reflection at GTS, and one topic often on the agenda is this: if those in charge of a humanitarian response have not systematically attempted to act on the perception data collected for one or more years, should we invest in collecting it the next year? And further, if the data for several years has not changed much, should we stop collecting it and focus on more qualitative enquiry and advocacy?

For us, the jury is out. On the one hand, we do not want to waste people's time asking them questions if we are not sure it will lead anywhere. If we know what they said a year ago, and not much has happened on the part of the response, it's likely their feelings will be similar or more negative.

On the other hand, as soon as we stop asking the questions, we lose the transparent record of what people are saying. Action on feedback seems to be more elusive in responses that are underfunded, and so we could be setting ourselves up for only proactively understanding widespread views in humanitarian contexts that benefit from more money and capacity.

To address this, we have stopped collecting response-wide data multiple times a year, and have kept advocacy pressure on for more concrete action. If longer-term project funding were available, we would prefer to collect response-wide data every two years in protracted crises, and use the interim period for rigorous qualitative follow-up, dialogue and community advocacy. We invite funders to help us realise this vision over the coming years.

The slow train to a cash revolution

Some call cash assistance ‘silent community engagement’ because it helps people make choices. But is cash the humanitarian game-changer it is supposed to be? Through our [Cash Barometer](#) project, we spoke with people in Nigeria, Somalia and the Central African Republic (CAR) to find out. We interviewed women about their experiences with mobile money, and in Ukraine we dug deeper into people’s journeys receiving financial assistance, to learn if experiences would be more positive than the norm in a cash-based response where funding was high and national systems strong.

Our data from Nigeria painted a surprising picture: many things were going relatively well. As an organisation often criticised for being a frequent purveyor of doom and gloom, this was pleasing to hear. It indicated that when things ran smoothly in a humanitarian cash programme (e.g. people know when cash will come, for how long they will receive it, who is providing it and how to communicate with them) there was less angst, less need for complicated community engagement strategies and a sense that people could make choices.

Not all was rosy, though. Far from it. When it came to information and transparency, initially positive findings were negated by further analysis that showed while many people said they felt informed, they were not. They were unaware of targeting processes, aid duration and other standard facets of accountable humanitarian action. While we are often sceptical of overly positive data due to the potential for multiple biases, this also showed us that it’s not just biases that matter, it’s our own standards and questions around what accountable humanitarian action looks like. If people don’t know what to expect, they often think they’re informed when they’re not.

In no country did people receive adequate information about their cash and voucher assistance. In CAR and Nigeria, two out of three recipients did not know the duration of their assistance.

People were equally in the dark about how aid providers target assistance. In Nigeria, less than half of respondents understood how humanitarian organisations

decided who should be on assistance lists. One in five respondents in CAR said that their relationships with other community members had worsened since receiving cash. In Somalia, many people felt that for aid to be fairer, coverage should increase – 67% of respondents who did not believe that cash and voucher assistance was fair felt this way because some people in their community were being left out.

Longer-term planning key to people-centred cash

Talking to people about cash assistance unearths many ideas about how the whole process could be better tailored to community priorities. In several locations, people said they would prefer less cash for longer, or less cash if it meant that some was provided to everyone in a community, not just a few. In no country did people say that cash helped them feel more resilient in the future. There is a desire for people to stand on their own, and people need cash in order to respond to a variety of needs, or to respond to needs that change over time. Linkages with social transfer or safety net programmes present an opportunity for providing regular transfers in line with people’s preferences.

We were pleased that our work was referenced in the Government of Nigeria’s national cash policy, and we are hopeful that other authorities will follow suit.

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We have made several enquiries about how long we would be receiving the assistance, but they always say they don’t know.

Woman living in Kasaisa host community, Yobe State, Nigeria

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It would be helpful to get a smaller amount of money over a longer duration because the person can plan his needs accordingly. If it is not enough this month, he or she can plan the next month step by step.

Man in Deynile, Somalia

Should we stop accepting the technical status quo?

Cash tends to be grouped with voucher assistance in humanitarian aid, so much so that all of it is thrown together and described as ‘CVA’. Having long accepted that in our research design and community dialogue, our 2022 data slapped us with a reality check that this grouping makes no sense to community members, who feel that one (cash) provides choice and another (vouchers), generally speaking, does not.

In CAR and Nigeria, where many aid recipients receive vouchers, risks abound. People reported price-gouging, vendors putting pressure on (particularly female) voucher recipients to sell their vouchers at a low rate, and rude or disrespectful behaviour from vendors. While most recipients in all Cash Barometer countries report feeling safe when receiving their assistance, when asked for more details, voucher recipients often reported uneven power dynamics between themselves and voucher vendors, leaving them worse off and open to exploitation. CVA might be a handy acronym for many in the aid world, but we will try harder to avoid it.



