

**EVALUATION OF  
THE GLOBAL HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME**

**Ian Smillie**

## SUMMARY

The GHA program is highly relevant to the business of humanitarian aid. It is widely used as a reliable and objective source of information by a broad and growing range of government officials, policy makers, front-line aid practitioners, academics and students. It has become the publisher of record on global humanitarian action and is widely regarded as a primary source of professional and authoritative information and as a repository of “corporate memory” for humanitarian actors.

The humanitarian enterprise has become considerably more sophisticated, better coordinated and more attentive to needs since the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative began in 2003. While there are other monitoring devices and organizations, it can be argued that GHA has been very important in creating greater transparency – through consistent and reliable data analysis over time – and thus greater accountability in helping donors to achieve this goal.

### PRINCIPAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

- In GHA’s newer and more challenging workstreams -- notably conflict and the military, domestic response and non-DAC donors -- greater depth in a few carefully selected countries makes more sense in the short run than attempting to cover the entire spectrum of organizations;
- Marketing should become a more prominent priority, aimed at reaching policy-makers and actors that have hitherto been the *subject* of study: non-traditional donors, domestic responders, the military;
- GHA’s editorial policy should be reviewed and consideration given to the provision of greater meaning and context as an accompaniment to basic data provision;
- Synergies with the rest of the DI family should be improved so that the GHA program can consolidate its strengths and streamline its work;
- On questions of sustainability, the need for GHA outputs is likely to grow and evolve over the next three to five years. Then, perhaps, a more substantive stocktaking would be useful.

### WORKSTREAMS

The GHA Programme has several established “workstreams” that improve with age while others are new. Four of the newer subjects are addressed in this evaluation (while others are not), in part because they *are* new, and in part because of the challenges involved.

**Scale of Need:** Detailed case studies on Southern Sudan and Haiti found that despite all the effort that has been devoted to needs assessment and response documentation, useful consistent and comprehensive data over time is simply not available. GHA is now focussing on “approaching the question of equity in humanitarian funding according to needs through study of the processes and politics of evidence generation and decision making.” In addition to this and the quest for current numbers in difficult circumstances, it might be useful to undertake a study of a “concluded” emergency to examine in greater depth – in Sierra Leone, for example – how well needs were met, both qualitatively and quantitatively, and over time.

**Conflict and the Military:** This is an area of growing importance but there is a challenge in addressing it well and adding value to the work being done by others. Rather than a broad-based multi-country approach, it might be wise to seek, say, two governments that might commit at a reasonably high level to a deeper study of the topic. If good data on two countries could be

developed, and if it proved useful in advancing understanding of the military role in good humanitarian donorship, it might demonstrate the value to others in participating more actively.

**Domestic Response:** GHA has made a good start with two detailed studies of domestic response in Bangladesh and Uganda, but the reports provide little in the way of qualitative analysis. The two primary objectives in wanting to know more about local response are how and where to build local capacity, and how to improve relationships between domestic and international actors. Arguably, better data alone will not achieve this objective. The use of local organizations in Bangladesh and Uganda is a good model. Expanding this approach will be a long-term and not inexpensive enterprise, but it is one worth doing. Initial concentration on two or three disaster-prone countries – Bangladesh and Haiti, for example – might make greater sense than a broad-brush approach.

**Non-DAC Donors:** The development of the relationships needed to yield better data and more meaningful interaction among non-DAC donors is no simple matter, and it cannot be done well at a distance. This too will probably require the participation of local research organizations that can, over time, gain the confidence of relevant ministries and individuals in target countries. Rather than trying to spread this effort too thinly at first, it might be wise to focus in depth on two or three countries of interest, balancing the scale of their contribution against the likelihood of early success.

## OUTREACH

GHA findings are being widely disseminated, and usage is well tracked. The growth in uptake – website visits, Help Desk requests and citations – is significant. Target audiences, however, have not yet been well segmented. GHA products need different kinds of marketing and different signposts and interpretation for different audiences. Audiences need to be prioritized as well. In the South, a direct approach is probably required – starting perhaps with presentations to the humanitarian committees in regional bodies such as ECOWAS, the African Union and others. In short, the *product* has been developed; *marketing* should now become a major priority.

Translations: Several GHA reports could be translated in summary form on an experimental basis and made available on the GHA website in a way that would allow tracking. If the traffic is significant, a case could be made to funders for a more substantive translation program.

## EDITORIAL POLICY AND “NO SPIN DATA”

This report confirms that GHA is providing greater access to reliable, transparent and understandable data on humanitarian assistance. But questions arise about GHA’s opinion-free editorial policy. As GHA becomes better known among non-traditional donors and domestic responders, the challenge to provide useful *meaning* will grow. Good journalism tries to present unbiased news, allowing readers to form their own opinion. But all good newspapers provide editorial comment. One way of preserving DI’s well-deserved reputation for independence and objectivity while answering part of the “so what?” question might be to create a separate place on the website where issues can be discussed and where greater reader interaction can be encouraged.

