



Checking the heartbeat of humanitarian assistance

Initial reflections from the Listen Learn Act project

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Cover photo: Men working on the latrine construction and hand washing campaign in Gambella, Ethiopia. Photo ©Tinbit Amare Dejene¹

Title: Checking the heartbeat of humanitarian assistance: Initial reflections from the Listen Learn Act project

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¹ <https://www.danchurchaid.org/where-we-work/list-of-projects/projects-in-africa/emergency-sanitation-and-hygiene-assistance-to-south-sudanese-refugees-in-ethiopia>

Foreword

In a world of ever-increasing need, we humanitarians rush to scale up our responses to save lives – but don't necessarily *always* consult affected people about whether the support we provide is meeting their most immediate needs.

Listening takes effort. It takes time, something we often feel we don't have enough of. We need to invest much more in listening to people - to learn how to enhance our response capacity, improve our programme quality - and to ultimately be more accountable to the communities we strive to support by acting on their feedback.

DCA and Save the Children Denmark want to find out how to ensure our programmes really respond to people and their needs. Through LLA, we want to explore a new path to truly accountable programming and learning. We're building on the many good efforts that organisations have already made to achieve accountability, but with the CHS in mind, we're turning the approach "upside down" and trying something new and different: with affected people truly at the centre of what we do.

Ground Truth Solutions derives its name from the practice of 'ground truthing'. This is a process where information that's inferred - such as the proposition that aid will actually help in an emergency - is compared to information from direct observation on the ground. It's been used in fields as diverse as space navigation - where measurements on the ground are compared to those from satellites - to marketing and machine learning. Ground Truth Solutions has adapted this approach for the humanitarian space.

How can we apply our complex and professional accountability mechanisms in a way that is meaningful and relevant for affected communities? Is there a sufficiently straight-forward way to do this, so organisations can collect, discuss and act upon feedback? We are investing time and resources in this project because we know that we need to do better. In LLA we're working together to bring Ground Truth's innovative methodology in tracking community perceptions of our performance to the accountability commitments in the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS).

What is most exciting about this project for us is also most scary: we don't know how it will turn out. We are all willingly walking into the unknown, because asking affected people what they think opens up uncharted territory. But if we do it right, it also gives us solid and representative evidence to improve what we're doing, right from the people we are trying to help. The local and international organisations participating in our pilot surveys are bravely committed to openly exploring the survey results. What this approach offers is something like a 'vital sign' on humanitarian performance, and sometimes those results point to concerns and problems. Through repeating surveys, we can find out where we are on track in terms of our quality and accountability commitments, and where we are not and thus need to course-correct.

The CHS is a big step forward in providing a common framework for quality and accountability, both in terms of direct work in communities and organisation-level responsibilities. In order to meaningfully implement the CHS, we need more systematically gathered feedback and more responsiveness from organisations to act on it, in a way that is also easy to implement. This is what Listen Learn Act is all about.

The Sphere Project is a close collaborator in Listen Learn Act, and Sphere's interest is two-fold: Firstly, as this report shows, an important part of feedback relates to the actual services provided. Therefore, the connection between the CHS and technical indicators needs to be well understood. Adapting technical indicators to context and explaining this adaptation to affected populations is a fundamental

element of accountability. This is the direct link between the CHS and practical humanitarian work based on technical standards.

Secondly, lessons learned from the use of the CHS in conjunction with the technical Sphere standards will be an important contribution to the 2017 Sphere revision, during which the CHS will be physically fully integrated into the Sphere Handbook. In return, Sphere provides input and feedback to the LLA project and ensures a rigorous thought-process around the work with standards. Sphere will also be helping to sharing key learnings from the LLA project through its global communication channels.

The European Commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) is aware that the actual effect of a response on each single refugee or disaster survivor is every bit as crucial as the response itself. Through its Enhanced Response Capacity funding, EU humanitarian aid is supporting us to listen, learn and act, and we would like to express our gratitude for that support as we seek to enhance humanitarian response capacity.

This report is a snapshot in time, the first of two that we will produce. It captures what we have learned so far and how we can adjust that learning process during the second phase of the project. We also hope that these early reflections will contribute to your ongoing efforts to put people at the centre of your work.

