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an introduction to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) for humanitarian actors

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Introduction

At the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, a number of leading donor governments, multilateral and UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), agreed the 'Grand Bargain: A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need', including a set of proposals and commitments to increase the transparency of humanitarian financing.

Grand Bargain commitments on greater transparency

Aid organisations and donors commit to:

1. Publish timely, transparent, harmonised and open high-quality data on humanitarian funding within two years of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul. **We consider IATI to provide a basis for the purpose of a common standard.**
2. Make use of appropriate data analysis, explaining the distinctiveness of activities, organisations, environments and circumstances (for example, protection, conflict-zones).
3. Improve the digital platform and engage with the open-data standard community to help ensure:
 - accountability of donors and responders with open data for retrieval and analysis
 - improvements in decision-making, based upon the best possible information
 - a reduced workload over time as a result of donors accepting common standard data for some reporting purposes
 - traceability of donors' funding throughout the transaction chain as far as the final responders and, where feasible, affected people.
4. Support the capacity of all partners to access and publish data.

Within this commitment, the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) has been identified as a basis for a common standard for publishing data on humanitarian funding.

Implementing the Grand Bargain commitments on transparency provides an unprecedented opportunity for increased political momentum and practical action to improve the quality, availability and use of data on crisis-related financing. There are potential benefits for all involved: donors, who want to know how efficiently and effectively their funding is being spent; and implementing organisations, to improve their decision-making processes and support advocacy efforts to mobilise additional resources. Most importantly, access to information is a key part of making humanitarian action accountable to affected people – allowing people to see how much assistance is being provided and whether it is reaching them in the most efficient and effective way possible.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce humanitarian actors, particularly those organisations that have signed up to the Grand Bargain, to the top-line purpose and functionality of the IATI Standard. It should be read alongside other resources that provide more technical detail on how to publish to the IATI Standard and access IATI data.

Why is transparency of humanitarian financing important?

Transparency is not an end in itself but a fundamental part of improving the efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian action. Knowing how much funding is provided in crisis contexts, as well as how much is received by the people affected, is a prerequisite for prioritising reforms in humanitarian financing and tracking their progress.¹

There are three aspects of transparency that are particularly important within humanitarian financing – the ‘3Ts’:

- **Traceability:** being able to ‘follow the money’ through the transaction chain from donor to crises-affected people
- **Totality:** reflecting all relevant resource flows including and beyond humanitarian assistance, bridging the humanitarian and development reporting divide
- **Timeliness:** providing an up-to-date picture of the resources available is essential in fast-moving humanitarian settings.²

What is the International Aid Transparency Initiative?

IATI is a multi-stakeholder initiative that works to ensure that transparent, good quality information on development and humanitarian resources is available and used to help achieve sustainable development. The IATI community brings together governments, multilateral donors, partner countries, civil society organisations (CSOs) and private sector organisations to publish, improve and support the use of quality IATI data.

At the centre of IATI is the [Standard](#) – a framework for publishing open data³ on development cooperation and humanitarian assistance in a comparable format.

Publishing to IATI is voluntary, with individual publishers retaining control of the data they choose to put in the public domain. It is nevertheless worth noting that some bilateral donors require their implementing partners to publish to IATI as a condition of funding. All actors are welcome to publish to the IATI Standard, while membership of IATI – for which there is an annual membership fee – confers the right to participate in the governance of the initiative.

Since 2013, the initiative has been hosted by a multi-stakeholder consortium of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), Development Initiatives and the governments of Ghana and Sweden.

How does IATI work?

Organisations publish raw data in the IATI format (XML), in line with the Standard, using one of the existing publishing tools (such as [AidStream](#) or [CSV Converter](#) – also known as CSV2IATI), or by developing a download or automatic feed from their own internal systems. This data is hosted on the publisher's own website and the URL link(s) to the data are posted in the IATI Registry. The IATI Registry therefore acts as a library (or register) of URL links so that anyone with an internet connection can access the data.

IATI promotes the concept of 'publish once, use often', generating high-quality IATI data and making it freely available ('open') to be used in a variety of ways by different people or platforms (e.g. the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service (FTS)) – either internally by the publisher or by a range of external stakeholders, as a single dataset or combined with other data.