## **1 BACKGROUND**

Work for this evaluation was carried out in March and April 2011. It consisted primarily of a document review and interviews. Most of this was conducted by telephone and on line, but there was also a visit to the GHA office in Wells. A literature review included the original GHA proposal and LFA, workplans, a September 2010 AidInfo Evaluation and an August 2010 Institutional Appraisal of DI/DIPR and Aidinfo, terms of reference for different workstreams, narrative and financial reports to donors, a variety of internal documents and logs, plus all of the GHA output over the past two years. GHA conducted its own “user survey” among 54 stakeholders, and a complementary review of the GHA communications was conducted at the same time as this evaluation. Interviews were conducted with Judith Randel, Tony German, Jan Kellett and nine GHA staff. Interviews were also conducted with officials in the humanitarian and/or policy departments of the governments of Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Netherlands, Poland, South Africa, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Additional interviews were conducted with relevant officials in DARA FAO, OCHA, UNDP, and the Feinstein Center at Tufts University.

The TORs for the evaluation asked a variety of questions, some very ambitious – for example, on impact: to what extent is the GHA programme contributing to “more effective use of money, greater coordination, better planning, more ownership and accountability and therefore greater impact on vulnerability”?

If even a small measure of this goal could be accomplished with the relatively limited investment in GHA, it would be a remarkable achievement. Correlating inputs with this kind of outcome – to the extent that it might have occurred – however, is no simple matter. This evaluation, therefore, is limited to proxy indicators, the views of people closest to GHA, and the evaluator’s own experience of the sector.

## **2 GENERAL**

### **Relevance and Effectiveness**

The GHA programme is highly relevant to the business of humanitarian aid. It is widely used as a reliable and objective source of information by a wide and growing range of government officials, policy makers, front-line aid practitioners, academics and students. It has become the publisher of record on global humanitarian action and is widely regarded as a primary source of professional and authoritative information and as a repository of “corporate memory” for humanitarian actors.

The programme has met or exceeded all of the output targets that were contained in its 2008 proposal to donors. The 2010 GHA Report is similar in size to the 2006 Report but approximately four times the size of the 2007 Report, containing significantly more breadth and depth on GHA’s “boilerplate” areas, along with fresh information drawn from studies in new areas: domestic response, non-traditional donors, scale of needs and conflict and the military. GHA has written some 40 country profiles, including donors and recipients, a major new contribution to its analysis. It has also produced several significant stand-alone studies, a wide variety of articles, blogs and factsheets. It has made a number of presentations to donors and humanitarian practitioners. The use of its Help Desk has increased, citations of its work in academia and mainstream media have grown and visits to its website have increased at least fifteen-fold since early 2010. The increase in donor funding has resulted in a larger and wider range of GHA material, and a deeper examination of important and hitherto unexamined aspects of humanitarian action.

## **Impact**

The DI/GHA theory of change is based on the idea that better information, especially on resource flows, will lead to more effective use of money, greater coordination, better planning, more ownership and accountability, and therefore greater impact on vulnerability.

There is considerable evidence, much of it contained in the GHA record, that the humanitarian enterprise has become considerably more sophisticated, better coordinated and more attentive to needs during the 2000s. While there are other monitoring devices and organizations, it can be argued that GHA has been very important in creating greater transparency – through consistent and reliable data analysis over time – and thus greater accountability in helping donors to achieve this goal.

Humanitarian action is as prone as any other form of international assistance to political manipulation, media pressures and public campaigns. Anecdotal evidence from donor agencies interviewed for this report suggest that GHA data and analysis are frequently used to bolster arguments with front-line decision makers in favour of GHD-type principles when extraneous pressures come to the fore. “We have clear guidelines and principles for our humanitarian funding,” one donor official said, “but in the end, what we do and how much we spend can depend very much on the whim of the minister. Having good data and good arguments backed by a respected, independent authority like GHA can be extremely important in helping us do the right thing.”

The GHA programme is also becoming a kind of “corporate memory” for the humanitarian community. It is the publisher of record on good humanitarian donorship. The representative of a non-traditional donor country said, “We are new to humanitarian assistance. We do not know all the norms or the history behind them. GHA provides a short-cut to a lot of background and helps us to find our place among players who take all this for granted.” Another said, “We are a very small unit and we don’t have time to do our own research and analysis on many of the issues covered by GHA. GHA is a quick and convenient source of information that we often require on very brief notice.” In short, the track record is good, and the potential for more is excellent.

The GHA programme as it currently stands is significantly larger than it was two years ago. It has developed new workstreams, new products and new ways of working. In some respects, this has been a period of experimentation – learning what works and what does not. Some changes in direction are taking place and others are indicated, especially where wider, long-term impact is sought. Later sections of this report go into greater detail on GHA workstreams, outreach and editorial policy.

