

Ground Truth Solutions annual report 2021

Against the tide: Wins, losses and lessons from a small organisation
working to put people at the centre of humanitarian action



GROUND TRUTH
SOLUTIONS

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the thousands of people impacted by crises who have taken the time to speak to us and share your views; to our funders, especially our core funders, who make our work possible; to our dedicated Board, who ask the right questions at the right times; to our many partners and co-conspirators in our quest for systemic change and to the advocates working tirelessly within organisations to use our findings for good – even when it’s hard.

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

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The semantic satiation of people at the centre

You would be hard pressed to find a humanitarian policy or planning document that doesn't tout 'people at the centre' nowadays. But ask crisis-affected people how that is going, and they tell of continued marginalisation and a sector that can't seem to meet even the most basic standards.

Our 2021 projects showed us more than ever that all the right words are written in all the right places and the sector is full of individuals who care, but the system itself is geared against accountability. This leaves us with a choice: give up, or double down. Our commitment is strong. But our continued optimism for change comes not from a blind belief that a few surveys can move mountains but from a more informed understanding of the problem statement. We can no longer be fooled into thinking commitments mean real changes, no matter from how high they come. In 2021, we realised that we needed to pivot from a primary focus on data to more emphasis on advocacy for system change.

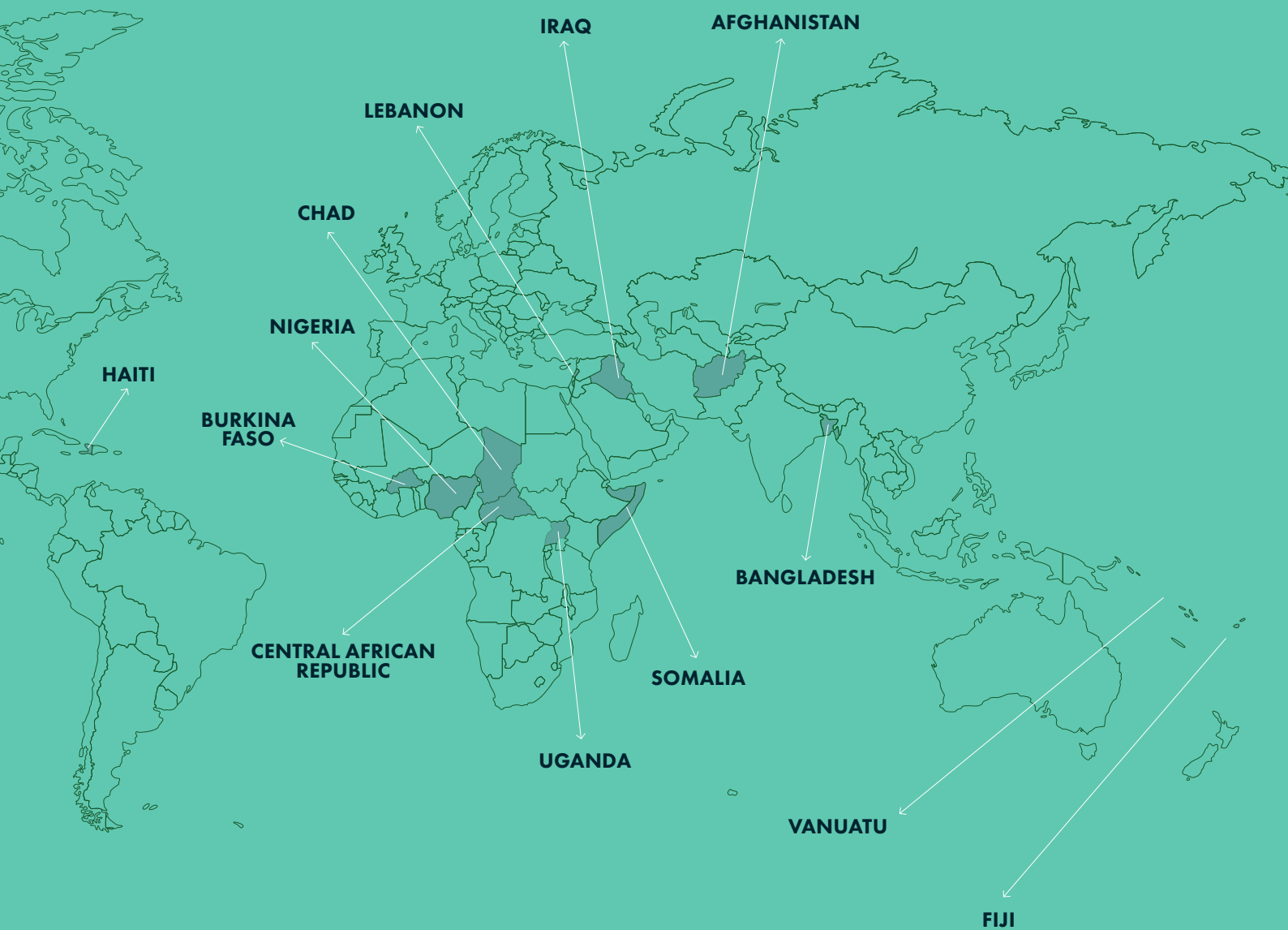
As we wrote in our strategy, if the pendulum is to swing in the direction of more people-centred humanitarian action, reform needs to happen at all levels. We are a relatively tiny organisation. This is all much bigger than us, but that isn't a reason to be defeatist or to wash our hands of whether or not action is taken on our findings. 2021 was a year of many deep breaths and a resolve to try harder. We know we can do more to influence those whose decisions directly affect people whose lives have been turned upside down in the aftermath of crisis. We owe it to the individuals who give us their time, speak to our teams, answer our questions and thoughtfully provide recommendations.

With this in mind, we have become much more self-critical. It remains true that nobody needs to pay attention to our data. The incentives gap for accountable aid is as real as it is troubling. But that is our challenge and not our excuse. If the incentives aren't there, why aren't they? If leaders aren't making the right decisions, what would encourage them to do so? And if people affected by crisis feel powerless to advocate for their rights to protection and assistance, how can we support them to change that?

