

## High-Level Meeting (HLM)

### Accountability towards crisis-affected people, 20 years anniversary and handover to new co-chairs

19 June 2023, Geneva

#### *Co-chairs Summary*

The final high-level meeting of the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative during the Belgium-Finland co-chairpersonship was organized in Geneva on 19 June 2023. Building on the outcomes of the Expert-level Meeting (ELM) held on 3 April 2023, the HLM theme focused on accountability to crisis-affected people— both accountability of donors and of humanitarian organizations.

The topic was introduced by the co-chairs **Lauratuulia Lehtinen**, Humanitarian Director, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, and **Pieter Vermaerke**, the incoming Director of Humanitarian Aid and Transition, Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of Belgium.

The speakers included representation from the IASC, whereby **Mervat Shelbaya**, the Director of IASC, introduced the topic of accountability, and **Trude Strand**, Director of Policy, Impact and Advocacy from CHS Alliance and a member of the IASC Taskforce 2 on Accountability to Affected People, shared insights on the recently published [IASC report directed to donors on how they can incentivize accountability](#). **Meg Sattler**, the CEO of Ground Truth Solutions, an organization focused on documenting the views of crises-affected people, spoke about the views of local communities on humanitarian response, and **Yuliia Chykolba**, a Ukrainian activist and the co-host of the *Trumanitarian* podcast shared an example and lessons learnt from Ukraine in terms of accountability. Finally, the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for the Philippines, **Gustavo Gonzalez**, provided an overview of the Emergency Relief Coordinator's Flagship initiative that is being executed in the Philippines.

In their interventions, GHD members welcomed the topic of the HLM and the fundamental importance of ensuring that crises-affected people are at the centre of humanitarian action.

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#### *IASC and the Taskforce 2 on accountability the IASC AAP report for donors*

##### **Mervat Shelbaya, Director Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Secretariat**

Ms. Shelbaya introduced the topic of accountability noting the **primary responsibility of the humanitarian actors to the people affected by crisis**. She highlighted the substantial progress made on Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP), including innovative ground practices and publications that had been developed on accountability, and increased community interactions over the years. Various agencies have implemented effective feedback mechanisms, and pooled funds have been used more efficiently to bridge the gap between supply and demand. Additionally, collaboration with Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) and Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) has led to tangible AAP action plans and their realizations.

However, Ms. Shelbaya acknowledged that the humanitarian system still needs to become more genuinely accountable to crisis-affected communities. The IASC's momentum and renewed commitment to AAP, along with the **crucial role of donors in incentivizing positive change**, highlight the necessity for a collective effort. She advocated for unearmarked, high-quality, multi-year funding, essential for tailoring responses to individual needs, including aspects regarding disability inclusion and mental health support. She emphasized that people did not need more consultations, **what they needed was more influence**. Ms. Shelbaya observed that many

were well-informed about aid and, in protracted crises, were seeking development and durable solutions. This underscores the need for improved collaboration with development actors.

#### **Trude Strand, IASC Taskforce 2 on AAP, Director of Policy, Impact and Advocacy at the CHS Alliance**

Ms. Strand shared her insights on the **IASC report on supporting donors' responsibility for greater accountability to people in crisis**. She noted that as the work currently stood, the **system was falling short of its commitments**, but that the **will and the awareness on the topic existed**. She also commended the GHD for working together for greater coherence on humanitarian donorship.

The IASC report on accountability for donors suggested ways forward linking system change to **localization**, developing **shared commitments, concepts and language** around accountability and **creating enablers** of which donors constituted a critical one, according to Ms. Strand.

Ms. Strand noted that progress on the topic would come with leadership and coherence, with **strengthening the GHD principles, especially in the areas of the GB participation revolution, the CHS Alliance principles and the IASC Collective AAP framework**, by **developing both carrots and sticks** for aid agencies as incentives, **ensuring continued donor predictability and flexibility** and by **prioritizing accountability across the system**.

