Ground Truth Solutions 2020–2025
A strategy to bring real, lasting change to the humanitarian space
We envision a humanitarian system that fully recognises the agency of the people it exists to assist and protect, and is responsive to their views, preferences, and needs.

We support this vision in our daily work by ensuring that the priorities of people affected by crisis are front and centre in any humanitarian action, from individual projects and organisations to complex responses and system-wide humanitarian reform.
Less Talk, More Action
This year, the case for sustained community engagement in crisis management has been made with devastating clarity. The COVID-19 pandemic showed far too many people, far too late, that understanding community perceptions could be life-saving. But for too long, the humanitarian sector has invoked empty variations of the mantra that our action should be more accountable to the people it serves. Ambitious commitments were put forward in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s, enlarged upon as lessons learned from the Indian Ocean tsunami response in the early 2000s, and improved and formalised as part of global humanitarian reform initiatives such as the introduction of the Cluster System in 2005, the Transformative Agenda of 2010, and the participation revolution, called for in the Grand Bargain of 2016.

Well-meaning rhetoric, however, no matter how earnest, cannot tip the balance towards more accountable and participatory humanitarian action. People on the receiving end of such action still have little say over how aid is provided, and none of the reforms have achieved the change required to establish aid recipients’ influence at all levels of humanitarian decision-making.

It is clear that “past commitments to elevate affected people’s voices within humanitarian action have been voluntary, unenforced, and disconnected from meaningful sources of power in the humanitarian landscape,” as the Washington-based Center for Global Development asserts. More importantly, when we ask affected people on the ground about the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, they tell us plainly that these efforts have not worked. Why? The aid sector continues to be supply-driven, focussed on upward accountability to its donors, and centred around the mandates and preferences of individual agencies keen to demonstrate their value to both their funders and the public.

Our plan for the next six years is to take on the challenge of bringing real change to the humanitarian space – change that is more urgently needed today than ever – to improve the lives of people in need through effective action.

Our goal in developing this strategy is that accountability to affected people will no longer be a list of subordinate activities to roll out or an add-on to deploy in certain localised instances. Neither will it be treated as the holy grail. We simply and firmly believe that participation done right will lead to higher quality aid, better value for money, and increased acceptance of humanitarian action among those it is supposed to benefit.

Firmly rooted in this conviction, we focus on practical, systematic improvements to programme design and monitoring. We do so through regular consultations and by using people’s feedback to measure progress on the key objectives of humanitarian responses. This involves, facilitating interactive dialogue sessions between aid providers and the communities they serve, and supporting coordinators to make their systems more conducive to people-centred aid.
We will focus externally on how to best influence a complex sector during increasingly challenging times, and internally on how to best adapt our ways of working. Assuming the humanitarian sector will return to business-as-usual after the pandemic would be short sighted. We stand ready to adapt, experimenting at the margins and learning new ways to support community engagement from afar. In doing so, we hope to do our small part to lift the rhetoric around localisation into a more practical realm.

Ground Truth Solutions’ success to date has been as a catalyst for change, and we are as strategic in our partnerships as we are in our activities. Without shifts in policy and practice on the part of donors, humanitarians, and authorities, the change we seek will not happen. We are calling on those who share this vision to join us and multiply these efforts.
Changing the System
When the system changes, listening to the voices of the most vulnerable is more important than ever.

Ground Truth Solutions was founded in 2012, based on two traditions of inquiry that continue to drive the core of our work: participatory development thinking and the business world’s emphasis on customers’ perceptions of service.

We have tested and proven our methods in tens of thousands of conversations with people affected by crisis in 34 countries. This dialogue has provided valuable insight into how to improve the provision of aid, based on the experiences of those at the receiving end of humanitarian action. We have also conducted thousands of consultations with aid providers, seeking the perspectives of staff working for both local and international organisations, highlighting the stark contrast in how relief workers and aid recipients view success. Experience has taught us that attempts to understand community views by proxy do not work.

In 2019, we worked with a range of organisations that were eager to learn and improve based on feedback from the people they serve. These include UN agencies such as UNICEF, the World Food Programme, and UNHCR; humanitarian country teams; the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement; INGOs such as Welthungerhilfe and the International Rescue Committee; as well as local organisations such as the Afghan Development Association and the Empowerment Centre for Women in Afghanistan.

We are proud to have seen our findings inform changes within aid agencies and to be included in response-wide monitoring frameworks, where they spurred action planning. Demand for feedback is also strong at the global level, which has allowed us to deepen our collaborations with the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID), the German Federal Foreign Office, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). We have also shared community feedback at global gatherings such as the High-Level Humanitarian Segment of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Humanitarian Networks and Partnership Week (HPNW), and ALNAP’s Annual Meeting, as well as at individual donor briefings and in documents such as the Global Humanitarian Overview.