This report tries to provide an honest reflection on what we've done, what we've learned and where we want to go now. From Bangladesh to Burkina Faso, we've spoken to thousands of people and worked hard to see their voices permeate the many cracks in the humanitarian system. We're immensely proud of our contribution as a small passionate team that demonstrably punches above its weight. And we're geared up and ready to keep pushing for change in the years to come, with our ever-growing network of passionate partners. We will do our very best, but we can't do it alone. More humanitarian actors, donors, policymakers, leaders and practitioners need to get on board, not by sharing more of the same commitments written in different ways, but by being honest about why things aren't working, how unaccountable this sector remains and how we can change the tide.

This report is not just a list of activities, but a rallying cry.

Where we worked in 2021





JANUARY

Our first ever core-funded response-wide projects launched in Chad and Burkina Faso



FEBRUARY

We commissioned our first climate change research, identifying a gap to be filled in perceptions that launched a new programme stream



MARCH

Ground-breaking 'ethnicity of interviewer effect' study underway in Bangladesh



JUNE

'Falling through the cracks' report on Iraq's daily workers released with the Iraq Cash Consortium



MAY

Second user journey report published in Lebanon. User journeys help aid providers to understand what each stage of their programmes feels like on the receiving end



APRIL

We gathered hundreds of people at Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week to talk about concrete action on perception data



JULY

We supported Red Cross National Societies across Africa to understand the perceptions of their volunteers in the time of Covid-19



AUGUST

The Taliban took Afghanistan as we prepared to start data collection with the World Health Organization. We pivoted and safely launched our surveys on access to healthcare shortly after



SEPTEMBER

H2H project launched in Haiti just weeks after the earthquake



DECEMBER

We identified our partner – Fama Films – for our first film-based community engagement activities in Burkina Faso



NOVEMBER

We shared global lessons learned at the NetHope summit, while workshopping local lessons learned in Bangladesh with BBC Media Action and Translators without Borders

OCTOBER

Our work with national NGOs in Afghanistan wrapped up, seeing them equipped to integrate perceptions in their work without us



Humanitarian reform at the response level

It's common nowadays for agencies to promote their accountability and feedback mechanisms. Log in to any webinar on 'best practice' and you'll hear about several of these. But no matter how good a single agency accountability system is, we can't truly know how people are experiencing humanitarian action unless we ask them about the response as a whole: what they know about it, how they feel about it, and how it treats them. People often don't know from whom exactly they are receiving aid, and aid recipients don't see humanitarian action in the same siloes that its practitioners do. Humanitarian Response Plans (HRP) and appeals lay out collective and coordinated approaches to meet people's needs, and so the impact of this, from the community viewpoint, is what we track.

As Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) were encouraged by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to draft accountability strategies last year, we continued response-wide programmes in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Chad, the Central African Republic, and Somalia, and added Haiti toward the end of the year with some emergency funding from the H2H Network. We also supported partners to include perception indicators in the Refugee Response Plan and make changes based on feedback data as part of the U-Learn consortium in Uganda.

Our data showed us that previous trends in community feedback were continuing – people by and large feel respected and safer than they did before receiving aid, but lack opportunities to participate in decisions affecting the response, which most don't see as really meeting needs or reaching the right people. We also found that on most metrics, humanitarian staff paint a rosier picture of how things are going than their intended 'beneficiaries' do. This gap has not changed since our first survey work nearly a decade ago.

Metrics based on our perception data were included in response plans in Chad, the Central African Republic, Burkina Faso and Somalia, and used to inform the roll-out of the Joint Response Plan (JRP) in Bangladesh and Refugee Response Plan (RRP) in Uganda.

We surveyed humanitarian partners about the usefulness of our data and the experience of working with us. Across our response-wide projects, almost 100% of respondents said they found our data useful and clearly presented, felt included in the process and able to ask questions, and would recommend working with GTS. We also garnered near perfect scores from enumerators on how prepared they felt by our teams to collect data responsibly and effectively. People in operational agencies were honest, however, that they hadn't all made changes to their programmes based on perceptions and feedback, though roughly 60% said they had.

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If we're serious about using the Core Humanitarian Standard to its full potential in system reform, we can't do that without hearing what crisis-affected communities think about humanitarian aid. GTS' work has been critical in making sure the accountability agenda stays relevant and grounded in reality. With all the focus on AAP at the moment, that's more important than ever.”

Tanya Wood, CEO, Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance

The most critical part of our country-level programmes is dissemination of findings, and travel was still slowly shifting back into gear as Covid-19 entered its third year. In every project country we facilitated workshops, meetings, presentations and more, helping people to understand and act on the feedback we had collected. Beyond these standard elements, we went a step further in certain places to try to address identified barriers to responsiveness, including:

- In Bangladesh, in our project funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), we noted a lack of engagement at coordination level and jointly designed an advocacy plan with BBC Media Action and Translators without Borders, which included suggestions for improved coordination structures, a workshop series and discussions with donors, response leadership, government and other humanitarian actors.
- In Burkina Faso, we trained 12 national and international organisations on integrating and acting on perception indicators, realising we could not rely on presentations or advocacy but that more handholding on what to do next would be helpful. We also undertook a similar process in Afghanistan, this time with clusters.
- In Somalia, we took the opportunity of the launch of a new Working Group on Accountability to hold an action-oriented webinar, jointly presenting analysis of community feedback from three organisations and asking pointed questions to try to generate follow-up on people's views rather than simply a roll-out of generic accountability activities.

When it comes to action on findings, we've been pleased with how perceptions and relevant indicators have been included in planning documents, how people have pulled together to listen to and react to our findings at high levels, and how more and more country teams (in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere) are asking if we can support them to meet their commitments. We now want to see more evidence of concerted action

on feedback. We have started requesting concrete commitments from country teams that they truly plan to act on people's views. We do so upfront, before we launch into new projects, so that we can provide support through facilitation and further community engagement.

At our first internal 'fail festival' breakfast in October 2021, we owned up to the – in hindsight, often cringeworthy – recommendations we had made in some of our reports, finding them either blatantly obvious or ignorant of the efforts of humanitarian actors already working hard to try to make such basic improvements. We are constantly asked by country teams for recommendations, but we now only include them if they are co-created with affected people or humanitarian actors, ideally with both.

What is a response-wide project?