## **Efficiency**

The TORs for this evaluation asked questions about the efficiency of GHA implementation and the synergies between the GHA programme and other aspects of the work done by Development Initiatives. The GHA staff is proud of the fact that they have met all of the deliverables that were set by the programme and donors, and have done so on time. This was not accomplished without considerable effort. Many of the staff were/are new, and the effort that went into the creation of the 2010 Report, the new website and the country reviews over the past twelve months was enormous.

There is a feeling in GHA that synergies with the rest of the DI family could be better. This is an internal matter, resulting from the tremendous growth in all aspects of DI – from six staff two years ago to 30 altogether, including GHA, Aidinfo and DI’s consultancy work. New work is arriving on a

regular basis for DI consulting, and new ideas for GHA are not infrequent. Although the different parts of the organization are clearly segmented for accounting and reporting purposes, day-to-day workloads and expectations sometimes overlap and clash. Each GHA section has created its own workplan or terms of reference, but these will not mean much if new work is added on top of already full agendas.

The issue was noted in the August 2010 Institutional Appraisal of DI/DIPR and Aidinfo which commented on “strategic uncertainties”, and the need for a better understanding of workloads across the collection of DI/GHA activities, along with the need for a shared strategic vision.

This is not an area the evaluation could address in any depth, but it is not surprising that stresses might appear two years into a new, demanding and multi-faceted operation. It is not too soon for the challenge of institution-wide work planning and review to be addressed in a comprehensive manner – perhaps using professional external advice – so that the programme can consolidate its strengths and streamline its work in the months ahead. The forthcoming appointment of a Chief Operating Officer for the DI group will be an important part of this.

### **Sustainability**

The TORs for this evaluation asked some leading (and difficult to answer) questions about sustainability: Is the current programme sustainable? What are demands likely to be in the future? How can institutional capacity be developed? Is DI the right home for the GHA programme?

An organization or an effort will be sustained if it is worthy of being sustained, and in the case of a donor-funded operation, *if the donors believe that it is worthy of being sustained*. Clearly, the momentum for improved humanitarian donorship has grown in recent years and there is a much greater appetite for discussion about humanitarian assistance and how to advance it. DI has been part of that discussion and has helped to shape it. That is a primary purpose of the GHA programme.

It could be said that soon everything we need to know about humanitarian assistance will be known, and everything we need to do to make it as effective and efficient as possible will be in place. But that is unlikely. Emergencies, both man-made and natural, will not end any time soon, and as long as there are new actors and new governments, there will be a need for the kind of work GHA is doing. As one donor put it, “We need regular refills.” A question might be asked as to whether the refills should be the same every time, or whether there can be incremental value added with each GHA Report and each additional GHA study. Many of the areas the GHA is dealing with – domestic response, non-traditional donors, the military and needs assessment are still in their very early stages. And as new actors enter the field, there will be new issues and new challenges. In short, the need for what the GHA programme is doing today is likely to grow and evolve over the next three to five years. Then, perhaps, a more substantive stocktaking of the GHA programme and the wider range of actors involved in advancing humanitarian assistance will be useful.

On the question of GHA’s home, one or two interviewees thought that it might be better housed in an intergovernmental institution such as OCHA, but most reacted to that idea negatively. DI may have limitations as a small non-governmental organization, but these are also its strengths. It has no vested interest in the conclusions it reaches; it has developed a good reputation for providing useful, reliable and comprehensive data, and for objectivity. Why fix something that isn’t broken? This question could be revisited in three to five years as well, as perceptions might change with the (anticipated) arrival of more non-traditional actors into the humanitarian field. But for now, it does not seem to be an issue.

Finally, there is a question about location. Wells in Somerset is not exactly the centre of the humanitarian universe. One donor made the point that “If they were in ‘the neighbourhood’, they would have more impact.” By “neighbourhood” he meant one of the “humanitarian capitals” – Geneva, New York, or perhaps Brussels. Being seen more frequently by and among the large humanitarian donor agencies could make a difference in terms of outreach and impact. That is perhaps true, although there would be obvious cost implications. Would the posting of a GHA staff person in, say, Geneva, significantly advance the GHA purpose? If the choice were between having someone in Geneva and someone in Asia to complement the forthcoming DI Nairobi office, which one would make more sense? These are questions that are perhaps worth asking, but the decision has to be weighed in terms of both opportunity cost and cost-effectiveness. A glib answer here will probably not be of much use.

### **3 WORKSTREAMS**

The GHA Programme has “workstreams” on global trends, governments, financing mechanisms, delivery, data and guides, scale of need, conflict and the military and domestic response. Several of these are well-established GHA topics that improve with age while others are new. Four of the newer subjects are addressed in this evaluation, in part because they *are* new, and in part because of the challenges involved.