Erik Johnson, Head of
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Executive summary

Introduction

All too often, humanitarian actors fail to adequately consult with affected populations who are given too few opportunities to offer their perspectives on the assistance they receive or the agencies that provide it. Delivered through a partnership between DanChurchAid (DCA), Save the Children Denmark and Ground Truth Solutions, and with the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) – the accountability component of the Sphere handbook – as a foundation, the Listen Learn Act (LLA) project is piloting an innovative method of regular and systematic information gathering and analysis to provide a ‘heartbeat’ or vital sign for agencies to know how they’re meeting people’s basic expectations. Linked to a process of engaging communities on the issues they raise and a commitment to feeding back on corrective actions, this initiative offers an important benchmark for ‘closing the loop’. This report provides an overview and analysis of some early findings and offers critical reflections from practitioners piloting the initiative in Ethiopia, Lebanon, Mali and Nepal.

Background to the Listen Learn Act project

LLA is a global quality and accountability project funded by European Union (EU) Humanitarian Aid and piloted in four countries; Mali (the humanitarian response in the north), Nepal (the earthquake response), Ethiopia (the response for South Sudanese refugees in Gambella) and Lebanon (support for Syrian refugees). The project is overseen by DCA, Save the Children Denmark and Ground Truth Solutions (Keystone Accountability) and seeks to strengthen accountability to communities through three inter-connected components:

- Building the capacity of humanitarian organisations to strengthen their accountability to the communities that they work with by applying the CHS and implementing feedback systems, through face-to-face trainings, on-the-job mentoring and through e-learning, on-line toolboxes and supporting communities of practice and sharing data.
- Refining and testing an innovative methodology to collect and use evidence on the implementation of the CHS by 15 organisations² in Ethiopia, Lebanon, Mali and Nepal.
- Strengthening accountability across the sector through the promotion and dissemination of findings and results via reports and online media and by providing input to key humanitarian events and fora.

An overview of the LLA process

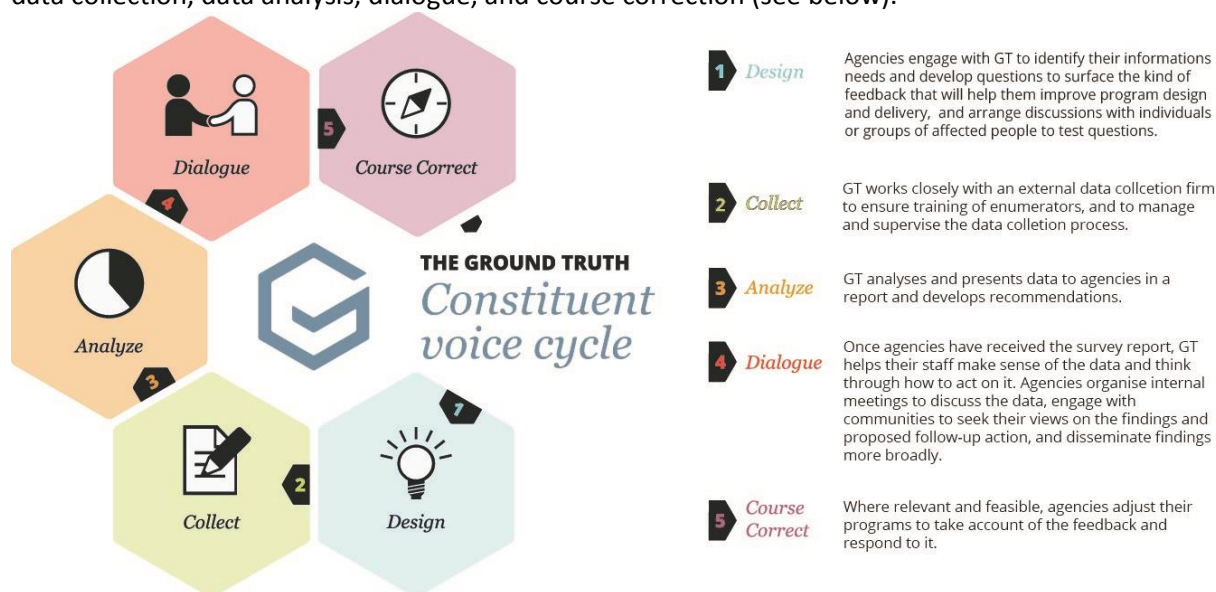
At the heart of the approach is Ground Truth’s (GT) Constituent Voice™ (CV™) methodology. This offers a light-touch way to integrate feedback from affected people into the design and implementation of humanitarian programmes. The CV™ methodology is based on collecting feedback on four dimensions of performance: the relevance and value of services, the quality of service delivery, the quality of relationships (trust, respect, self-efficacy and empowerment) as well as how constituents perceive and experience the results of an intervention (positive or negative). These dimensions are based on the relationship and performance metrics used by the customer relations industry that have proven to be reliable predictors of business success. The underlying hypothesis in GT’s methodology is that by improving on aspects related to the performance dimensions, an organisation can also improve its results and this can be tested over time, allowing agencies to compare the trend in scores by asking a few questions and repeating data collection frequently.