This year, we have all seen that drastic systems changes can happen for other reasons. The many challenges thrown at us by the COVID-19 pandemic have also presented opportunities to self-reflect. While continuing to push for system-level reform, we must be more ready to adapt when the system changes on its own. At such times, listening to the voices of the most vulnerable is more important than ever. Our original focus on participatory development and perceptions is complemented by three fundamental realisations that underpin this strategy:

1. When the system changes, listening to the voices of the most vulnerable is more important than ever.
One: Through more agile, contextualised approaches, we will support and challenge aid actors to do better.

Ground Truth Solutions was set up to help aid actors listen to and use feedback from affected people. Over the years, we have adjusted our mission to help affected people influence aid provision. This difference is more than a change in language. It is based on the realisation that despite positive outliers and an increasing number of accountability champions in the sector, humanitarian agencies face strong disincentives to be honest about feedback data, to acknowledge shortcomings, or to coordinate their communications with communities. When they do embrace feedback and listening, they tend to do so in a disjointed way, setting up individual mechanisms that return fragmented feedback. This is not sufficient to tip the balance towards more accountable aid, and it makes the user experience unsatisfactory for those on the receiving end of humanitarian assistance.

Constant nudging and championing of data is required to get relevant actors to pay enough attention to feedback and to coordinate their listening approaches. This requires us to go beyond providing data and analysis, and then simply expecting agencies to act on what we provide. As we have seen in Somalia, Iraq, and elsewhere, close and continuing support of country teams and individual champion agencies is one of the most effective means of promoting change.

Encouraged by this dynamic and inspired by ongoing conversations with aid recipients, our strategy for the next six years is to make our country-level engagement smarter, working more strategically with key partners, and getting more creative with our methods. We will do this while protecting and capitalising on our independence, functioning as an honest broker and an effective advocate for people affected by crisis.

Two: Through our integrated approach, we will achieve change on multiple levels.

We now know that feedback from aid recipients and affected people cannot simply be shared with decision-makers in an unfiltered manner, but must be analysed and understood to be effectively represented across the three major levels of humanitarian action: at the field implementation level, at the response leadership level, and at the global governance level (Figure below).

These three tiers will serve as the framework on which we will expand our tested approach to improving humanitarian action by including the views of affected people. All three are inter-dependent and need to be addressed simultaneously for maximum impact. Progress at the global level can lead to better humanitarian projects on the ground, for example, but only if implementing agencies have the skills and resources to improve their practice. Meanwhile, individual agencies can raise the bar for accountability in their own programmes, but this will have little overall effect if others involved in the broader response do not follow suit.

These three levels are equally relevant to our more recent focus on cash and voucher assistance and adapting to the impacts of the climate crisis. The reasons for adding these topics to our strategic focus are twofold. First, they provide opportunities to accelerate broader reform. Second, they both require systematic community engagement.

Cash and voucher assistance holds transformative potential for a humanitarian sector currently focused on discrete technical responsibilities and mandates, and for affected people who are too often forced to sell relief supplies to meet their real needs. We believe that cash can and should replace the provision of goods, with the important exception of protection and public services. But cash and voucher assistance by itself is not necessarily more empowering or dignified than other types of aid. It is crucial to listen and adjust to the feedback of recipients if we are to maximise the positive potential of the humanitarian cash revolution.

Climate change is impacting all facets of humanitarian action, cutting across aspects of preparedness, response, and recovery. But people’s voices are rarely systematically included in related programmatic decisions on preparedness, adaptation, and mitigation – leading to less effective interventions and potentially dramatic consequences for those affected. At the same time, the political energy associated with the climate crisis promises a new approach to humanitarian action, bringing together public policy and development as well as conflict and risk analysis. People affected by crisis have long understood this nexus and continue to ask for a more integrated response to the challenges they face.

Continued on page 10.
Ground Truth Solutions: Levels of impact

Level 1: Global governance

**OUTCOMES**

Global humanitarian policy incentivises people-centred programme design and implementation, placing the perspective of affected people at the centre of humanitarian action.

**CASH AND VOUCHER ASSISTANCE**

The scale-up of cash and voucher assistance is informed by feedback from recipients and affected communities.

**CLIMATE CHANGE**

Global policy (including donor policy) on climate preparedness and adaptation is informed by community views and experiences as well as existing community practice.