#### **Scale of Need**

There is an assumption in the humanitarian world that the lack of proportion in response has been caused to a large extent by inadequate and conflicting needs assessments. If we had a common approach to needs assessment, the argument goes, humanitarian funding would be better coordinated, better targeted and would be more effective and efficient. A chapter in the 2010 GHA Report on this topic delves into the subject in considerable detail, laying out some of the necessary caveats to the concept and showing how very uneven the funding has been in different emergencies. In many cases, the differential has not been about access or a conflict in needs assessment. It has resulted almost entirely from other factors – including the absence of media attention and political interest. Two detailed case studies on Southern Sudan and Haiti found that despite all the effort that has been devoted to both needs assessment and response documentation, useful consistent and comprehensive data over time is simply not available. Donor response to GHA efforts in this area has so far been poor “and at times hostile, [questioning] the purpose and our mandate to conduct such an exercise.”<sup>1</sup>

There are perhaps two levels to the achievement of a common needs assessment. At a primary level is the desire for a common tool across all major donor agencies; at a secondary level is the quest for a tool that is common at least to all UN agencies or other sub-groupings.

GHA has now changed tack somewhat and is continuing its work on humanitarian need by focussing on “approaching the question of equity in humanitarian funding according to needs through study of the processes and politics of evidence generation and decision making.”

Good needs assessment is key to effective and timely humanitarian response. Some of those interviewed for this report were exercised about the situation in Libya,<sup>2</sup> and asked what GHA was doing about determining needs there. That is not GHA’s remit. GHA can study the differences in various approaches to needs assessment and it can document the impact of, and trends in different

---

<sup>1</sup> “Scale of Needs: Pilot Phase Report”, GHA, July 2010, pg. 3

<sup>2</sup> Interviews were conducted within three or four weeks of the start of the Libyan uprising.

approaches to assessment over time – such as the greater use of pooled funds on the basis of better needs analysis. But its plan to dig deeper into *why* assessments are different, and *why* the response is so varied is equally valid. The findings may be somewhat uncomfortable for a donor community used to doing things in a certain way, but conclusions that result in more equitable and more appropriate funding are essential to the GHA purpose, and to the purpose of humanitarian principles.

Many humanitarian actors acknowledge that there is a large unmet need in many emergencies, but in the heat of a humanitarian disaster, numbers fall prey to calculations based on what organizations think they can deliver, what donors are willing to fund, and escalated fundraising competition among front-line delivery agencies. As a complement to the quest for a global number, or current numbers in difficult circumstances, it might be useful to undertake a study of a “concluded” emergency to examine in greater depth – and in the cold light of morning – how well needs were met, both qualitatively and quantitatively, and over time. Sierra Leone, for example, might lend itself to such a study.

### **Conflict and the Military**

This is an area of growing importance. The military are used on occasion to supplement, complement, and even to supplant traditional humanitarian actors. The issue has been widely studied, but data-based analysis has so far not been employed. In taking on this workstream, GHA bit off a very large and difficult piece of work. It has discovered in the past year how difficult and frustrating it is, even with support from donor governments, to get reliable data from military actors operating in humanitarian emergencies.

Interviewees for this evaluation mostly agreed on the importance of the subject, although one GHA donor was quite adamant that this topic had not been part of the GHA proposal and was not a welcome addition to the GHA mix.<sup>3</sup> There was general agreement on the difficulty in addressing it well and adding value to the work being done by a variety of other actors. One informant said, “Getting good data on the military is almost impossible. The military don't want to share, and even if they do, you would need a very good team of auditors to understand it – how they put their budgets together, and what the numbers really mean. Any value added by GHA will depend on who they hire, and getting into big government ministries like the military is a major long-term endeavour. It requires contacts, skill and time.”

This is a useful caution, one that GHA staff understand after a year or so of trying to crack this very hard nut. Rather than a broad-based multi-country approach to the subject, it might be more reasonable to seek, say, two governments that will commit at a reasonably high level to a deeper study of this topic. If good data on two countries could be developed, and if it proved useful in advancing understanding of the military role in good humanitarian donorship, then it might demonstrate the value to others in participating more actively. Whatever the next step on this topic,

---

<sup>3</sup> The original proposal to donors discussed military spending under the heading “Non-ODA international financing from DAC government directed towards humanitarian situations.” It spoke of the need “for humanitarian assistance to be set in the context of overall financial flows to humanitarian situations.” Given that the largest proportion of humanitarian spending takes place in complex emergencies involving conflict, and given the obvious humanitarian role of the military in several recent fast-onset emergencies, this is not a subject that can be easily ignored in the kind of survey work done by GHA. If there is a misunderstanding on this point with GHA donors, it should be clarified.



it is likely to require greater investment, individual(s) who can interact credibly with military actors, patience, and considerable skill in the interpretation of data.

## Domestic Response

The domestic response in any emergency is often large and may significantly outweigh the international response. The roles of government, local civil society, the military and others may be only partially visible, and there is recognized need for an understanding of the volume and the players in domestic response – and for a determination of how (and whether) to try to improve their effectiveness and efficiency.