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#### **Yuliia Chykolba, Activist, Humanitarian worker and co-host of the Trumanitarian-podcast: *A local perspective to accountability***

While Yuliia Chykolba has experience from working in different humanitarian crisis contexts, such as Syria, with different organisations, such as ICRC and the UN, she spoke to the GHD membership in her personal capacity sharing her experiences in Ukraine, where she returned after the start of the Russian aggression. Ms. Chykolba started by noting that each crisis was different but that **in Ukraine the accountability approach had been a failure**. In Ukraine there was a democratically elected government, and local governments with significant capacities, yet **the humanitarian system had been created as a parallel separate entity without accountability to the government or the people of Ukraine**. She also noted how the **system operated with a standard approach** not taking account of the specific issues faced by people locally.

Ms. Chykolba raised the **importance of localization in addressing accountability**. In countries like Ukraine, where there were 140,000 civil society actors, of whom some were first responders, the humanitarian system excluded most of them and only 1% of funds were directed to them.

Ms. Chykolba, however, saw some positive **developments in collaborations and partnerships between local and international organisations**, while **power dynamics remained asymmetrical**. She emphasized how **INGOs and the UN continued to take as little risk as possible**, while local organisations operated in the frontlines, with little say in programming or budgets, with no overhead costs covered and remained practically cheap labour for international actors.

Ms. Chykolba encouraged **donors to push for better accountability** and reminded that international experience is not everything but that the people on the ground are the ones to identify best practices. She **encouraged donors to work with local actors, and to ensure power shifts and overhead costs for them**.

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#### **Gustavo Gonzalez, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in the Philippines: *OCHA Flagship Initiative to improve accountability***

RC/HC Gustavo Gonzalez shared with the GHD membership the experiences from the Philippines in setting up the **Emergency Relief Coordinator's Flagship Initiative to address accountability**. He started by noting how the

tools, frameworks and the systems for good practices already existed in the country, while the **incentives for better integration of humanitarian, peace and development efforts as well as political will, were lacking**. Mr. Gonzalez saw the prevailing humanitarian system as a highly standardized and rigid industry, which in its approach hampered the much-needed adaptation to new challenges, but the **Flagship was bringing critical momentum to rethink, review and contextualize approaches** to a new generation of shocks and improve accountability to affected population by recognizing that “one size can’t fill all” situations.

Mr. Gonzalez saw that the four Flagship countries – South Sudan, Columbia, Niger and the Philippines – had been selected due to their different backgrounds, vulnerabilities and sociopolitical contexts, which will contribute to *a la carte* approaches. The RC/HCs have agreed to meet regularly to exchange their experiences.

In the Philippines, the **Flagship** will initially focus on the humanitarian impact of natural hazard and climate change. The country ranked number one in the 2022 World Risk Index report; which will imply strong investment in prevention, preparedness and better anticipatory action. In addition, an estimated 65% of shocks could be predicted, which should have direct implication on the adopted business model. The **Flagship** plan was for **strong localization, following the ongoing process of decentralization** initiated by the Government, where key municipalities are expected to develop their own disaster risk management plans. In addition, the plan will make the most of existing various social safety nets developed by the Government and supported by humanitarian partners. The **UN’s role is to enhance the existing relief infrastructure** and to bring the glue some still disconnected interventions. To accelerate localization, there was a plan to create a **multi-partner trust fund for civil society organizations** that were the first responders. The **Flagship** was represented as a people-centred platform to integrate converging contributions from **the government, the large humanitarian and development community, the academia, and the private sector**. The aim of the initiative was to consider the people of concern not from their needs and vulnerabilities but also their capacities, assets and strengths.

The Flagship was planned to **run for three years**, where the first year was reserved for developing the prototype, the second year was meant for testing and the third year allowed for full implementation and learning from experience. Mr. Gonzalez encouraged donors to stay involved in the process and harness this opportunity for improvements.

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**Meg Sattler, Director of Ground Truth Solutions:**  
*Documenting local experiences of humanitarian work*

The final speaker addressing the GHD membership, Meg Sattler, gave a thoughtful account how the system was falling short in addressing accountability and what donors could do to address this, referring to the data collected by the Ground Truth Solutions. The humanitarian response must be **linked to the priorities of the people who are living in crisis**, she said, **allowing them to take charge of their own lives today and tomorrow**.