Climate crisis – a looming engagement gap

Adaptation – a new frontier for GTS

All the technical solutions in the world will not solve the climate crisis if those with the most at stake are missing from the conversation. The debate is shifting to embrace not just mitigation but adaptation. At COP26 in Glasgow, developed countries pledged to double adaptation funding and most of them are reaching their targets. A year later delegates at COP27 finally succumbed to three decades of advocacy from vulnerable countries and agreed to establish a “loss and damage” fund for those hit hardest by climate disasters. But adaptation needs still dwarf available funding by a long way making it critical that every dollar is spent where it has the greatest impact. Engaging communities on the frontline of the climate crisis has never been so critical.

This was the context in which we came good on our strategic priority to launch a programme on people’s perceptions of climate disasters and the activities undertaken to respond to them. We chose Bangladesh, a country whose volunteer-based cyclone preparedness programme has become a global exemplar of effective disaster preparedness. It’s also a country that symbolises the acute inequity of climate change: although it generates just 0.56% of global carbon emissions, Bangladesh is among the top 10 countries most vulnerable to climate risk.

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*Complaining brings danger.
If we complain, we will not get
any support anymore.*

Man in Panpatti, Golachipa, Bangladesh

Mapping the gaps in Bangladesh

Our work in Bangladesh began with research into national climate policy and programming by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), then moved to surveys and interviews of over 2,000 people across three districts affected by climate disasters, conducted by Bangladesh’s International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD). Our findings reveal two significant gaps. First, the gap between existing climate assistance and the most sharply felt needs and priorities of affected communities. Second, the gap between the rhetoric of community engagement in policies and programming documents, and the reality on the ground.

Those we interviewed on the front lines of the climate emergency in Bangladesh report that, while cyclone preparedness has been a largely successful programme, assistance in helping them adapt to climate risks is often unfair, insufficient and beyond their ability to influence. Decision-making around who receives assistance is seen as opaque and prone to favouritism. People fear the consequences of providing candid feedback. And there is an overwhelming sense that accelerating climate impacts, from more frequent floods to more intense heatwaves, are consuming communities’ capacity to adapt.

In one particularly telling response to the question, “Do you think people in your community have a say in the support they receive to deal with the impacts of climate change?” – just 17% replied yes, one third shrugged and half said no. This is less than half the 36% of respondents who replied “Yes” to a similar question around humanitarian aid in DRC and CAR – our lowest-polling countries in Africa.

Locally led adaptation

We presented our results at COP27’s blue zone, to a highly engaged audience. The timing proved auspicious. Not only did the conference see concrete progress on loss and damage, driven forward relentlessly by our project partner Saleemul Huq, director of ICCCAD; it also welcomed a growing cohort of delegates from some

of the 100 organisations that, in August 2022, endorsed and committed to eight core principles of [locally led adaptation \(LLA\)](#).

At its heart, LLA is about helping ensure that local communities are empowered to lead sustainable and effective adaptation to climate change. We believe that GTS – which for a decade has brought its unique methodology and policy influence to bear on making humanitarian assistance more responsive and people centred – is well placed to effect the same change in climate adaptation policy and programming.

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Many people give hope, but when the disaster is over, no one can be found, and we have to fight to survive.

Women in Shyamnagar, Bangladesh

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Next time, when organisations want to help us, they should approach us and ask us what our real needs are.

Woman living in a host community, Bangui, Central African Republic

In late 2022, in GTS’s first programme focused on climate change, we surveyed 2,367 people in two coastal districts of Bangladesh and one inland district. Our aim was to understand how respondents perceive the quality and impact of adaptation programmes in their communities, and the extent to which they feel their views, opinions and experiences are considered in decision-making. The survey was complemented by 12 focus group discussions and 48 interviews in the three districts. These are our key findings, published [here](#) in April 2023:

- Efforts to improve information-sharing on preparedness and early warning are mostly working. But while the majority of people surveyed in the two coastal areas feel sufficiently informed, those surveyed inland do not.
- Adaptation programmes are deemed unfair. People say many vulnerable people are left out, citing favouritism, mismanagement and opaque decision-making.
- Communities are demanding greater transparency. Without it, they draw their own conclusions about how decisions are made and do not trust decision-makers.
- There are limited opportunities to participate and provide feedback in climate adaptation programming. Some people do not even feel comfortable providing feedback for fear of reprisal.
- People do not feel that short-term interventions prepare them for complex climate crises. Timely messages and disaster relief only go so far in the face of infrastructure shortfalls and precarious livelihoods.
- Projects with a longer-term approach are noted and appreciated. But communities say they benefit relatively few people and need to be scaled-up.
- Feedback points to changing community priorities. While most aid programming in the inland district focuses on floods, three-quarters of respondents highlight heatwaves as the hazard of most concern to them.

A woman wearing a green sari with a purple floral pattern is shown from the side, holding a large, light blue fishing net. The net is spread out and appears to be drying or being inspected. The background is a bright, clear sky with some green foliage visible. The woman is wearing a gold bangle on her right wrist.