Our programmes look different in each country, but generally include:

- Careful analysis of context and the strategic goals of the humanitarian response
- Annual perceptions surveys, to ask people how they view and experience the response
- Development of associated indicators to include in response monitoring and evaluation
- Qualitative follow-up to dig deeper into findings and ensure we are hearing from vulnerable groups in appropriate ways
- Ongoing dialogue with crisis-affected people and humanitarian responders to facilitate action on feedback
- Documentation of the process for global advocacy

Our role as a critical friend: Independent, co-opted or walking on glass?

GTS is not an organisation that fits easily into the standard boxes of humanitarian coordination. We need a degree of buy-in from the country team if we are to be able to do our work safely and support action on findings, but we also need to be able to collect and analyse data independently and without censorship. One of the topics of most interest at our 2021 team retreat was how to pull off what is often a delicate dance for the best outcomes.

In 2021 we felt under pressure from country teams to fold under their strategies for Accountability to Affected People (better known by its acronym AAP) or even to somehow replace those strategies where they didn't yet exist. This is not bad in theory but saw us in several countries asked to draft 'AAP plans' for inclusion in HRPs, or to limit our dialogue to meetings within AAP working groups, talking mainly to other 'accountability specialists'. This is a worrying trend. The point of our work is not to act as an accountability checkbox, but to help humanitarian decision-makers facilitate better programming by listening to and acting on people's feedback. The AAP silo has not helped us do that, and we have found it concerning that accountability plans, now mandated to fall under humanitarian country teams, are being passed to us to write. If, however, this comes with facilitating a process across a response where operational agencies' commitment to act on feedback could be recorded, and therefore included in such a plan, we see an opportunity to step up to this role.

Good practice: Haiti and Central African Republic (CAR)

In Haiti and CAR, the country teams supported our work through assisting with in-country security, committing to gather agencies to discuss and react to our findings, helping us fundraise if needed and, overall, demonstrating a leadership commitment to responding to feedback. They allowed our work to be conducted independently and took the findings seriously. In both countries, they saw our work as informing better accountability but not necessarily being siloed under an AAP banner, opening doors for us to include our findings in broader response processes.

On the right track: Chad and Somalia

In Chad and Somalia, country buy-in was high in principle, but we often found ourselves lacking high-level audiences and instead were asked to produce narrative for AAP planning documents or to support working groups. We have had more success in these countries working with second-tier coordination structures like cash working groups, clusters or single agencies, which enabled uptake of our findings without relying too heavily on the HCT. In Chad, particularly, we have been entrusted as a facilitator, gathering people around our data, discussing accountability and feeding into decisions.

Room for improvement

In one country our activities were relegated to an AAP working group where we often felt under pressure to supply data to information managers without careful analysis, or to contribute to joint AAP activities that weren't necessarily followed-up. There was a degree of control exercised that we have not experienced elsewhere, and which hindered our work. In 2022, we have decided to ramp up our efforts there with implementing agencies, especially national organisations, and to work more closely with aid actors who have committed to act on our findings.

Closing the loop

A common criticism of entities that collect data in humanitarian settings is that nobody returns to communities to report back on what they found. GTS conducts this so-called 'loop closing' as a matter of course, but it's not as straightforward as it sounds. Initially we simply shared summary findings back, generally via whatever channel the majority of respondents told us they preferred to use during our surveys. But we found that doing this via telephone generated limited engagement (people didn't open the links or try to engage further) and doing it face-to-face often led people to tell us that frankly, they didn't care that much what the findings were. Since they were the people who had provided them in the first place, there were few surprises. In a cash project in Lebanon, none of the research participants said they wanted the results of our surveys, they just wanted action taken. Makes sense.

In 2021, we set out to make sure that rather than a static process of ‘closing the loop’, we engaged communities more in the dialogue process throughout our projects. This took different forms in different places, but usually involved planning to return to community groups *after* we had feedback on what humanitarian actors actually intended to do with the findings, and/or working with them to hear reflections on the findings and to co-create recommendations. The latter has helped to improve the richness of our analysis and advocacy, and in 2021 community recommendations were included in our projects in Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad and the Central African Republic.

The Central African Republic: Our first ‘integrated programme’

Our strategic quest for more integrated country strategies bore fruit in CAR last year, where the same project team managed a response-wide programme (funded by UNICEF), perceptions tracking on cash and vouchers (funded by the German Federal Foreign Office) and dialogue and capacity strengthening efforts that cut across both. Despite some teething problems – we hadn’t quite predicted the workload, and could have benefited from more staff – this approach proved our hypothesis that by integrating activities, they become more than the sum of their parts. Spurred on by a supportive country team, we saw a wider network of people interacting with our results in more forums, which meant a larger pool of champions for our data, more opportunities to keep people’s perceptions at the forefront and a greater understanding of how and when to adapt to the evolving context.

Want to know what people really think? Consider who is asking the questions.

In Bangladesh, we heard from partners that bias might be impacting our perception data from Rohingya communities. If Bangladeshis were asking the questions – no matter how respectful they were, or what language they used – maybe people wouldn’t be honest about how they felt. We set about finding out. Ethnicity-of-interviewer effects are well-studied and documented in the United States and increasingly in Europe, mainly investigating effects between Black and white interviewers and interviewees, but no systematic study had been undertaken in a refugee context. Our [study](#) with the International Organization for Migration showed clearly that respondents interviewed by Rohingya expressed much lower levels of satisfaction with aid services than those interviewed by Bangladeshis. Differences between the interviewer types were also significant on topics around safety, respect and information provided by aid agencies. The findings pointed to a social desirability bias. Rohingya interviewers are more likely to elicit views that are socially undesirable, and less likely to capture perceptions and behaviors that are socially desirable. With most enumerator teams in the response comprised of Bangladeshis, this study proved hugely useful to response and research actors advocating for more Rohingya researchers, and is soon to be published in a peer-reviewed research journal.

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Thank you for the interview but we want something concrete after this interview. We are really tired of interviews without follow-up.”

Woman receiving aid, 49, Central African Republic



Cash and vouchers: A way to go on agency, dignity

The percentage of humanitarian aid provided via cash and vouchers (CVA) rose in 2021, predicted to have finally surpassed 20% of all aid provided. Cash actors remained willing audiences for GTS feedback in 2021, both globally and in-country. Our data continued to indicate that cash and voucher programming brought with it increased likelihood of recipient satisfaction, but that there was a long way to go before cash programming lived up to its claims of improved dignity and agency.