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Level 2: Response leadership

**OUTCOMES**

Planning, funding, management, implementation, and monitoring of humanitarian responses at the country level are strongly influenced by, and adapted to, the perspectives and priorities of affected people.

**CASH AND VOUCHER ASSISTANCE**

Inter-agency response analysis systematically includes affected people’s experiences and perceptions to maximise quality.

**CLIMATE CHANGE**

Community understanding, perceptions, priorities, and experiences of climate-related disasters informs action by both humanitarian and development actors.

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Level 3: Field implementation

**OUTCOMES**

Local and international humanitarian actors manage their performance using feedback and insight from affected people while enabling their target groups to express their views through ongoing dialogue.

**CASH AND VOUCHER ASSISTANCE**

Agencies use quality perception data and ongoing dialogue with recipients to optimise programmes.

**CLIMATE CHANGE**

Humanitarian and development agencies adapt their climate programming to community views, practices, and preferences.
Our primary focus will be on the response leadership level, analysing which combination of support will best enable improved accountability to and engagement with affected people. From this level as the starting point, we will systematically work to inform global policies at the governance level, as well as help to improve the work of individual agencies in the field.

As demonstrated in 2020, humanitarian priorities, actors and systems can change dramatically in a short amount of time. Ensuring that the views of those most affected remain central to these pivots will be essential as health, climate and economic crises continue to compound existing need. Our work with humanitarian objectives, which in turn will increase in ambition. We will work systematically to inform global policies at the governance level, as well as help to improve the work of individual agencies in the field.

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country teams (HCTs) will continue to support the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) so the teams are better able to develop, implement, and monitor response plans that consider the views, priorities, and feedback of affected communities.

This same approach will be applied to the country-level leaders of responses to health crises and climate emergencies. Monitoring targets based on people’s perceptions will show the quality of responses and how to improve them. Learning based on feedback will inform course correction and encourage more effective, accountable action. This will require deeper engagement, further investigation, and piloting new dialogue approaches by our teams. At the same time, we will work with a small group of partners in each country who can leverage our response-wide findings and maximise impact. These partners include donors, local organisations, the United Nations, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and INGOS that aspire to increased uptake of our findings across the humanitarian system.

As the new decade begins, we are at an inflection point in the way humanitarian actors approach the accountability and quality agenda. Accountability rhetoric has resulted in a proliferation of feedback mechanisms, but not in systemic change. The humanitarian system is a messy, loosely controlled ecosystem, made up of diverse actors with individual agendas and freedoms who tend to adapt their behaviour depending on the actions of others. If the right actors adopt the right changes, then the needle moves.

Globally, a trend towards collective accountability is palpable, and the tipping point from tick-the-box collective mechanisms to systemic changes leading to real improvements for affected people is now within reach. It

Policymakers at the global level can benefit from both information provided by affected people and the logic behind our methodology — as well as the iterative improvements it yields — as they formulate and roll out system-wide reforms. This means the reforms are more likely to be demand-driven, delivering better results for affected people. We will develop a broader range of analytical tools and information products to shed penetrating light on our findings and provide the basis for tailored analysis. We aim for these to include more timely, frequent analysis, with sharper focus on how the data could translate to action. We will use our existing data more strategically to inform and refine our future approaches in survey design and analysis. We will enhance our Humanitarian Voice Index, which brings together pertinent data from our surveys and dialogues into a single, global database.

Our work focusing on recipient views of cash and voucher programmes will inform action among donors and programme managers on maximising financial assistance for systemic accountability. We will continue to roll out our multi-country response support programme on COVID-19 and apply lessons learned from this unprecedented event to future planning. We will grow our strategic communications and advocacy function to ensure the uptake of our findings across the humanitarian system.

Three: Through our focus on country-wide reform, we will reach a tipping point towards more accountable humanitarian action.

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Globally, a trend towards collective accountability is palpable, and the tipping point from tick-the-box collective mechanisms to systemic changes leading to real improvements for affected people is now within reach. It
has been further spurred by COVID-19 panic, when the sudden need for remote support brought to light glaring gaps in agencies’ community engagement capacity and localisation claims. However, achieving change now requires systemic shifts in a critical mass of countries.

We have identified several focus countries for 2020–2025, as shown in the map below. We will review our geographic focus periodically, considering evolving circumstances including new health, natural disaster, or human-made complex emergencies. Three factors have guided our selection of countries and will influence whether we scale activities up or down in a given response:

- the openness of humanitarian country teams and key actors to enhanced accountability to affected people;
- the scope of crises, in terms of number of affected people, overall vulnerability analysis and available funding;
- synergies with existing activities, which ensure value for money.