Ground Truth’s performance dimensions link to particular CHS commitments; commitments 1-3 which focus on the relevance, timeliness and quality of interventions, and commitments 4 and 5 which examines the relationship between an organisation and the people it serves, covering how well

² See Annex 1 for full a list of organisations which are participating in the LLA project.

humanitarian organisations include affected people’s voices in their work and how responsive they are to the complaints they receive.

Data is presented in ways designed to foster dialogue both among staff and with affected people, and to spur follow-up action. A five-step feedback cycle lies at the core of the CV™ methodology: design, data collection, data analysis, dialogue, and course correction (see below).³



In relation to the data collection stage of the diagram, the option of using an external data collection firm is not prescribed by the CV™ methodology, but decided on a case-by-case basis, depending on the context. For the LLA project, external firms have been hired to take the pressure of data collection off the participating organisations, so they can focus on learning about the methodology. In other contexts however, agencies may choose to collect the data themselves.

What has been achieved by the project?

To date a single complete round of the LLA process has been carried out in all four of the countries and two countries have started a second round of surveys. With the project still some months from completion, it is not yet possible to speak of impact, but the nature of the process – that designs surveys on CHS commitments and performance indicators and the interactions that are required both within agencies and between agencies and communities to discuss and diagnose problems, and agree course corrections - have already yielded some interesting results. Highlights include:

- The design and delivery of an approach to routinely listen to community feedback through regular surveys with a focus on making course corrections addresses two of the most important gaps in humanitarian accountability; the failure to regularly consult with communities and the failure to act on the feedback received. Evidence suggests that organisations are listening and acting.
- The use of a single methodology for a range of interventions in four diverse humanitarian contexts is unprecedented and offers an approach to humanitarian accountability that has broad relevance across the humanitarian sphere.
- The initial round of surveys endorses the relevance of the CHS as an accountability framework to gather feedback on agency performance against the commitments for which community feedback can help verify compliance. It also offers organisations an opportunity to check that they are ‘walking the talk’ and putting their principles into practice.

³ Adapted from Ground Truth Solutions (2015) *Quick Guide to the Ground Truth Approach*, p.1.

- Agency feedback on the survey findings suggest that CHS commitments, alongside contextualised Sphere technical standards are a relevant framework for measuring and improving programme performance and quality.
- Organisations participating in the LLA project have found value in an approach which is implemented and overseen by an external organisation, with GT assisting agencies to validate the survey results, discuss corrective measures and ensure procedural clarity, and the rigorous approach adopted in LLA to documenting decisions, offering an important accountability paper trail.
- Findings from the LLA project show that when an accountability approach is partnered with a formal process for discussing and agreeing course corrections which benefits from strong management engagement, swift action can be taken to address the issues raised.
- Repetition of the surveys plays an important role in strengthening the motivation to address communities' concerns and to improve performance. Over the longer-term, it also has the potential to flag ingrained issues of culture or ways of working and thinking within organisations that need to change.

What lessons have been learnt?