The FTS already uses IATI data and has been piloting the use of data from specific publishers within its system. Some existing platforms driven by IATI data include the UK Department for International Development's [Development Tracker](#), the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs' [openaidNL](#), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency's [Openaid.se](#), [Open Aid Search](#) (also known as IATI Search), [Open UN-Habitat](#) and [d-portal](#). There are also many other examples.

How does IATI relate to existing financial tracking systems and platforms?

IATI is not intended to replace existing platforms such as the FTS or the European Emergency Disaster Response Information System (EDRIS). Rather, it provides a more efficient and effective way for these platforms to automatically access good quality, comparable raw data, rather than having to collect it from each reporter in turn and manually enter and manipulate it. IATI data can provide the raw material to feed both existing and emerging systems and platforms; it is the core source on which other platforms are built. Crucially, IATI can free up resources to focus on data analysis and curation, rather than data collection.

Figure 1: IATI in relation to existing systems and platforms



Source: IATI

In addition, internal reports, reports to funders, websites and accountability dashboards can be driven by IATI data, providing a rich source of information for decision-makers and policymakers. The availability of a wealth of financial and activity data can improve evidence-based decision-making and enhance operational effectiveness both in the field and at headquarters level. IATI data can also provide a vital source of information for external audiences, such as researchers, or be used for reporting to donors and other stakeholders.

Who is already using IATI?

As of January 2017, over 500 organisations are publishing data to the IATI Standard. These include bilateral and multilateral donors, foundations, CSOs and private sector consultancies. Key humanitarian donors and agencies publishing their funding to IATI include the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO), Sweden and Japan, as well as the UN Central Emergency Response Fund, UN OCHA FTS, UNICEF, the World Food Programme (WFP), Save the Children and Oxfam. A full list of publishers can be found on the IATI [Registry](#).

How has IATI been adapted to meet the needs of humanitarian actors?

While the IATI Standard was originally developed with traditional development flows in mind, it has since been modified to better meet the needs of other actors, as well as adapting to the changing external environment. The latest upgrade to the Standard was specifically designed to improve IATI's usability by the humanitarian community.

Following consultations with UN OCHA FTS and other humanitarian stakeholders, new fields were added to respond to the specific data needs of humanitarian reporters and data users. Organisations can already publish data on humanitarian activities using either older versions of the IATI Standard, or the latest version 2.02, which includes new fields specifically developed for humanitarian assistance. These new features include the ability to mark activities as 'humanitarian' and to tag them in relation to specific crises and sectors.

At the time of press, two Grand Bargain signatories – ECHO and the WFP – have begun using IATI's new humanitarian marker.

How do smaller organisations publish to the IATI Standard?

Many existing IATI publishers are CSOs, ranging in scale from foundations and trusts to local, national and international NGOs.⁴ In many respects, it is easier for a small- or medium-scale CSO to publish to IATI. They have comparatively less data than a government, multilateral or large international NGO; they don't have complex internal systems that need to be aligned to the Standard; there are *free* publishing tools that are specifically designed for their needs (e.g. AidStream and CSV Convertor); and sign-off processes are less likely to involve multiple levels within their organisation. Small and medium CSOs can start publishing almost straight away using a free online tool and some web guidance.

Larger NGOs, particularly if they are part of a global federation, may have to invest more time in aligning systems and producing data feeds. However, this has not prevented branches of some of the largest international NGO federations and families from publishing to IATI.⁵ Some organisations have used IATI publication as an opportunity to redesign their internal systems. While this has required investments of time and money, there have been significant benefits in terms of more streamlined systems, resulting in better data collection and use across the organisation: 'publish once, use often' in action.

Many of the CSOs who publish to IATI have been able to do so after a one-day training session (UK and Dutch NGOs can access training and support from their NGO national platforms); others have published without any support at all. There is an investment of time at the beginning to establish systems and ensure there is a shared understanding across finance, IT and programmes, but once regular reporting has been set up it should be a routine, automated process like any other.

Does IATI allow users to see how much funding is passed to local and national responders?

When all actors are publishing good quality data, financial flows will be traceable through the implementation chain, as money passes from one organisation to another. If all actors – including donors, UN agencies, international and national CSOs and other local implementing partners – complete the appropriate fields, then systematic traceability of funds through the delivery chain is possible. Where local organisations are not in a position to publish such data themselves, international agencies are encouraged to offer

and, in exceptional circumstances, can even publish to IATI on their behalf – though this necessitates systematic access to the required data.

Will publishing to IATI put staff and operations at risk?