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Support is not distributed properly. Those who deserve it don't get it a lot of the time. Those who already have enough, they end up getting more. I just feel like they give to the people they know.

Woman community leader in Buri Goalini, Shyamnagar, Bangladesh

Health check

The world opened up as the COVID-19 pandemic came under control, and our healthcare focus shifted to general access for vulnerable populations. We spoke to people in Afghanistan, where non-governmental and United Nations agencies were providing almost 90% of all primary health services, and in Bangladesh, where displaced Rohingya people living in camps had long flagged complicated access to healthcare as a stressor.

In Afghanistan, we conducted research in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Awaaz Humanitarian Helpline to identify and unpack barriers to essential health services, perceptions on trust in health workers and quality of care. We used scenario planning techniques to create and test different future scenarios with community members, gathering feedback on the potential impact of our recommendations and refining them accordingly. This process helped to ensure that our recommendations are not only theoretically sound, but also practically relevant and responsive to the unique needs of people in Afghanistan.

We found that people were seeking alternative support due to the lack of qualified medical professionals, and women and people in rural communities faced multiple barriers. Often, we wonder about the strength of the recommendations we are consistently asked to make at GTS, but when they come directly from community members, they make sense. People told us that while big solutions might be slow, smaller ones – like ensuring older women receive information as they are entrusted to share it with younger women – were possible and would be appreciated.

In Bangladesh, we spoke with people living with disabilities. The accounts of their journeys to access medicines and interact with health workers led to a series of recommendations that were incorporated into the work of the age and disability working group in Cox's Bazar, and shared widely on the global stage. People feared providing negative feedback in case it came back to hurt them, and there was widespread confusion about aid eligibility and care options. Although Covid-19 messaging was widespread, dangerous rumours persisted about what happened to those who were seeking treatment.

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I don't complain about healthcare workers because I'm afraid that if I visit again, they'll treat me even worse. I don't even know where to complain about all of the problems we face.

Rohingya woman in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

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Men do not wait for permission to go to a doctor, but women may not even go outside without permission.

Woman in Kunduz, Afghanistan

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A few days ago, I went to a doctor to receive phototherapy of my legs. But it didn't affect me at all. Tears started flowing out of my eyes because I didn't understand anything about the treatment.

Woman in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Making noise – our amplification and advocacy efforts

Data alone cannot drive decisions. The incessant cry for more ‘evidence’ is often a cover for inaction. If we do not continue to increase the advocacy and dialogue that happens alongside our data, even when it is difficult or feels ‘beyond our remit’, we risk feeding into that inaction. This belief has seen us pivot significantly, and continue to pivot in every project country, towards more of a networked approach to advocacy.

Our first [global analysis report](#), produced in collaboration with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), fed directly into a discussion with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) principals. Community feedback collected by GTS was soon afterwards credited as the catalyst for a system-wide reform package being proposed for 2023 by Martin Griffiths, Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs. Our work was further noted at the launch of the Global Humanitarian Overview and we were asked to present it at more than a dozen regional and global gatherings. This would not have been possible without core support, which saw us invest more in advocacy and policy than ever before, including the appointment of a new, dedicated policy coordinator.

Core support additionally helped us deepen our dialogue with communities and test different methods of facilitating discussions that would better support localisation of accountability efforts. In Haiti, we teamed up with [The New Humanitarian](#) to see how far our data could go. For the

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If we always wait for humanitarian aid, we won't get anywhere. We need to manage on our own through work, in order to eat and meet our needs.

[Woman in Les Cayes, Haiti](#)

first time we made the dialogue public, with humanitarian leaders and Haitian advocates agreeing to unpack the data live on a webinar. A creole version of the report was further discussed with community groups in Haiti, who used it to plan their own advocacy strategies.

2022 saw a renewed hunger for our data at global level. It fed into global evaluations, discussions by the IASC's operational policy and advocacy group, Grand Bargain workstreams, country based pooled fund management, global task forces and many more, training programmes, conferences and journals. Our data was included in ODI's Grand Bargain reporting, ALNAP's 'State of the humanitarian system', the Cash Learning Project's 'State of the World's Cash', and at many policy dialogues including Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW), IASC gatherings, global health forums and others. Our advocacy also had regional impact, including presentations and dialogue with regional humanitarian colleagues in West Africa, the Middle East and North Africa.

A redesigned website has helped us tell our story in a cleaner way. We brought back quarterly newsletters to share our more unfiltered thoughts.

We also joined forces with others to speak more loudly for change. Along with five other leaders, we called for [transformation not tinkering](#) in response to the 'State of the Humanitarian System' report. We worked with Groupe URD to disseminate internal reflections about our own role in the humanitarian status quo, [challenging some of our colonial research norms](#) in the hope that, by making ourselves vulnerable to critique, peers would follow.

Our aim for next year and those that follow is to support more community-level advocacy, and ensure that our small headquarters team are not always the ones on the global stage.