Ms. Sattler saw that **currently transparency and participation were non-existent**. Rather than recognizing that **accountability should be front and centre**, organisations continued to silo it as a technical specialty. She saw that the **IASC donor report recommendations would not create the needed changes** and that as a donor she would be worried how aid was missing the mark.

Ms. Sattler noted the challenges in terms of what constituted best practices on accountability. Her concern was that **donors at best tended to only ask how people were included into projects**. This left donors unaware of the reality as no evidence was requested. Ms. Sattler emphasized that **the sector could not continue to police itself**. The questions aid organisations should answer included: how have you adapted your work to peoples’ views? What is your evidence? How have you relinquished control in your areas of operation? How

did you explain to communities when you couldn't meet their priority needs? Did you really need to do this project, or could a smaller local organization have done it better?

Ms. Sattler concluded by suggesting to the **donors to start funding smaller organisations**. She supported flexible funding and wanted to see it extended to smaller actors, such as was currently done for example by Sweden, Switzerland, Netherlands, and Norway. **When funding big actors was necessary, she encouraged to hold them as accountable as smaller organisations were and as intermediaries, she hoped donors expected them to pass the same flexibility and overheads to local partners**. She also emphasized that within prioritization, **donors needed to remember forgotten crises** reminding that quality of aid and amount of it was linked. She encouraged **donors to review their accountability policies** and said that the Ground Truth Solutions was happy to provide support pro bono on this to donors. She **suggested donors engage in self-reflection on how their decisions on contributions were being made if they were not receiving independent information on community priorities** and encouraged donors to continue **funding independent initiatives that monitor humanitarian assistance**. She also supported any progress towards the nexus.

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### Questions and answers:

The GHD membership widely supported steps to progress towards better accountability. There was recognition that the topic was not always popular, but rather complex and exposed oneself to criticism, which made it further crucial to make efforts to keep the discussion ongoing. Some donors noted they had done well in terms of criteria for quality funding but not so much in terms of accountability. In fact, the tension between these two were recognised.

General concerns were raised in terms of criteria to monitor accountability and the needed significant changes in ways of working including in terms of moving forward with a nexus approach, integrating social protection systems, political analysis and, where purposeful, the government alongside humanitarian response. Localisation was seen as an important aspect towards accountability and some donors had increased their direct support to local and national organizations and shared these experiences.

There were concerns that quality would deteriorate as funding reduces. But it was recognised that funding brought power and donors ought to require accountability from their partners. Experimentation was needed and the opportunities to share best practices were welcomed. It was also seen that intermediaries carry the same responsibilities as donors, and in it was suggested that the IASC report for donors would similarly apply to intermediaries. Opportunities for collective action and coherence by donors were encouraged by some membership and speakers alike.

Donors also wished for continued availability of information on the Flagship and its progress and an agreement among donors on sharing information on that progress.

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## 20 YEARS OF GHD AND UK/EST PRIORITIES

The GHD membership watched a video address by **Magnus Lennartsson**, the Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations, who was one of the founding members of the GHD in 2003 in Stockholm. He shared his insights in terms of the original purpose and background of the GHD, and how it aimed to look at donor responsibility to good humanitarian action and donor accountability rather than only focusing solely on the accountability of humanitarian organizations. Mr. Lennartsson noted how inspiring it was that the GHD continued to hold purpose today and that the principles originally drafted were still relevant and needed.

## **PRIORITIES OF THE UK AND ESTONIA FOR THE NEXT CO-CHAIR TERM**

The United Kingdom and Estonia welcomed the incoming co-chair role and thanked Belgium and Finland. They noted the continued relevance of the GHD at a time of rising humanitarian needs, protracted conflicts, humanitarian principles being tested, and donor funding increasingly more stretched. Having a forum where donors can come together to exchange on these issues and to discuss how to collectively take principled humanitarian action on them is invaluable.

Estonia and the United Kingdom presented their two overarching co-chair priorities: 1) Coordination of the Humanitarian System; and 2) Humanitarian Space. They noted that they will draw on various stakeholders and relationships throughout their co-chair term, including inclusive discussions with the IASC, OCHA and civil society to ensure that synergies across the system are being harnessed and that different perspectives and expertise are being heard.