Concerns about security and commercial confidentiality are common to many publishers, and are dealt with using ‘exclusions’. For example, if there are security concerns in a particular humanitarian context, and publishing data poses a potential risk to staff, partners or affected populations, the publisher can exclude publication of all or some of that data in line with their exclusion policy, provided details of this policy are made public.

Is IATI only for financial reporting or can publishers also provide narrative reporting?

Currently publishers can report outputs, outcomes, impact and ‘other’ result type information using free text, and the IATI Standard also provides for the publication of structured results data. Measuring results is one of the most challenging issues in IATI and in the humanitarian and development communities generally. In the absence of an internationally agreed results framework for the sectors, publishing fully comparable results data is not yet possible. A shared international approach to this could help inform the next upgrade of the Standard. Discussions on this question will be a key part of follow-up on the Grand Bargain commitments on ‘transparency’ and ‘harmonising and simplifying reporting requirements’.

Will the IATI Standard be adapted further to meet the needs of humanitarian publishers?

IATI aims to provide a Standard that is stable, but also flexible enough to respond to the demands of its diverse users and publishers. Going forwards, minor (decimal) upgrades to the Standard are considered on an annual basis, while major (integer) upgrades only take place around once every three to five years in order to maintain stability and minimise disruption. The most recent upgrade to version 2.02 of the IATI Standard that introduced the new humanitarian elements was a decimal upgrade. The process to consider the next decimal upgrade will commence after the annual IATI Technical Advisory Group (TAG) meeting in March 2017, providing an opportunity for all members of the IATI community, including humanitarian actors, to table suggestions for further improvements to the Standard. Follow up to the Grand Bargain commitment on transparency, through a project led by Development Initiatives, will provide a further opportunity for humanitarian actors to make suggestions about further revisions to the Standard to make it more applicable to humanitarian work.

Where can I find more information and resources on IATI?

More information on IATI can be found online at:

- [Aid Transparency](#) – information on the initiative, news, governance, how to join

- [IATI Standard](#) – detailed technical information on the Standard, code lists, schema and more
- [Dashboard](#) – statistics to assess the quality of existing IATI data, as well as a wealth of other information
- [d-portal](#) – search IATI data by recipient country, publisher or sector, or use the new free text search facility

and by contacting:

- support@iatistandard.org – helpdesk run by the [IATI Technical Team](#) to provide one-to-one bespoke support to organisations wishing to publish IATI data.

Notes

¹ Development Initiatives, 2016, *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2016*. Available at: <http://devinit.org/#!/GHA2016>

² Development Initiatives, 2016, *Better information for a better response: The basics of humanitarian transparency*. Available at: <http://devinit.org/post/betterinformation/>

³ Open data is data that is freely available for everyone to use and republish as they wish, without restrictions from copyright, patents or other mechanisms of control.

⁴ For example, the following **Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response** members are existing IATI publishers: ACT Alliance (Christian Aid, World Association for Christian Communication); Caritas (CAFOD, Cordaid, Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, Trócaire); **International Committee of the Red Cross** (British Red Cross); Care International (UK); Oxfam (GB, India, Novib); Save the Children (UK); World Vision (International, UK). **International Council of Voluntary Agencies** members already publishing to IATI include Action Contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger UK); ACTED (France); ActionAid (International, UK); Concern Worldwide (UK); Handicap International (France); International Medical Corps (UK); InterAction; International Rescue Committee (UK); Norwegian Refugee Council; Plan International (Finland, Ireland, UK, US); Stichting Vluchteling (Netherlands). **Local NGOs** publishing to IATI include: I Choose Life Africa (Kenya); Magariro (Mozambique); Medical Research Centre (Sierra Leone); MAMTA (India); PHASE (Nepal); Rahnuma-Family Planning Association of Pakistan (Pakistan); Family Aids Caring Trust (Zimbabwe); Association for Reproductive and Family Health (Nigeria); CRANE (Uganda); Cuamm Trustees (Tanzania); Gender Links (South Africa).

⁵ See previous note

Development Initiatives (DI) is an independent international development organisation working on the use of data to drive poverty eradication and sustainable development. Our vision is a world without poverty that invests in human security and where everyone shares the benefits of opportunity and growth.

We work to ensure that decisions about the allocation of finance and resources result in an end to poverty, increase the resilience of the world's most vulnerable people, and ensure no one is left behind.

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