Accountability in action

Supporting operational agencies in their quests to become more accountable remains a key element of our work, but it has continued to change shape. Where once we focused on teaching people how to track perceptions, we are now keener on helping humanitarian actors come up with their own, contextualised solutions and communicating our hard-won lessons with those who share our mission. Our projects with humanitarian agencies have taught us two things: many simply won't have the time, resources or will to continue carrying out data-driven perception studies after our training is over; and even if they do, the lack of independence often leaves perception data riddled with biases.

We led workshops across almost every project country, creating spaces for agencies to discuss perception data and find ways forward, instead of being told what to do. In Bangladesh, we gathered agency representatives together from across the Cox's Bazar Rohingya response to hear their challenges collecting and responding to feedback, then helped them design collective solutions. This grew into a broader piece of work examining what was and was not working across the response that was then used to guide the design of revised coordination structures and the workplan of an incoming coordinator. We partnered with UNICEF on a project to support the Rapid Response Mechanism in the Central African Republic to improve feedback systems based on existing practices.

In Nigeria, we found that some analysis on modality preferences (i.e. in what form people prefer to receive aid) was only telling half the story. People may say they prefer cash or in-kind, but further enquiry showed us this was often simply because they had received it before and were familiar with it. Many also felt unable to express what they really wanted, seeing aid as a 'gift', and so were likely to align their feedback with what agencies were already providing out of courtesy. As we continued to try and gain a more nuanced understanding of what drives preferences and how to assess them, our analysis on the complexity of modality preferences was shared across the response and included in Nigeria's HNO to help guide response actors who were grappling with the same issue.

At the global level, we fed into the initial design of an accountability course through the Geneva Centre for Humanitarian Studies, and recorded a module for an open source course on humanitarian action in the digital age, led by the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières. We shared lessons learned with several of our donor agency staff through at least four workshops.

GTS is regularly asked to provide generic training and 2022 was no exception. In the past we have often worked hard on the 'capacity-strengthening' that funders so like to see from us, only to find that it failed to have the impact we hoped for due to either a lack of capacity or a lack of willingness on the part of busy humanitarian organisations to maintain the work. As a result, GTS is now turning down most training-only requests and re-evaluating what supporting organisations looks like for us.

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There are people who receive aid three or four times, even while there are people in need who haven't received anything.

Community leader in Port-à-Piment, Haiti

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Aid is inadequate because no one consults us. Humanitarians do not know our reality. They arrive with aid and as we are vulnerable, we cannot refuse. So we take it, then exchange it for food.

Woman in Moyen Chari, Chad

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Find out exactly what people need and provide them with what they need, rather than handing out everything.

Woman in central Ukraine

Tuning the methodologies that power our work

All of our project countries benefited from a more advanced sampling methodology, developed in 2022 in collaboration with 'Statisticians without Borders.' Quantitative studies included our newly updated GTS 'core questions', co-developed by our policy and statistics experts, to allow for regional or global analyses and recommendations for action that go beyond individual countries.

At the same time, we became better at tailoring our work to the contexts in which we operate. Our work in Somalia included a range of questions on people's preferences around the depth and breadth of assistance (e.g. whether they prefer smaller transfers over a longer period or vice versa, how aid should be spread among members of the same community) and how this contributes to feelings of resilience. Work in Bangladesh focused on social cohesion and targeted recommendations for an increasingly restrictive environment, which saw the space for independent data and research actors shrink. Our community engagement in Nigeria and CAR focused on the power dynamics between communities and with voucher vendors, as well as the associated protection risks people face.

Refining our methodologies saw us include additional questions to gauge the importance that communities attribute to different aspects of accountable aid programming (e.g. transparency, information, participation). By comparing expectations to people's actual perceptions, we were able to visualise the 'gap' between expectations and reality, and so indicate where the response is falling short. This gap analysis was included in Somalia's HRP and used to highlight priority areas for action in all project countries.

Our ground-breaking methods study on ethnicity of interviewer effect, which we reported on in our 2021 annual report, made it into the [Survey Practice](#) journal in September 2022.

We learned a lot from our questions, both quantitative and qualitative, about information. People think they are informed, but they are really not. This needs further exploration, but it became clearer to us that people think that feeling informed about aid is often limited to knowing

when distributions will happen, providing further evidence that supporting people's agency is a long way off.

We also learned over time that consulting humanitarians during the inception phase is undoubtably important to establish relationships and ensure buy-in (especially because our research rarely shines a flattering light on a response). At times, we have almost let that drive us too much and have nearly fallen into the trap of doing commissioned research for specific clusters that we doubt would lead to significant change. Our work places primary importance on crisis-affected people, not organisations. Our research has shown that no matter how close to a community aid actors can be, they rarely represent their views. Many of the humanitarians we speak to are from affected communities and can share valuable insights, but we cannot assume they represent the views of crisis-affected communities. Humanitarians will speak from their vantage point, which is likely a position of power in comparison to affected communities.