We will always work where we feel it is most ethical to do so. We will weigh the potential benefits of adding new countries against the advantages of deepening our impact in those places where we already have a presence. We recognise the fact that most people affected by humanitarian crises live in protracted settings, and it takes several years to reach the deep, lasting change we want to see on the ground through our work. We also recognise that a health emergency or sizeable climate event could shift priority areas overnight.

*See map on page 12.*

The depth of engagement in-country varies depending on the demand for our services, access, funding cycles, and the duration of a humanitarian response. Over the next six years, we will strive for comprehensive engagement in the countries where we work. We will push for longer-term planning and funding cycles in order to develop a more contextualised and bespoke approach to in-country support.
We Need Strong Partnerships and the Right Culture to Grow
Strong partnerships

The fundamental ethos of our work relies on actions taken by others. Our partnerships have enabled us to change processes, policies, and behaviour across a range of humanitarian activities, despite being a small team with a modest budget. To be an effective agent of change into the future, we need strong allies at all levels of decision-making. Two factors inform how we identify partners: their proximity to or alignment with our vision, and the leverage they can offer in achieving it.

First and foremost, our partners include a complex ecosystem of actors in-country, whose trust in our work enables changes to programmes, systems, and structures. We will work more intentionally to support governments and local disaster management or health authorities in countries impacted by crises. The exact combination of partners will continue to be determined locally in each context. Developing a more continuous, deeper understanding of countries will help us to more precisely identify the key agents for change on the ground – national NGOs and other local partners – that are likely to have the greatest impact.

In government-led responses – such as our current work in the Pacific region or with the Ugandan refugee crisis, where the government plays a strong, constructive role – we will continue to partner with states and involve them in all phases of our work. This is especially the case as we consider durable solutions and climate change, both of which demand tangible action from governments if real progress is to be made.

In areas of ongoing conflict, we will continue to be mindful of the political complexities involved and to explore partnerships with actors who subscribe to the humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence, impartiality, and humanity.

However, we will not be able to make the changes we want to see without commitments from institutional donors, who still supply most humanitarian funding globally and exercise considerable influence over other actors. That is why we will deepen, grow, or add partnerships with innovative donor agencies, helping them to maximise their influence on accountable aid. Rather than calling for requirements imposed on grantees to merely collect feedback, or simplistic ratings of implementing organisations based on arbitrary criteria, we will work with leading donors to continuously optimise their operations. While mindful of the political and bureaucratic challenges involved, we are convinced that real change is possible if the right donors put their weight behind this.

At the global governance level, we will also continue to contribute to Inter-Agency Standing Committee Results Groups, global UN coordination bodies, and Grand Bargain workstreams. We will keep partnering with peer organisations that share our values, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) Alliance (building on the innovative approach of including perception indicators in Humanitarian Response Plans, which we piloted together)
and others, and we will explore additional collaborations globally.

The focus of our relationship with the Red Cross movement will shift towards greater response-wide impact, as will our relationship with REACH. We will work more closely with national organisations and select UN agencies, recognising the leading roles they play in response leadership and coordination, inter-cluster coordination structures, and individual clusters. We will work closely with national authorities, whose action and policymaking on various health and climate related crises will impact countless lives.

Ground Truth Solutions will continue to deploy its services during emergencies as part of the H2H network.

Making a more concerted effort to ensure that development and community service actors have access to and can act on our data – notably our sizeable datasets on resilience – will be a critical element in linking the humanitarian-development nexus.

Organisational growth

In the eight years since our launch in 2012, the GTS team has grown to include more than 20 individuals, each of whom brings their unique talents, diverse background, and tireless commitment to our work. Today we are active in projects spanning a dozen nations, with small country offices established in Chad (2018) and the Central African Republic (2019). Demand for our services is strong, and most of our funding is now generated through project and programme work. In line with our growth trajectory, and in order to implement an integrated approach in our focus countries while strengthening the headquarters in Vienna, our annual budget will need to roughly double by 2025.

We have learned that funding for our public good activities is central to our ability to effect change in the system more broadly. From the deeper analysis we offer through our Humanitarian Voice Index database to more ad-hoc speaking engagements, communications, and ongoing policy advice to decision-makers, we have realised that some of the most valuable opportunities for impact arise outside the scope of individual projects. We have also learned that investments in methodology and advocacy pay off in positive outcomes, as do investments in long-term staff development.