GHA has made a good start in carrying out two detailed studies of domestic response in Bangladesh and Uganda. These studies demonstrate a variety of things in obtaining reliable data. Both studies were carried out by local organizations, but they involved a great deal of direct input from GHA. Second, obtaining reliable data from government (and other local actors) was extremely difficult. Trying to do this at a distance is challenging, if not problematic, but it does need hands-on GHA input. In terms of information, the two studies provide orders of magnitude and a cast list. This is important in drawing attention to a phenomenon that is too often ignored, especially by international humanitarians – described by one interviewee as “people who behave as though they are the Lords of Poverty.”<sup>4</sup>

But the reports provide little in the way of qualitative analysis. GHA’s editorial policy is discussed more broadly in Section 5, but it becomes especially pertinent in understanding domestic response, especially if there is to be greater engagement between outsiders and locals. Knowing what the Bangladesh government has spent on, for example, flood relief in 2010, has limited value without some idea about targeting, effectiveness, efficiencies and probity.

The two primary objectives that outsiders might have in wanting knowing more about local response are how and where to build local capacity, and how to improve relationships between domestic and international actors in times of crisis. Arguably, better data alone will not achieve this objective.

Local capacity building is a much-repeated mantra in the humanitarian world, but too often it is little more than lip service. The political economy of Western humanitarian action favours Western, or at least international humanitarian actors, and they – regardless of lofty ambitions to the contrary, have a considerable vested interest in the status quo. In order to change that, incentives must change. Domestic actors, in fact, can build their *own* capacities if they can be brought into mainstream thinking about humanitarian action. That suggests that they need to become more aware of international norms and practise. An obvious vehicle for that is the GHA programme. The GHA programme, however, is unlikely to reach the governments of disaster-prone countries, much less local civil society and other domestic actors, with a passive approach. In other words, the website alone and attempts to reach domestic players from a distance is unlikely to make much difference.

The use of local organizations to survey the field in Bangladesh and Uganda is a start, and is not unlike the *modus operandi* used by Development Initiatives over the years in compiling *The Reality of Aid* reports. Finding and building the capacities of local organizations capable of generating high-quality data as well the high-quality judgement that must accompany it will be a long-term and not inexpensive enterprise, but it is one worth doing. As in other areas, the best approach might be to concentrate on two or three disaster-prone countries such as Bangladesh and Haiti where there is a

---

<sup>4</sup> A reference to Graham Hancock’s scathing attack on international aid, *The Lords of Poverty* (Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 1989)

likelihood of recurring or long-term need, and where improved understanding of local capacities would be beneficial for all.

### **Non-DAC Donors**

There is a great deal of interest among traditional humanitarian donors and others in the role of non-DAC donors, and this is a key element in the GHA workplan. Some see a growing resource in funding from Gulf States. Others see the small army of Northern humanitarian NGOs as part of a “self-defining universe... vestiges of a dying colonial age; no longer agents of change in the South.”<sup>5</sup> In these scenarios, the real change in humanitarian (and other forms of) assistance is likely to come from middle income countries in the South – China, India, Brazil and others. Hence the need first to better understand their humanitarian contribution, and second, to engage with them to ensure optimum coordination and effectiveness.

Whether one sees this phenomenon as part of a changing political dynamic, a new cash cow, or simply wishful thinking, perspective is important. Non-DAC donors still represent a small proportion of overall international humanitarian assistance. The bulk of their funding has gone to three emergencies in recent years (Palestine/OPT, Pakistan and Afghanistan), and most of it has been funds from the Gulf States. In 2009 78% of non-DAC funding was channelled through the CAP appeals process, and – by way of demonstrating the scale – it represented less than 8% of what DAC donors provided to Palestine/OPT. In short, non-traditional donors still represent a very small part of the humanitarian whole.

This data is contained in GHA reports. Because GHA relies heavily on FTS and DAC data, much of the actual non-DAC flow is probably not counted (and GHA notes this). South Africa, for example, has not been reporting its humanitarian spending to the FTS.<sup>6</sup> In addition, non-DAC donors may not be as constrained as others by DAC definitions of ODA, adding to possible data distortion. And while some non-DAC donors may be keen to meet international norms, others may not. The GHA programme has engaged directly with some non-DAC donors, and interviews for this evaluation suggest that the GHA can be a valued and highly useful resource in both its printed material and in its direct support. GHA experience demonstrates that direct, personal communications with appropriate individuals in key ministries *can* make a difference, not simply in turning up better data, but in helping to inform and shape new-donor humanitarian response.

It also demonstrates that the development of the relationships needed to yield better data and more meaningful interaction is not a simple matter, and it cannot be done well at a distance. As with the engagement of governments and others involved in domestic response, this will probably require the participation of local research organizations that can, over time, gain the confidence of relevant ministries and individuals in target countries. Rather than trying to spread this effort too thinly at first, it might be wiser to focus in depth on two or three countries of interest, balancing the scale of their contribution against the likelihood of early success. Kuwait and Turkey, for example, might be more amenable to study than, say, Saudi Arabia, India or China.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Author’s interview with a humanitarian veteran.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with South African Dept. of International Relations & Cooperation. South African humanitarian assistance is relatively small, but that is not the point being made here.