Incentives matter

In one of our most successful projects, we explored the user journeys of Syrian refugees receiving multi-purpose cash from the World Food Programme (WFP) in Lebanon. We did so in partnership with the Cash Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, Learning Organizational Network (CAMEALEON). Conditions were favourable for action, because CAMEALEON and WFP had agreed in advance they would act on recommendations. Any arrangement that obliges a large operating agency to act on people's perceptions and feedback – or at the very least to explain why it has not done so – is positive and much harder to find at the response-wide level. The data demonstrated that people were unfamiliar with using ATMs and were worried about having to utilise them to access their cash assistance. We recommended encouraging more independent use of ATMs by having trainers on site. This inspired thinking on how we can work better with third party, non-implementing bodies in responses in future, be they funders or monitoring bodies. This in turn has encouraged us to pursue partnerships with entities including the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) in the United Kingdom.

A way to go before cash = dignity

Rolling out the third year of our Cash Barometer project with the German Federal Foreign Office, we set out to understand how the humanitarian “cash revolution” was presenting itself to recipients in Nigeria, Somalia and the Central African Republic, asking them about their experience at various stages in the process, as well as

the protection risks they faced. In Nigeria's BAY states, where more than two million people receive monthly cash, we found that there is a long way to go before cash and voucher assistance is empowering, with most people telling us they did not feel informed, were unable to participate and that decisions about who received cash were not considered fair. These themes were echoed in Somalia, where only 25% of the 1,526 cash and voucher recipients we spoke to in October 2021 feel their opinions were considered by aid providers. This is where our focus on including perception indicators in HRP's is important, because our response-wide work the previous year had seen an objective included in the plan to increase the percentage of respondents who feel their opinions are considered from 37% to 50%. These targets help to show where improvement can and should be made, and keep the focus on concrete improvement instead of generic AAP mechanisms.

We have continued to see the value in qualitative approaches when it comes to communicating perceptions on cash and vouchers, as these tend to provide more actionable recommendations even if they are based on smaller samples. Our dialogue with humanitarian actors was generally done via cash working groups, or bilaterally with influential cash agencies like WFP and donors. The commitment from working groups is promising, but we learned that more bilateral engagements are necessary to discuss and communicate our findings. We conducted dozens of presentations tailored to individual agencies and, one agency at a time, developed the basis for strong communities of practice in Cash Barometer countries. We will work with those communities throughout the project, helping them make sense and act on feedback findings in their own spheres of influence, and involving them more in the design phase of our work and even during data collection to identify ‘low hanging fruit’ – areas where changes based on feedback are feasible. Our experience working with the Red Crescent in Bangladesh saw them commit to acting on perception data from the outset, which they then did: when community members explained shifting priorities in light of Covid-19, they changed more of their aid from in-kind to CVA. We hope to see more of this.

Health: Covid-19 and beyond

In 2021, Covid-19 continued to dominate the news but the frenetic humanitarian focus on hygiene and health programming slowed as the shocking scope of non-Covid-related needs rose to the fore. Our data from tracking perceptions of Covid-19 in six plus countries the previous year had told us that people felt informed and prepared to deal with the pandemic but that their priority needs were not being met, and anxiety around livelihoods and protection was high. With this in mind, we wrapped up most of our work on the pandemic specifically, finishing our programmes in Bangladesh and Iraq by mid 2021.

In Afghanistan, we partnered with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Awaaz humanitarian helpline to track perceptions on healthcare access and quality. Challenges came thick and fast, as the day the Taliban took Kabul was the day we were set to start data collection. But we found ways to cautiously move forward, thanks largely to the effort we had put into establishing solid partnerships in-country with data collectors and implementers alike.

Finding out what women thought about the response proved complicated, so by piloting ideas like using a 'call clock' to call women at different times of the day, we were able to drastically increase our sample of Afghan women. In follow-up qualitative discussions, we focused on the views of rural women, a double-marginalised group. The work continued into mid-2022, with findings used to inform WHO and its partners' continued work on access to healthcare, satisfaction with health services, and health worker security as Afghanistan's new normal takes hold.

We also worked with the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) to help track perceptions of their many volunteers across Africa on how the pandemic was affecting their communities, as well as how well they felt the Red Cross/Crescent national societies were doing when it came to helping them do their jobs. At IFRC's behest, we didn't publish the findings, instead agreeing to focus on concrete changes being made by the societies and IFRC in response to the data.

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Some people are more vulnerable than us. But they have not been selected for the programme, and we don't know why.”

Man receiving cash, 36, Borno, Nigeria

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

Female, Kunduz, Afghanistan

Accountability in action

We moved away from the not-quite-right term ‘capacity building’ last year in favour of Accountability in Action, to describe our work supporting agencies or coalitions to improve systems for collecting and/or responding to feedback. We hope we will be forgiven for the accidental creation of a new acronym – AiA. We also pushed back on some limited single-agency projects in favour of incorporating better dialogue and facilitation into our country programmes, in line with our strategy.

We conducted training for humanitarian agencies big and small in Burkina Faso, Uganda, Afghanistan, the Central African Republic and Chad, and drastically increased the number of workshops with humanitarian actors based on our data.

Supporting local efforts

As first responders and implementers of humanitarian projects, national NGOs are often the primary receivers of feedback and complaints from aid recipients. However, much of this feedback is informal and received on an ad-hoc basis and NGOs rarely have the tools or resources to collect and act on it systematically. In Afghanistan, we completed our project with Welthungerhilfe (WHH) and the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR), supporting national entities to track and respond to feedback in low-tech and context appropriate ways. In June, we published a [paper](#) via the Humanitarian Practice Group reflecting on lessons learned from such efforts aimed at capacity strengthening, stressing the lesson-sharing on both sides and the need for equal partnership. An organisation we trained in this project has now presented its first perception survey in the accountability working group, explaining in detail how useful this activity was for the agency.

We supported national governments, through our continued preparedness work with the disaster management bodies in Vanuatu and Fiji in partnership with the CDAC Network. The feedback mechanism, collaboratively designed with national actors in Vanuatu, has been approved and endorsed for roll-out by the disaster management authority. In Uganda, we provided the Ministry of Health with recommendations based on community feedback. And we worked with Red Cross national societies across Africa, helping them incorporate volunteer perception tracking into their work as an extension of our Covid-19 project.