To maximise impact, we need to be strategic, not reactive. That has never been clearer to us than this year, as we have had to radically shift our approach to work in countries affected by the pandemic. Through 2025, we will prioritise four strands of strategic activities, with the help of core funding:

At the global governance level, we will provide deeper analysis of aggregate feedback data, tailor advice to decision-makers, and expand our involvement in policy processes. Our analysis will be smarter, more targeted, more frequent, and driven more by our mission than evolving demand from partners. Our global analytical team will be bigger, more experienced and better equipped to support, via both remote and in-country methods, novel ways to garner and understand community perceptions.

At the response leadership level, we will dedicate core funds to systematic feedback collection and accountability enhancement, even where in-country funding is lacking. Similarly, core resources will be used to ensure continuity in crisis contexts where we have time-series data going back several survey rounds, but where in-country funding shortfalls mean we risk missing a round of data collection and dialogue with affected people.
We will dedicate resources to strengthening accountability and developing the capacities of national actors as well as small NGOs that otherwise would not have access to our support.

Finally, we will carry on our pandemic work for as long as is needed, and invest core funding in developing a climate change workstream, starting with scoping and dedicated research capacity in 2020.

In the light of these strategic priorities, our target is to receive around one-third of our total annual budget as core funding. Furthermore, we will advocate for longer timelines on project funding in our target countries. This will provide the flexibility to influence the system and to further professionalise and expand our organisation.

In 2020, we will reinforce our human resources and financial management functions to match a growing portfolio of projects; we will then hire additional programme staff to bolster our in-country support.

Our hiring priorities include:

- programme managers, each of whom can technically oversee Ground Truth Solutions’ contextualised activities for one or two countries;
- additional analysts with a broader range of analytical or statistical skills, knowledge and experience;
- a communications and advocacy specialist;
- more experts in thematic areas, such as climate change and cash and voucher assistance.

We are committed to excellence and a diversity of talents and experiences in all of our hiring decisions, and we aim for much of this growth to include individuals from crisis-affected countries. As we grow, we will attempt to reduce our per capita environmental footprint, adhering to a new, evolving climate change policy.

Ground Truth Solutions, which began as a KeyStone Accountability programme, was established as an Austrian association in 2016. It has since been granted international non-governmental organisation (INGO) status by the Austrian Foreign Office. We will continue to seek quasi-international organisation (QIO) status, and in the meantime, we will diversify the association’s board of directors in 2020–2021. Starting this year, we will set up a diverse, high-calibre GTS Advisory Council to provide expertise, guidance, and support in furthering our impact over the next six years – and beyond.

A culture of excellence

We are well aware of the challenges inherent in driving cultural change in the humanitarian sector, and we will be equally conscious of and strategic about the environment we cultivate in our own organisation. This is particularly important for the projected growth period over the next years, ensuring that Ground Truth Solutions can attract and retain the right diversity of talent while delivering exceptional impact. To this end, a series of internal workshops will be conducted throughout 2020, and a culture statement will summarise and guide how we will work in the future.
Measuring Our Own Performance
Our dynamic partnership model has enabled us to meet ambitious objectives within modest budgets, but it has also made our impact difficult to measure. We are under no illusion that the type of change we are seeking can be easily quantified or tracked in linear result chains and logical frameworks. We will resist the temptation to merely count outputs, such as reports produced or surveys conducted, and instead take inspiration from approaches such as outcome mapping to monitor behavioural change.

Acknowledging the complexity of social change, we will get smarter about how we measure and track the outcomes of our work. Where we have previously relied on citations, speaking invitations, and informal feedback from humanitarian partners to gauge how and where our work is making a difference, over the next few years we will be more structured in documenting evidence in both qualitative (narrative) and quantitative metrics.

Our new, iterative outcomes-tracking process will help us to better understand our effectiveness. Specific areas to monitor include whether we have strengthened humanitarian planning through our data and engagement, whether our approaches are sustainable, how users experience our data and recommendations, how agile we are when situations demand substantial pivots and whether our own staff continues to identify with our mission and feel satisfied in their work. Partner action will be better documented through management response matrices and surveys, and we will get better at disseminating the findings themselves through multiple channels and partners. We also plan to augment our monitoring of survey participants’ views about the process and about our work more broadly.

In each of these areas, we will track a small number of key performance indicators and interpret them in conjunction with more qualitative evidence.

We will refine our planning and evaluation frameworks, both for individual projects and for GTS as a whole. We also plan to focus on and invest more in learning.
We will strengthen our approach to understanding programmatic shifts at the country level, more actively and systematically solicit feedback from partners on the uptake of our findings, and work with consumers of our work to understand which aspects of our various processes can be strengthened, changed, or even eliminated.

We will produce external materials on our lessons learned as well as an annual report analysing these outcome areas and the corresponding evidence.