<sup>7</sup> Although relatively small donors, Kuwait and Turkey rank fourth and sixth largest among non-DAC donors in terms of their known humanitarian contributions over the past decade.

## 4 OUTREACH

Several questions in the TORs for this evaluation dealt with dissemination and outreach. The GHA Programme aims to reach a wide audience and it uses a variety of tools ranging from formal reports and web material to presentations, discussions and a Help Desk.

For GHA the primary question is what defines a “wide audience”? And for the evaluation: Is it being reached?

The GHA programme keeps a careful log of citations and Help Desk usage, and Google Analytics provides details on website visits. GHA is receiving about 10,000 visits to the website every month. Before July 2010 the site was receiving about 20-30 visits a day. This rose in July 2010 to 150-200 a day. Since January 2011 the average number of weekday visits has been between 400 and 500 per day. Overall, between February 2010 and February 2011, there were 56,000 visits, of which 32,500 were unique visitors. The average visitor goes to five pages and stays about three minutes. This compares favourably with other websites. A university-based think tank devoted to crisis and crisis mitigation receives between one third and half the number of GHA visits, each visit averaging less time and half the number of pages. One humanitarian “think tank” gets half the number of daily visits, while another with a more aggressive outreach programme averages about triple the GHA number.<sup>8</sup>

One quarter of the visits to the GHA site between February and April 2011 were from the United States, 17% were from the UK,  $\pm 5\%$  each from Germany and Canada, 3.4% from France and  $\pm 2\%$  each from Italy, Australia and Spain. Traffic from India, Brazil, Japan, Netherlands and the Nordic countries was relatively light, although the combined total of visits from 12 developing countries and non-traditional donors,<sup>9</sup> at 13% of the total, was not insignificant. Over time the greatest growth in usage has been in the United States.

GHA had a contacts list of 1067 for distribution of the 2010 GHA Report, up from 442 for the 2009 Report. 769 hard copies of the report were distributed to governments, NGOs, universities and others – 37% in Europe, 19% in the UK, 14% in North America and 10% in Latin America, Africa and Asia combined.

Over a period of 30 months (Sept 2009 – March 2011) the Help Desk logged 98 requests for assistance. Approximately 25% of these were from people or organizations requesting financial assistance or employment (i.e. not relevant). Approximately 20% were received from bilateral or multilateral donor organizations; 20% from NGOs and practitioners; and 20% from universities and researchers. Approximately 7% were from media outlets, including the *Washington Post*, Reuters and CBS News. Of the 70 requests for which time was logged, the average devoted to each was 1.6 hours (a total of 112 hours or approximately 15 person-days over the period). The average is a bit misleading as only 22 of the 70 required more than an hour, 11 more than 3 hours, and one a remarkable 22 hours. The number of serious requests to the Help Desk in January and February 2010 showed a 300% increase over the previous six months.

In April 2010 the GHA programme carried out a citation review in an effort to determine where and how frequently GHA had been referenced since 2001. The survey was updated in March 2011 covering a subsequent eight month period. Using Google Scholar, Google News and Google News Archive, the 2001-2010 survey found 85 citations from 58 sources in a variety of reports, newspaper and journal articles, working papers and books. In the eight month period during 2010, it found an

---

<sup>8</sup> Details were provided on condition of anonymity.

<sup>9</sup> India, Russia, South Korea, Brazil, Pakistan, Poland, Kenya, China, South Africa, Turkey, U.A.E. and Singapore.

additional 87 citations in 47 sources, almost as many as in the previous nine years combined. Half the citations were used by academics, 20% by the media, 16% by NGOs and 11% by international organizations. The 2010 review showed that there had been a significant increase in media citations at 16%, up from 3% over the previous nine years. This review has obvious limitations and may represent a fraction of actual citations. Using consistent calculating techniques, however, the difference between the first nine years and the subsequent nine months shows a dramatic growth.

Between October 2009 and March 2011, GHA made 29 direct presentations in 14 different countries on its work and findings to donor governments, multilateral organizations, NGOs and others. The collective audience is estimated by GHA at more than 800 individuals.

### **Observations and Recommendations**

Clearly, GHA findings are being widely disseminated and usage is being reasonably well tracked. The growth in uptake – website visits, Help Desk requests and citations – is significant. It is perhaps true to say, however, that the target audience has not yet been well segmented. GHA is widely used by donors and academics, but perhaps less-so by those who require real-time information for needs assessment and decision-making. An interviewee in a UN agency said, “I use the GHA report on a regular basis; I wish I had some assurance that the donor governments I deal with are also using it. My suspicion is that many are not.”