Behind the scenes

In Uganda, we worked behind the scenes with U-Learn consortium partners on collecting, analysing and discussing feedback. We also trained agencies on aspects of feedback collection and response that they had deemed important to them. Almost all (90%) participants said they had taken action or made changes based on the training content within six months. These ranged from integrating new feedback mechanisms based on community demands (such as mobile help desks to facilitate feedback from people living with disabilities) to designing or improving feedback systems, developing perception indicators and working with communities to identify issues and co-create solutions. We also cautiously dipped our toes into ‘rumour tracking’ territory for the first time, helping agencies analyse, share and recognise the limits of data.

Good feedback but more effort needed

Feedback from partners in all AiA programmes was positive, with all of those we surveyed afterwards saying they found the support useful and would recommend it to others. Over 85% of participants of our various training

programmes intended to use the new knowledge and skills in their work, finding the training relevant and tailored to their needs. The only metric on which scores were low was on agencies embedding feedback collection and response into their organisational policies. This is why we have moved away from AiA programmes that target only accountability or monitoring focal points, because real action on feedback requires action at the leadership level.

Our biggest lesson in putting accountability into action in 2021 was that our strategy was on the right track in saying that more of this needs to happen at all project stages if real action on feedback is going to be taken. It isn't enough to simply present data. To catalyse cultural changes across a response, data needs to be examined and questioned, effort needs to be made by multiple agencies to proactively seek and react to feedback, and people need to know how to react to data at multiple levels and on an ongoing basis. This means a lot more facilitation and handholding, but it comes with a cost. It means our projects require more staff

time than in the past, and this leaves us in a challenging situation with funders who on the one hand demand more evidence of concrete outcomes by way of humanitarian behaviour change, and on the other hand balk at increased staffing costs in budgets. In 2022 we foresee our efforts in this area blurring more and more with those on advocacy, as we push in a more coherent direction toward concrete action and programmatic changes.

We are also making more of a concerted effort to identify national partners interested in carrying the torch of perception-based advocacy. We find ourselves asked often about how we are passing this on to humanitarian implementing agencies to ensure sustainability. This certainly has merit but we're acutely aware that when it comes to matters of accountability, aid agencies shouldn't be marking their own homework. 2022 will see us working more to identify national actors one step removed from humanitarian action who may be interested in playing such a role.

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Since the training, I have been able to organise community leaders meetings to get feedback on the services that are offered by the organisation. We have been able to discuss the feedback with the leaders and agree on how best to move forward together. More meetings are being organised. They have helped the programme to identify the gaps, especially where some of the communities were not benefiting from the services because they did not know about them, while others confirmed that the deployed teams were not reaching their areas”

Training participant, national agency, Uganda

Global advocacy

Our advocacy in 2021 was deeply rooted in our country data, but it targeted leadership. We had focused too much in the past on simply ensuring that our findings reached a global audience, and not enough on honing-in on systemic barriers to responsiveness and discussing them with people who have power over changing things. We met with policymakers, donors, actors and advocates, and started to think much more about the big problems when it comes to accountability. This saw us focus on the dire lack of incentives for accountable programming by the biggest agencies, the difficulties of the short and clunky humanitarian programme cycle, the evolution of accountability as a perceived technical speciality and the all-too-easy set of excuses (lack of funds being a major one). We published several blogs on these topics and used them as the basis for conversations with funders and policymakers.

Our data, analysis and honest conversations helped to influence:

- The policy decisions of the global Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) – first outgoing Mark Lowcock who used our data to inform this high profile [admission](#) that the sector had failed on accountability to affected people and rally various actors together for change, and then Martin Griffiths as his office has worked to make good on his promises to finally progress this issue
- The policies of various funders, to whom we have provided ideas, reviews, data and feedback
- The Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC), with whom we have semi-regularly shared data and analysis, and supported initiatives such as the HCT Retreat and provided input for the renewed IASC Principals statement on AAP
- The global evaluation on the humanitarian response to Covid-19

- The Core Humanitarian Standard Accountability Report, ODI's commentary on the grand bargain and the ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System report.

As ever, we presented our data and views on topics ranging from capturing the perceptions of people with disabilities to widespread systemic reform, at various fora including Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW), the global Cash Working Group, the Grand Bargain's Workstream 6 (on participation), the IASC results groups, the Communicating with Disaster-affected Communities (CDAC) Network's annual forum, the CHS Alliance's annual forum, a USAID forum on global health, the Danish Refugee Council's annual event, ALNAP conference, the International Humanitarian Studies Association conference, the ICRC's data forum, and many more.

We hosted our own event at the Humanitarian Networks Partnerships Week (HPNW), together with the International Federation of the Red Cross/Crescent (IFRC) and moderated by The New Humanitarian, inviting practitioners at agency, coordination and donor level to share concrete action on perception data under the banner '[feedback is useless \(until someone acts on it\)](#)'.

We are now making advocacy more central to everything we do. We are appointing our first ever Policy Coordinator to keep us to task and see us sharing more analysis and commentary in more places. When we don't see action on the feedback that we so carefully collect, it's reasonable to shirk responsibility – after all, we've done our bit – but we've chosen rather to take this up as an advocacy challenge. We also know we could have done much more in 2021 to contribute to global discussions on cash and vouchers – and aim to do better at this next year.

Partners can expect us to be much louder in 2022.

What happened when we asked people how they had acted on feedback (to an audience of 300)?

At Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW), we invited people to discuss how they had used community feedback data in decision-making. At the response-wide level, UN OCHA in the Central African Republic described how perception data had given both the HRP and needs overview credibility – without including people’s views, planning documents are incomplete. They also described how community feedback is useful in convening actors around common problems and finding collective solutions. Cash coordination was given as an example. On the practitioner side, World Vision Afghanistan and the Zimbabwe Red Cross spoke in impressive detail about lengths they had gone to in ensuring people of many demographic groups had the option to provide feedback, but spoke of senior leadership buy-in being essential from the outset if such efforts were to be maximised. World Vision mentioned the challenges in responding to individual requests but the importance of tracking trends over time to make longer term, larger programmatic pivots. And The Monitoring and Evaluation of the Somalia Humanitarian, Resilience and Health Programmes (MESH) outlined changes in cash programming and efforts to better include the voices of people with disabilities off the back of feedback data on a large scale.



What crisis-affected people told us in 2021

In 2021, we spoke to thousands of people in more than 12 countries. They painted a sobering picture.