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The only right we have is to receive because we don't know anything about what the people in charge of aid are doing.

Woman affected by the earthquake in Les Cayes, Haiti

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*Income-generating activities
are better than income, better
than aid.*

Man in Pouytenga, Burkina Faso



What crisis-affected people told us in 2022

In 2022, we spoke with more than 13,000 people in over a dozen countries, whose lives and livelihoods have been deeply affected by war, disaster, hunger and climate change. What we learnt from our surveys and conversations is what we have always learnt – that those caught up in crisis from Afghanistan to Ukraine have exactly the same kinds of expectations that anyone would have in their positions. They demand to be treated with respect, they want a say in where the aid being channelled in their name actually ends up, and they want to play an active part in their own long-term recovery.

For example, among crisis-affected people we surveyed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Central African Republic, only 36% believed they can influence the humanitarian response in their area. Yet the vast majority (94% and 80%, respectively) thought it important that their community should have a say in how aid is provided.

94% of people in DRC think it's important their communities can influence how aid is provided – but only 36% believe they actually can.

Lack of engagement deepens skewed power dynamics

Meaningful engagement with communities – where people's input influences decisions – is critically lacking, but even basic consultations seem to be missing. In four out of six contexts, fewer than half of those surveyed think their community was consulted about aid. A man in Hodan, Somalia receiving cash assistance explained, "The community should be part of discussions before the project starts. As a beneficiary, we should be able to ask them questions. Also, when the project is done, we should be able to sit with them and tell them what was good and what wasn't."

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Man in Hodan, Somalia

Because crisis-affected communities are largely left out of the decision-making process, some people feel like they do not have a right to have a say. "No, we don't have [the right to make decisions about aid] because community organisations tend to minimise the role of youth," explained a young man in Les Cayes, Haiti. This sentiment is leading many people to feel like they have a lower status than humanitarians, deepening the already skewed and degrading power dynamics at play in humanitarian assistance. A woman in Logone Oriental, Chad said, "It's at their level only. Nobody knows how it's going."

When people have no voice and no power to determine the assistance they receive, it is unsurprising that most respondents think the aid received did not meet their basic needs: in Chad, only 8% of aid recipients surveyed felt that humanitarian assistance addresses their essential needs.

Fed up with short-term solutions

Less than half of those surveyed felt that the aid received enables them to live without assistance in future. People, especially those living in protracted crises, are fed up with short-term solutions and find such assistance to be patriarchal: "[Humanitarians] always try to assist us when we are in a crisis. They are like our parents, the parents

of the affected people, so a parent cannot let their child suffer without helping them. And a parent who has means would always think about the future of their child,” shared a woman in Moyen Chari, Chad.

Communities know that aid providers have a specific mandate to support people’s urgent and basic needs, but this short-term vision tends to perpetuate their sense of instability. Calls for better programming – in ways that require humanitarians to work in close collaboration with development actors – is constant and consistent across crisis contexts where people were surveyed. A man in Pouytenga, Burkina Faso stated, “Nobody can help someone to be self-sufficient. But if they have income-generating activities, it is better than income, it is better than aid. The one who helps you will get tired one day. But if you have an [income-generating] activity, it can go ahead. If not, the day the person who helps you abandons you, that’s the day you will fail too.”

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They should be transparent with us about how people are selected [to receive aid]. If they were transparent, we would know why one category of person was chosen over another, which would prevent questions and frustrations.

Woman living in a host community in Goma, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Lack of transparency on how aid dollars are spent fuels mistrust

Our surveys provide evidence for a widespread lack of trust in aid actors, fuelled by a failure to consult affected people on aid decisions. Mistrust is further compounded by a perceived lack of transparency: less than half of all respondents knew how aid was targeted and very few knew how aid providers spent their project funding.

In Haiti, 98% of respondents said it was important to them that they receive information on how humanitarian

funds are spent, but only 2% understood how funds were allocated. Trust in aid providers is also built – and undermined – by the extent to which aid providers keep their commitments. Respondents in Nigeria, for example, stated that when aid arrives when promised they feel more respected.

From complaints and feedback to engagement and agency

Despite these critical issues, aid providers still tend to focus on complaint and feedback mechanisms – reactive systems to collect comments about what went wrong – rather than aiming to set up aid programming in line with people’s preferences from the onset. Even these complaint and feedback mechanisms are not living up to their ‘accountability’ claims. First, people’s understanding of how to make complaints varies widely across contexts. While most respondents know how to submit feedback in Nigeria (94%), few know how to do so in the Central African Republic (36%).

In addition, most people are not using these accountability mechanisms. Only 27% of those surveyed in Nigeria have shared a complaint, the lowest use rate despite the highest knowledge rate across contexts surveyed. There are a plethora of reasons why people do not share their concerns, from fear of reprisals to apathy to a deep mistrust in aid providers, especially among those who know which channels exist to do so. Rather than relying on complaints as the

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We have the impression that aid is forced on us: we must take what we are given without questioning it. I would say I have seen nothing change since we shared our opinions with them. It seems our views are not as important. The population is not involved in the different phases of the project.