The value of GHA is in its broad coverage of humanitarian action over time, and its use as a tool to chart and improve flows and effectiveness. This should be of use to all humanitarian actors, but not all humanitarian actors, especially those on the front lines and perhaps some of those responsible for raising funds, spend time considering broad trends. Key decision makers within organizations and those beyond who shape public and political opinion are an important but perhaps neglected audience, as are those engaged in humanitarian action among new and non-traditional donors.

The received wisdom in today’s world of burgeoning social and electronic media is the need to place greater emphasis on tools such as RSS feeds, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. These may be important, but audience prioritization, research and segmentation are needed first.<sup>10</sup> In terms of its importance to the goals of GHA, the target audiences might be seen as a series of concentric circles. The inner circle has traditionally been the major government and multilateral funding organizations. A secondary circle might be made up mainly of front-line delivery agencies. A tertiary circle in the past might have included the media, parliamentarians and academics, and a fourth ring might include the general public.

It could be argued that parliamentarians and their research staff (or top-rank agency decision makers), academics and the media – in the past something of an accidental audience – need to be brought closer to the centre of the target because of their importance in shaping both political will

---

<sup>10</sup> GHA put out 95 Tweets between June 2010 and mid-April 2011. Many of GHA’s “followers” are important consumers of GHA material (ALNAP, DFID, several NGO networks and think tanks). Uptake of GHA material (or anyone else’s material for that matter) as a result of Twitter is unknown. Related organizations such as DARA and the Human Security Report Project do not use Twitter, although the latter provides RSS feeds. In contrast, fundraising organizations are voracious users of electronic social media. CARE USA, CARE Germany and CARE Canada all use Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, but no RSS feeds. CARE USA has 380,188 “followers” on Twitter. CARE Canada has 1,855 and CARE Germany 994. GHA had 168 in April 2011. The *New York Times Magazine* (March 27/11) found the most influential individual on Twitter was Rafhina Bastos, a Brazilian comedian with 1.7 million followers. “Influential” refers not to the number of followers, but to the number of times someone’s Twitter name is mentioned by others. It doesn’t measure who’s talking, it measures how much an individual is affecting the conversation. Lady Gaga, with almost five times more followers than Bastos, is rated as less than half as influential.

and humanitarian policy. The military, an increasingly visible player in humanitarian action and the subject of much study, needs to be aware of GHA findings. And although much has been said and written over the past decade about new and non-traditional donors – in the Middle East, the BRICs and the private sector – there is not yet much evidence that GHD principles are making significant inroads with them. Visits to the GHA website from India, Brazil, China and Saudi Arabia are minimal. Few of the Help Desk queries come from these audiences and only one of the direct presentations was made in the South, to an ALNAP conference in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>11</sup>

The military and non-traditional donors are addressed elsewhere in the report as the *subjects* of study, but they, along with the media and parliamentarians perhaps, need to be addressed more strategically as consumers of GHA output.

Media queries over the past year have been few, but they came from prominent news outlets, and demonstrate potential. The media, of course, can be a double-edged sword, frequently looking for “scandal” in hard-pressed, under-resourced humanitarian efforts. This is all the more reason for a carefully-tailored media strategy that can draw journalists to a better understanding of humanitarian action and what might be required to improve it.

In short, where communications are concerned, one size does not fit all. The website and the annual GHA Report are the main GHA products, but the contents need different kinds of marketing and “advertising”, and different signposts and interpretation for different audiences. The audiences need to be prioritized as well. For example, how important is the Help Desk in relation to building an audience among military actors? This may not be an either/or question, but some audiences will become more important than others as the programme evolves.<sup>12</sup> One interviewee suggested that in the South, a direct approach is required – starting perhaps with presentations to the humanitarian committees in regional bodies such as ECOWAS, the African Union and others. In short, the *product* has been developed; *marketing* should now become a major priority.

There is an obvious capacity question in this, but if a product is not reaching parts of its intended market, sustainability becomes an issue.

Finally, a question arises about languages other than English. A Spanish edition of the 2010 Report is in the works, but it is taking time and will soon be overtaken by the 2011 report. Attempts to obtain funding for an Arabic edition were unsuccessful. Translation of a 60,000 word publication – about half the length of a good-sized book – is a major proposition. Translation would probably run to at least \$25,000, and perhaps significantly more. The cost per potential reader of an Arabic edition is somewhat breath-taking. A similar calculation per reader of a German or French edition might prove illuminating. That said, there are several GHA reports, the summary of the Annual Report and other information that could be translated on an experimental basis and made available on the GHA website in a way that would both advertise the fact (e.g. small German/French/other flag buttons) and allow GHA to track traffic to that site. If the traffic is significant, a case could be made to

---

<sup>11</sup> The potential in this area is large. One official of a non-DAC donor country said: The GHA Programme is very important to me. We are a new donor; we have no corporate memory and need the information and benchmarks that GHA provides. GHA helps us understand humanitarian norms, GHD principles and trends among other donors; it helps us to see where we fit as we develop our own humanitarian effort. GHA responds quickly to requests in a very non-bureaucratic way. (These comments have been paraphrased.) Another said, however, that “I’m embarrassed to say that I know very little about it.” Their own capacity and curiosity is a problem, “but GHA needs to advertise more.”