Crisis-affected people do not think humanitarian aid meets their needs. It doesn't help that most feel unable to participate in decisions about aid, uninformed about available assistance, and unclear about targeting procedures. Aid recipients' negative perceptions about humanitarian aid are not new, and in contexts where urgent, life-saving assistance is insufficient, responses have turned into decades of recurrent, band-aid programming that leave people increasingly dissatisfied, wanting rather to be supported to stand on their own. Humanitarians know this, but despite widespread commitment to being accountable to people, they are not acting on these perceptions.

Our work aims to understand how people view the quality and effectiveness of aid they receive, and to help them influence the efforts undertaken on their behalf. Quantitative data was collected through surveys in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Haiti, Nigeria, Somalia, and Iraq. Some surveys focused on people's perceptions of the general response, others on recipients of cash and voucher assistance (CVA), or the lingering impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Methodologies, including sampling strategies and modes of data collection, were tailored to local contexts to best capture how people perceive aid. Despite these differences, the following common findings emerge.

Across the countries surveyed, there are variations in the percentages of people who think aid meets their priority needs. Chad is at the low end of the scale, with 22% of people who feel this is the case. In Iraq, at the other end of the scale, some 62% say their main needs are met, though unlike Chad, where data collection was face-to-face, the data was collected by the joint call centre, which may have influenced the way people responded.

Perceptions in each country are not always comparable to one another or over time, due to the different methodologies employed. Of those that can be compared, more people in Burkina Faso (Sahel and Centre-Nord regions) felt positive that aid met their priority needs in 2021 than in 2020, yet the overall proportion who do so remains low.

Meanwhile, the percentage of those who think aid meets their priority needs in the Central African Republic, already small, declined further in 2021.

It's easy to explain away needs not being met — due to responses being underfunded, mostly. So, we see it as important to examine how responses are conducted, and how much the sector lives up to basic standards on accountability and participation. Importantly, aid recipients who think their opinions are considered by humanitarians are more likely to think aid meets their needs. A host community member in Chad explains, "It is very important to consult us... to understand people's needs and to update things before programmes are implemented. Involving aid recipients from the start should be compulsory." Yet most people surveyed by GTS across a range of crises do not think they can influence decision making. When left out of the inception phase of a programme, many think the type of aid they receive is not well-adapted to their needs. In-kind and cash assistance provided is consistently considered insufficient. While humanitarian responses are constrained by their funding levels, better adapting to people's preferred aid modality would help ensure scarce funds are used more effectively. Aid recipients in the Central African Republic and Iraq prefer cash assistance (61% and 70%, respectively), but others — such as recently displaced Cameroonians living in Chad who do not have access to markets — prefer in-kind support.

Respondents in Burkina Faso, Chad, and the Central African Republic who say they receive aid when they need it most are more likely to think it meets their priorities. Ensuring people are well informed about aid distributions and communicating delays to communities will enable them to plan and prioritise. But few aid recipients feel informed about aid. Humanitarians often use community leaders as the main information channel yet the majority of respondents in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Chad, and Somalia say that they do not always trust their community leaders to share information or to represent their best interests. Some people think receiving information directly from humanitarians would solve things, but the problem might be less about who transmits the information than making sure clear information about targeting, which is lacking everywhere, is available to both those who are eligible and those who are not.

When information about the targeting process falls short, aid recipients are likely to think that aid provision is unfair. “When some people receive and others do not, it is not normal. We all have the same problems,” says one displaced person in Burkina Faso. In Iraq, only 47% of refugees surveyed say aid is targeted fairly. This suggests that information on targeting is not understood or disseminated effectively, or that there’s a disconnect between the way selection criteria are communicated and how people experience targeting in practice. Across all country contexts covered by GTS, people who do not think aid reaches those most in need believe that the targeting process is not fair or transparent.

Transparent practices should not stop at targeting processes. People want to know how humanitarian funding is used so they can hold aid providers to account. In Haiti, GTS asked people what they expected of the aid system versus what their experiences were. We found that people are very keen to know where all the international aid money flowing into the country goes. They see little sign of it in their communities. They also want to know how the humanitarian-development nexus is panning out, feeling that with so much funding over the years, aid programmes should cover more than immediate, hyper-short-term relief. A similar gap between expectations and reality was observed in Somalia: most people say it is important that aid providers communicate their plans and activities clearly. However, fewer than one-third feel aid providers are transparent about their plans.

The data collected by GTS in 2021 does not suggest that people are disgruntled with humanitarians themselves. In fact, most people surveyed feel respected by humanitarians. But being treated with respect has little impact on people feeling that priority needs are met. That will only change if and when feedback from affected people leads to follow-up action.

The following recommendations were provided by crisis-affected people in 2021:

- Consult communities more than once - during the inception phase of programme planning and at project mid and end points. Involve communities in the aid registration process to ensure accurate identification and inclusion of unregistered people, new arrivals, and minority groups.
- Explain the targeting process and its limitations. Communicate what type of demographic is targeted for a programme, how the lists of people will be compiled, and explain that further information will only be directed to the selected aid recipients – all before sharing the finalised aid recipient list. Explain the constraints: why aid programming doesn’t target everyone, or only a subset of a given demographic group, and why assistance was reduced or has yet to increase despite increasing numbers of people in need.
- Address information gaps and representation challenges. Regularise how often information is shared and in what format. People need to know when to expect information and from whom. If using community leaders as a main information channel, engage with representatives from diverse demographics to ensure information is shared broadly and prevent communities from perceiving information-sharing or decision-making to be biased. These leaders should be appointed by the communities they represent, not humanitarians. Invite a larger, more diverse group of leaders to the table.
- Adapt aid to people’s preferences and priority needs. Review and, where necessary, reallocate programme budgets based on the type, quantity, and frequency of aid that communities say they need to address their priorities. The necessity of reviewing food assistance is a consistent demand in all contexts.
- Communicate information on aid timing, delays, and duration so people can plan ahead. Inform communities well in advance about registration timelines, schedules, necessary documents, and how the process will be conducted. Minimise changes to the schedule and when there are delays or changes communicate them promptly. Make sure recipients know how long they will receive each type of assistance.

Methods in the madness: Our engine room

We've learnt over the years that if the methods underpinning our data are not rock solid, the data is too easy to dismiss. As far as we're concerned, research and advocacy methods are inseparable.