Displaced man in Kabare, South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo

principal means of informing and modifying programming, aid organisations should proactively involve affected people in decision-making processes from the very start. At its best, this kind of engagement can eliminate people's need to complain, empower them with decision-making authority and help them feel like they have agency over their lives.

Taking a step back to look at global trends

Reviewing our humanitarian reform work saw certain themes jump off the page, which helped guide our conversations with humanitarian actors in-country. Our 2022 analysis saw us speak more critically about community experiences of extractive needs assessment processes, tokenistic monitoring and evaluation exercises, and the limits of cluster-based planning systems that see prioritisation happen far from the communities who will be most impacted by it.

We asked more explicitly about transparency and people's feedback was clear: transparency is overwhelmingly wanted and almost always absent. Aid cannot claim to be 'people-centred' if its recipients do not know what to expect and cannot assess whether those in charge are following the rules, delivering the aid they said they would when they said they would, spending aid funds efficiently, and making community-approved decisions about aid allocation.

85% — the proportion of earthquake-affected people in Haiti who responded 'Not at all' to our question: 'I understand how humanitarian money is spent in my community.'

Finally, we became much louder about resilience. Our data on this topic is irrefutable. Communities want a longer-term view. After some initial hesitance, and indeed our fair share of pushback, we are now asking more questions of humanitarian practitioners and funders alike about how longer-term support can be prioritised.

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They slept with the girls. Only then would they put them on the list.

Woman in Kaga-Bandoro, Central African Republic, internally displaced

Tackling sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH)

Building on our existing processes of training, code of conduct and referral pathways devised with protection actors, we strengthened our incident referral guidelines for use by project teams, and continue to review and strengthen them on an ongoing basis.

We have also been working to ensure our programmes support better approaches to protection at the response-wide level. We started looking into the fundamental link between protection and accountability in our work, and how it is not always well understood or practiced. In crises, people's vulnerabilities are heightened, leaving them open to higher risks of abuse and exploitation. Our advocacy on protection from SEAH follows similar lines to our work overall: involve communities so that needs and solutions can be determined jointly and in a holistic manner.

Finally, we undertook analysis of complaints and feedback mechanisms and their impact on response effectiveness, which led us to conclusions about mechanisms specifically for protection from SEAH that will be communicated in a brief in 2023. We have also been workshopping a proposal for a protection-specific cadre of projects, which we hope to kick start in the coming year.



Money

Our donors are important allies in our quest for a more accountable humanitarian system. Being a small organisation is tough and we are thankful to them for powering our work, amplifying the views of people in crisis in their own spheres of influence, and talking through big systemic problems with us. We note the flexible multi-year funding provided by Switzerland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway and Germany, without whom we would certainly not have been able to achieve the impact we have.

Our budget and turnover rose from the previous year, with 91% of that funding going to people and projects, the rest on support structures, office and other indirect costs.

We continue to seek Quasi-International Organization status in Austria.

We updated our risk matrix in 2022, and noted that our biggest risk was rising costs, brought on by inflation and attributed widely to the conflict in Ukraine. Costs for data collection, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Chad and the Central African Republic, have far exceeded budgets. We see rising costs, coupled with donors' need to prioritise, as our number one existential risk as an organisation. While accountability and independent data may seem 'soft' or 'not life-saving' to some donors, it will prove impossible for funders and large organisations to effectively prioritise without listening to communities.

We are mitigating this risk by seeking non-traditional funding sources to supplement the support we receive from our committed cadre of institutional donors. We are also working to maintain constant dialogue with our funders to ensure our work is seen as valuable to ongoing policy debates and practice conundrums. We are constantly evaluating our operating model to keep it as lean and agile as possible something we remain very proud of by comparison to other data-gathering organisations in the sector. We are exploring partnerships and networking for opportunities to operate more efficiently.

It will prove impossible for funders and large organisations to effectively prioritise without listening to communities.

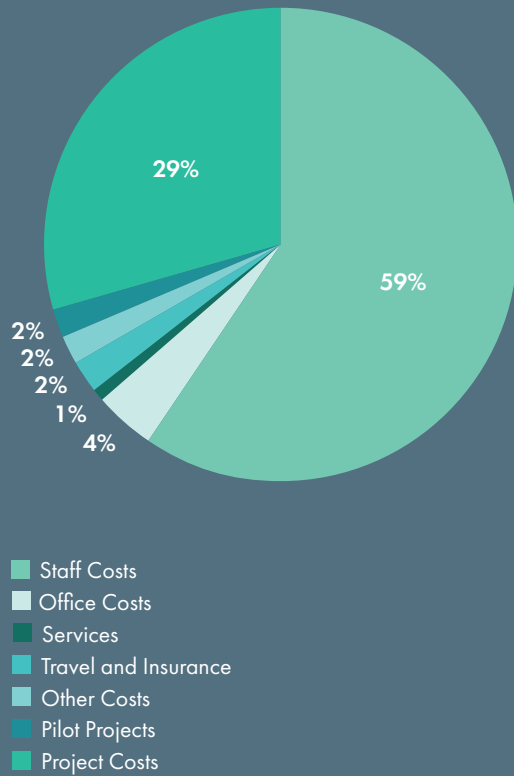
We are grateful to all of the funders who made our work possible in 2022:

- Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- Collaborative Cash Delivery Network
- Disasters Emergency Committee
- German Federal Foreign Office
- Global Affairs Canada
- The H2H Network
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
- The New Humanitarian
- Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
- UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA)
- United States Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance
- UN Women
- World Food Programme
- World Health Organization
- CERHA HEMPEL (pro bono services)

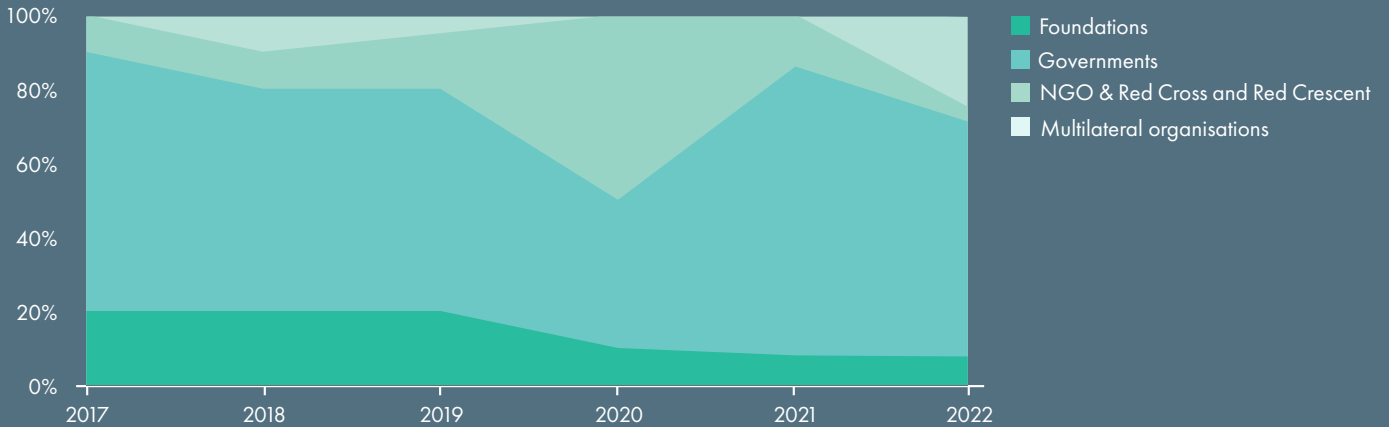
Weathering a financial crisis

We are lucky that we are so well-supported, but 2021 was the start of a perfect monetary storm. Indications that donors would soon be tightening their belts trickled in and we worked harder than ever to try to wow funders with high-impact work. Rising costs started to hurt both our projects and our people. Costs per interview rose almost everywhere, but our project budgets did not. Our bills went up. Staff felt the pinch of dramatic rent increases and winter energy costs, but we were not in a position to increase salaries in accordance. Government subsidies helped us offer a cost-of-living bonus. We are doing what we can to increase our core budget, not to grow but to safeguard and keep improving our vital accountability work. We are grateful for, and proud of, our diverse and long list of donors, and invite more funders to join us. We cannot reiterate our call for flexible funding enough.