<sup>12</sup> GHA is working on a Help Desk policy. One possibility might be to assess the level of effort that a request will require, and whether the request comes from a high or lower priority part of the target audience. A charge could be made for requests (from low-priority targets) requiring more than, say, an hour of effort.

fundings, notably in countries where the language is spoken, for a more substantive translation programme. Certainly translations into French, Spanish and Portuguese would help the GHA reach a much wider cross section of people – extending well beyond France, Spain and Portugal.

The value in a summary translation should be measured in ways that extend beyond the number of readers. Senior policy makers in many countries may not be fluent in English. Access to a well-marketed summary version may encourage them to promote the full report among civil servants with greater English language proficiency.

## 5 EDITORIAL POLICY AND “NO SPIN DATA”

The GHA programme prides itself on “no spin data” – “providing analysis, rather than opinion”. Elsewhere this report confirms that GHA is certainly providing greater access to reliable, transparent and understandable data on humanitarian assistance. But questions arise about the “no-spin” data and opinion-free editorial policy.

Casual opinion is one thing, but conclusions and judgement based on analysis and experience are another. The October 2010 report on Southern Sudan offers some very pointed comments and conclusions about the artificial distinction between humanitarian and development spending and the manipulation of needs data to accommodate donor preference. It calls for greater transparency in donor decision-making, and the need for shared methodologies in needs assessment. This is what one might expect from such a report. The report on Afghanistan, *Tracking Major Resource Flows 2002-2010*, however, draws no conclusions whatsoever, even though some are implied and many can be inferred. Nevertheless, casual readers interested in *understanding* more about humanitarian action in Afghanistan will almost certainly be left asking, “So what?” For an answer to that question, they will have either to devote a lot more time and attention themselves to the data, or go elsewhere – to analysts that may not be using the rigorous data produced by GHA.

This is not a question of “spin”, opinion or advocacy, although some of the latter is evident in the Sudan study. It is simply a question of whether GHA’s considerable talent can’t be used in drawing greater *meaning* from the figures – meaning that may not always be self-evident to the busy reader. Even a simple graph, represents analysis – in the choices that are made on what to include and what to exclude. The same is true in the selection of workstreams. By studying military involvement in humanitarian action, for example, an editorial decision has been made – regardless of how the eventual information is presented.

There are other kinds of judgement and quiet “editorializing above the fold”. In GHA’s discussion of funding mechanisms, there is a clear bias in favour of multi-donor funding arrangements, no doubt because these address many of the failings of the pre-2005 donor scramble. The language used in the report assumes that these funds are a good thing. The point here is not to dispute the fact but to suggest that in the absence of discussion about the failings (or advantages) of other forms of assistance, an editorial policy *is* at work.

Arguably, the entire workstream devoted to “trends” is based on a kind of editorializing:

“We believe that the changing patterns of humanitarian crises, the links between chronic poverty and vulnerability to risk, and the long-term practice of spending the bulk of humanitarian funding in protracted emergencies, are all challenges to humanitarian assistance as currently conceived.”

Here a “belief” suggests a very large and important conclusion for the entire humanitarian enterprise.

Among GHA stakeholders, views on whether or not GHA should offer more conclusions and recommendations run from warm to cool, and occasionally from hot to cold. Some feel that any effort by GHA to offer opinion or to engage in advocacy would reduce and possibly damage its reputation for independence and objectivity. Others, working in small departments without the time or resources to take GHA data to the next step feel that more could be done. For arguments needed to advance a position at a higher political level, they must rely on other analysts that do not, perhaps, have the same credibility as GHA. As GHA becomes better known among non-traditional donors and domestic responders, the challenge to provide useful *meaning* will grow.

### **A Halfway House?**

Good journalism tries to present unbiased news, allowing readers to form their own opinion. But all good newspapers provide editorial comment, and the best ones restrict it to the editorial pages. Comment may be prepared by the paper’s own editorial board, but it also comes from columnists, guest writers, “op eds”, polls and interviews. Informed views do matter, and to suggest that DI and those working on the GHA programme have none, or should offer none, seems like a waste of talent and opportunity.

One way of preserving DI’s well-deserved reputation for independence and objectivity while answering part of the “so what?” question might be to create a separate place where issues can be discussed – something like the editorial page of a newspaper. This could be a distinct part of the website. Or perhaps the “trends” section could be expanded to comprise “trends and issues”. Here some of GHA’s own conclusions could be expanded for their larger meaning. Guest articles on hot topics – pro and con – could be invited, and interviews with prominent actors could be posted. Here is where website interactivity could prove useful, in eliciting other views and debate on issues that shape and inform the everyday business of humanitarian action.