We spent more time than ever in 2021 preparing and testing surveys. We dedicated much more time to the design of sampling frameworks and took much more care in building relationships with enumeration teams to ensure data quality. We also, as part of the roll-out of a new project cycle template, demanded much more rigour from project teams in deciding which method was appropriate for each project based on its advocacy objectives. The days of defaulting to the standard survey are gone.

People take notice when things seem new or innovative. We piloted new methods to data collection and analysis in 2021, including SERVQUAL, a multi-dimensional instrument designed to capture consumer expectations and perceptions of a service, in Somalia and Haiti, and FAIRSERV, a model that tests fairness as a key ingredient to perceptions of service quality in Afghanistan and Nigeria. As predicted, new ways of cutting our data saw increased interest in our work – and by extension, the perceptions of people affected by crisis.

We also increasingly see the limits of quantitative data. It is still vital to our approach – to influence humanitarian monitoring and evaluation, you need to speak its language, and that is the language of counting – but we also know that to really understand what people – especially vulnerable people – think, you need to ask in more open-ended ways. We shifted to mixed methods as a matter of course for all of our projects, with single-method quant projects becoming the exception rather than the rule. We started working with brilliant qualitative researchers in project countries and organised a qualitative training for all of our programme staff. In Bangladesh, we responded to feedback that our data may be problematic in the cultural context by working with IOM and its team of Rohingya researchers to unpack how better to get at the themes we were setting out to track, and to what extent bias was skewing the data. Our test [study](#) showed clearly that the Rohingya were much more likely to share honest opinions when speaking with fellow refugees, and that a more conversational style of interviewing would elicit more accurate responses. On topics concerning safety, respect, and information provision, Rohingya interviewers were more likely to get honest answers, not courteous ones. We have worked this into future rounds of data collection and shared our lessons across the response.

“

A fundamental pillar in our accountability to affected people is the need not just to listen, but to act on the feedback that we receive from communities. GTS' approach to influence action at country-level and global deliberations to inspire and catalyse change is much needed.”

Mervat Shelbaya, Head, IASC Secretariat

“

Working with Ground Truth Solutions was a huge opportunity for FACT Foundation to deepen its institutional experience in perception research. GTS research quality standards are highly commendable.”

John Momoh, Executive Director, FACT Foundation

Telling our story

2021 was about building up the basics in strategic communication but we wish we had gone further. Our brand new website is now live, allowing us many more possibilities to showcase our data and raise the voices of people affected by crisis into the future. Staff have been trained on writing skills, and we have built up a new pool of freelancers to help us improve the quality of our written communication, something we had identified as a weakness. We have increased our following across social media platforms and started to produce video and multimedia content for the first time.

We published blogs, hosted events and contributed to external publications. We had hoped, though, to make greater strides in communication than we did. We hired dedicated support for the first time, but our decision to use a part time consultant when launching a huge website project meant that there was time for little else, and we weren't able to push forward with our desire for more and better storytelling.

For 2022, we will have a senior Head of Communications on staff and will be well-placed to take our communications – and hopefully along with it, our impact – to a new level.

Too shiny? Addressing our own perceptions problem

In developing our new communications strategy, we conducted a short series of interviews with sector partners. We wanted to find out how GTS was perceived. It was not a robust sample, but the findings indicated that while our contribution and innovation are well recognised, to some we may be considered a survey organisation or data collection company, we may at times come across as too shiny, our advocacy perceived as an attempt to keep ourselves 'in business'. This was useful feedback, informing our approach to sharing learning, pushing harder on demand for action on feedback, saying no to projects that don't serve our mission and continuing our push for more core funding to support our strategy.



Punching above our weight: Our team and culture

Our team is everything. We are a small enough organisation that we don't need to be bogged down by bureaucracy and hierarchy and this gives us opportunities for joint learning and innovation that we want to fiercely protect. We're growing, but we've put the brakes on a bit, knowing that if we grow too big, we'll lose some of our spirit. This is not quite a departure from our strategy, but a desire to slow things down.

2021 still saw our team grow and change, as well as decentralise somewhat from our beloved Vienna headquarters. Our commitment to increasing diversity among the core team didn't wane, and we changed the way we formulated and disseminated job advertisements to reach a more diverse group. Challenges of getting non-EU nationals visas and work permits stymied progress, seeing us lose at least one staff member to visa bureaucracy. We increased flexibility for people to work from where they want and our ability to hire from outside Europe and North America exponentially increased. We still have a way to go to diversify our leadership in particular.

Our staff survey in 2021 showed improving diversity as a priority for many team members. It also showed an increase in staff satisfaction against various metrics up on previous years, with the majority of the team feeling heard, respected, confident in leadership, valuing opportunities for ongoing learning and being fairly remunerated. People also tell us they value the level of flexibility in our mode of working (we get stuff done, not count hours) and this continues to evolve as we journey through the new phases of the pandemic. There was more variation in opinion on whether people felt work was distributed evenly among the team, which is something we are now addressing via better programme planning and tracking processes.

This was the first full year of living by the cultural values we agreed in 2020, and feedback from staff indicates it is going well. We're not a status quo organisation and we don't work by manuals or checklists, but demand of each other creativity, innovation and constant critical thinking. We know we are limited by our size, but we continue to try to think of ways to motivate and retain good staff and effectively manage performance. We hope never to be an organisation characterised by gimmicky attempts to motivate staff through fringe benefits, but pride ourselves on the knowledge that people who work with us are motivated by an opportunity to put their unique brains and skills to our collective and ambitious mission.