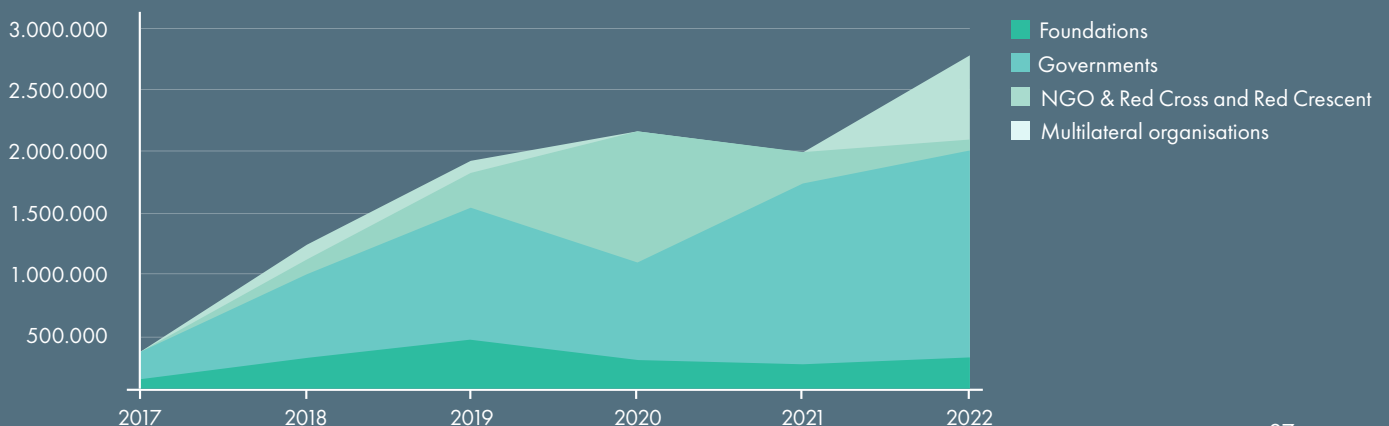
2022 Expenses



Funding 2017-2022



Funding 2017-2022 EUR



Our team and culture

It may be growing, but GTS remains the little team that could. We worked with new energy in 2022, emerging from the disruption of two years of lockdowns and relishing the chance for more face-to-face strategising, planning – and a bit of fun. We held our first in-person team retreat in a long time, grabbing the opportunity to spend time together and tackle some tough questions, but missing the presence of important colleagues who – as in years prior – could not access EU visas in time. While we would love to gather in other parts of the world, we are also restricted by our budget. As we seek solutions in the coming years, we hope to be able to proudly say that when important meetings happen, everyone is around the (physical) table. Like most people, we are a bit tired of staring at screens.

Our founder, Nick van Praag, stepped back from leading the organisation mid-year, handing the reins to Meg Sattler. Staff continued to tell us they are motivated by learning opportunities and flexibility, and we have tried to do our best to offer both. In 2022 we introduced more mental health breaks for staff as a pilot – something that, if feedback is positive, we will keep in the coming years.

Diversity remains a challenge for us, as we look back at some of our previous attempts to build a less Euro-centric team. Progress has at times been stifled not just by visas, but by an inability to provide desirable and secure working conditions outside of our legal 'home'. While we keep seeking diverse viewpoints, we see much promise in partnering, recognising our role as a global neighbour and ensuring that our small team in our part of the world is working better with the much bigger groups of people much closer to where most aid programming sits.

Strengthening our foundations

In 2022, we achieved the following:

- Launched our new website, communications strategy and reports database, making our work more accessible and user-friendly. Our communications coordinator is now a critical team function, with a bold new storytelling strategy for 2023.
- Held our first whole-team retreat after the pandemic restrictions, bringing colleagues together from all over the world to discuss strategy and internal issues, and to facilitate team building.
- Ramped up our security management, activating a new policy in which all staff are now required to undertake Hostile Environment Awareness Training. Seven staff were trained in 2022, with the rest to follow in 2023.
- Bolstered our internal functions, with a new operations manager and an HR focal point. We welcomed a new head of finance, with a background in both humanitarian finance and operations, to support the organisation more holistically.
- Next year we will develop our organisational carbon reduction strategy.

What next?

It's common at year end for the GTS team to feel a mix of pride and dejection – it's right to feel proud that we've worked hard, reflected on our successes and failures, and thought critically about where to put our energy next year. But we also feel the frustration that comes with the palpable sense that the 'system' of humanitarian action, though known for its rapid action, is so painfully slow to change.

We exit 2022 having pushed boundaries, shown both boldness and humility, and taken on some increasingly tough challenges. It is hard to know what is in store for the world, but we know that the fight for accountability in global responses to crises has a long way to go, and we're ready to play our part in the next phase.

Humanitarianism, of the kind enshrined in museums in Geneva, was once perceived as an heroic act by well-heeled benefactors, a gift to people suffering in far flung places. But the hero has been shoved off his pedestal. The idea that humanitarian action is altruistic and therefore less prone to scrutiny does not hold at a time when the countries most impacted by crises are demanding reparations from those whose pollution, and colonialism, has done them so much harm. When we realise that adequate responses to crises (and ideally, their prevention) is a right and not a gift, the narrative shifts. It's with this backdrop that we are questioning how much effort we have put into trying to influence and change the systems of humanitarian coordination that operate largely outside the realities of people's lives, perpetuating saviourism and existing without accountability.

We worry about shrinking funding for quality and accountability. We worry about humanitarian agencies making a mad dash for climate funding and repeating all the old mistakes in programmes with new names but the same approaches. We worry, always, that we're not doing our absolute best by every person who has voluntarily taken the time to sit down with our research teams and share their views, or when we see large entities using our work to window-dress their lack of accountability.

But we are also excited. We want to do more to use our networks, methods and evidence to try and help shift the power dynamics in aid, not just tidy up its edges. In 2022 we saw perhaps the strongest engagement ever with our work at the top of the decision-making pyramid, we enjoyed loyal support from our cadre of committed funders, and we were humbled by the honesty and openness of more than thirteen thousand people who spoke to our teams because they believed things could change.

We do too. In 2023, we'll fight harder for it than ever before.



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