Ground Truth Solutions is:

Programmes

Elise Shea, Marie-Francoise Sitnam, Kai Hopkins, Max Seilern, Kara Wong, Carine Nzeuyang, Serge Madjou, Chae Yeon Kim, Tim Buder, Carolyn Meyer, Isabella Leyh, Kai Kamei, Rieke Vingerling, Eva Soltesz, Amanda Panella, Shamim Iftexhar, Yannick Koudoufio, Leonce Zateo

Statistics

Hannah Miles, Christian Els, Ulrich Utner

Administration and finance

Rendy Morison, Arsen Somkhishvili, Konstantinos Liakos, Sigrid Markl

Leadership

Nick van Praag, Meg Sattler, Elias Sagmeister

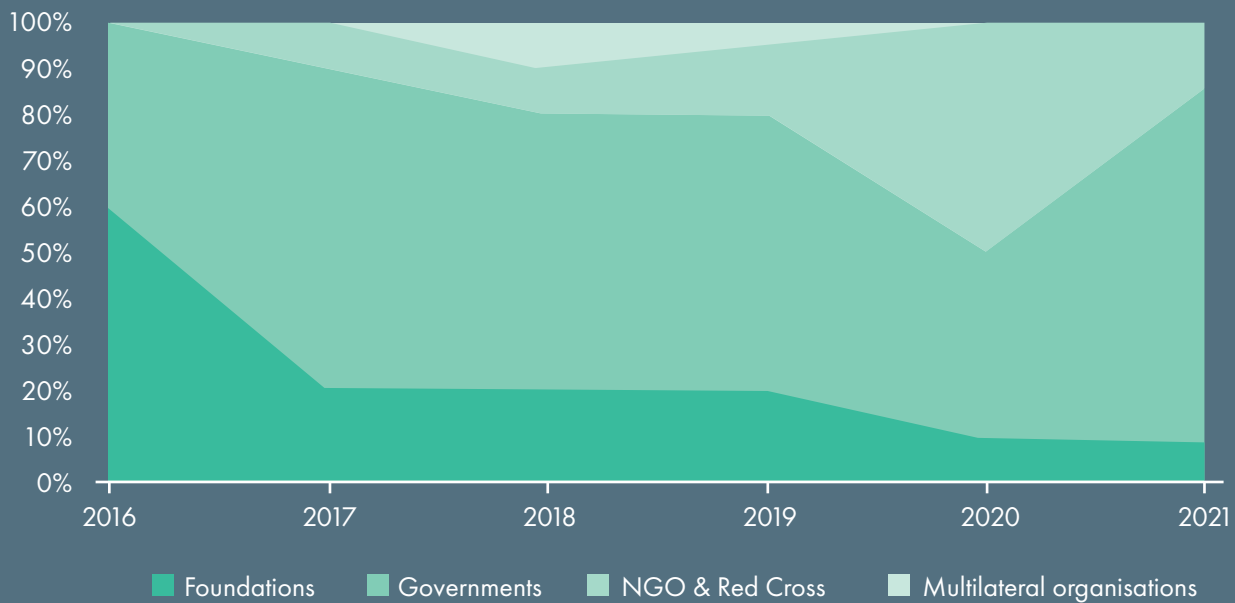


Finances

Without our donors none of what we do would be possible, and we are super grateful to them for the funds they provide, the ideas that emerge from our policy discussions, and the

oomph they give to our advocacy work. Our budget and turnover remained similar to the previous year. We seek Quasi International Organisation status in Austria.

Funding 2016-2021



We are grateful to all of the funders who made our work possible in 2021:

- ALNAP
- Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- Communication with Disaster-affected Communities Network
- Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance
- German Federal Foreign Office
- The H2H Network
- International Federation of the Red Cross/Crescent
- International Rescue Committee
- Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
- The New Humanitarian
- UNICEF
- Welthungerhilfe
- World Health Organization
- World Food Programme
- CERHA HEMPEL (pro bono legal services)

Our ongoing funding conundrum

Our gratitude to our donors and partners is well-known. That said, humanitarian financing is not always geared to supporting small entities like ours. It sometimes feels like a struggle to meet a critical part of GTS' strategy, which is to make sure we have the wherewithal to cover both our core costs and programme work. Resources for the lion's share of GTS activities come from our own fund-raising efforts, not from country response budgets. Core contributions and those with few strings attached are especially valuable. A special shout out to Switzerland, the Netherlands, Norway and Germany. Without them our work is difficult to plan and it's harder for us to pack the punch we would like. Light conditionality also implies trust, which is enabling, and complicity on the part of donors in the quest to enhance humanitarian performance.

We understand that donors must err on the side of fiduciary caution but the time it takes to land a donor contribution is long – an average of two years of back and forth, specifying and respecifying objectives, and squeezing vital overhead out of tight budgets. All of which takes a great deal of time and makes it harder to have impact when opportunities arise to support those country teams and humanitarian actors most interested in doing the right thing. At the same time, we feel under more pressure than ever to demonstrate to donors that we are moving mountains on accountability to affected people, sparking sweeping behaviour changes from huge agencies and coordination bodies.

When we act as a downstream partner of one of the more established aid agencies, as a short-cut way of accessing the resources of large donors, we are subject to the vagaries of long-distance relations with the donor and the high costs of intermediation. In contrast, our experience as a recipient of H2H funds has been positive, offering us the chance to act very quickly in face of pressing humanitarian needs, as after the earthquake in Haiti in August 2021.

We call for more predictable and rapid funding, not just to us, but to all those small organisations punching above their weight to help the sector reform.



2022 and beyond: What next for GTS?

It starts to feel as though every year we point out that the sector is at a pivotal moment for accountability. We have perhaps been a bit too optimistic in the past that all of the new policies, statements and frameworks aimed at putting people at the centre of humanitarian action would spur faster reform. But we're equipped now with a bigger advocacy toolbox, a smarter engine room, a creative and committed team and the loud voices of tens of thousands of people who have a lot to say about decisions that affect them.

Our priorities for 2022 are to ramp up our advocacy, to keep honing our methods, and to seek opportunities to not simply gather feedback on agreed humanitarian norms but to flip the status quo, putting more power in the hands of people affected by crisis. If the system is indeed broken, it would be a crying shame to put it back together the way it used to be. There is a chance to upend a sector in which bureaucracy, power imbalances and financing structures

mean that people's rights are not being respected and their needs not met, at times when they need both most.

We're unbelievably excited to be – finally – launching our first pilot project related to climate change. This has been a long time coming and has been made possible due to core funding from the Netherlands, Switzerland and Norway. We hope it will grow into a valuable programme, adding a groundswell of important and currently hidden voices to the climate adaptation space.

We will continue to be self-critical and to invite feedback from others. We will say no to projects that don't further our mission, while more aggressively pursuing those that do. And with a greater resolve to push action on the feedback we collect and support people to advocate for themselves, we'll be much more outspoken about where our role starts and ends. It's high time those with the money, the power and the reach in humanitarian action did their bit.



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