While the lessons from the LLA project are still emerging and there is much work still to do, the development, roll-out and implementation of a methodology to support regular and systematic community feedback on agencies' interventions against a set of commitments and performance indicators which are fast becoming the sector standard, has already offered significant opportunity for learning. Aside from the programmatic changes that have come about as a result of agencies adopting the CV™ approach, some of the more important accountability lessons include the following;

Placing a spotlight on communities that struggle for space to participate in decision-making

Across all of the agencies and all of the LLA countries, it was questions that related to agency performance against CHS Commitments 4 and 5 – information, participation and complaints - that most frequently received the lowest scores from communities. The limited knowledge that communities had about projects and how to feedback on them is a disappointing finding although not necessarily a surprise given widespread acknowledgement from within the sector that community engagement is often a weakness. It is precisely this challenge that the LLA project is seeking to remedy through its formal process of community survey, feedback and dialogue. As the project moves into maturity and moves through the three rounds, an improvement in the scores for these commitments will be an important indicator of the success of course corrections.

The impact of LLA on relationships

While the changes that agencies have made during the LLA project will understandably take some time to be felt, feedback from agency interviews suggest that in some cases, course corrections are already being made and there is already anecdotal evidence that this has strengthened trust as a consequence. The country-level training workshops have also helped focus the attention of field staff on the importance of community engagement; during the preparation of the report several of the interviewees spoke of the greater appreciation that their staff had of the need to listen to the communities that they were working with.

There have also been lessons learnt about the need to engage more broadly within communities. One organisation that received a poor score from the community as a consequence of their lack of knowledge about how to raise concerns and their lack of confidence that action would be taken, reflected that they had invested too much time engaging with community leaders and not enough in seeking to engage with other members. The disaggregated data generated by the survey prompted them to consult with a broader range of people within their project areas rather than working through a minority of village leaders.

How successful has the LLA process been in identifying issues and prompting action

Two of the most significant differences between the LLA project and many organisations' pre-existing accountability initiatives is the emphasis that is placed on taking action to address community concerns (course corrections) and feeding back to the community (closing the loop). During the baseline interviews, these two actions were frequently cited as areas of weakness and were rarely undertaken as routine activities. Perhaps as a consequence of historic challenges in achieving closure, but also because of a desire to improve performance in advance of the next round of surveys, interviews yielded several examples of how issues had been identified, discussed, validated and followed up (see below).

Country	Issue	Action taken
Ethiopia	Concerns were raised about security in the camp and child protection issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Validated the concerns raised with the childrenAction was taken to refer issues raised with duty bearers which include the police and the relevant government agency
Lebanon	Respondents were unclear about the comparative importance of the services in meeting their needs with 24% negative and 40% uncertain	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Awareness sessions to be conducted for local community to provide more information about the services.Discussions with beneficiaries about the relevance of the services to discover the reasons behind the low levels of knowledge.
Mali	There were concerns raised that some members of communities did not have information about the programme and that it did not reflect their priority needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">The LLA study has helped reveal weaknesses in community engagement some of which are already being addressedA guidance note on accountability is being prepared and will be discussed with partners for use in their interactions with communities as part of a broader action plan to strengthen accountability
Nepal	Respondents had little information on how to access the relief assistance that was available from the NGO	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Establishment of an information centre for communities to access information and set up help-desks to facilitate the flow of information about the programmeImprove communication with communities by establishing proper feedback channels and complaints mechanismInform people of their right to have information

What challenges lie ahead?

The dilemma of sustainability

At the end of its first year, the organisations that have participated in the LLA journey are enthusiastic about the future and some are already looking at the potential to transform their own practice by incorporating key tenets from the project into their internal monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning approaches. Moving from an independent and externally-supported approach to an internal one introduces important challenges to be overcome by early-adopters, including the need to maintain high quality support for the approach and the importance of committing to the same level of process rigour and management engagement. These will be fundamental to ensuring that accountability is focused on serving communities in need, rather than meeting organisational reporting requirements. This is an important distinction as it offers an opportunity to elevate accountability from a tick-box exercise to one that offers the potential to shift power to those who experience disasters.

4.3 Summary of recommendations

Based on what has already been achieved by the LLA project and the potential it has to influence positive change in the way that humanitarian organisations prove and improve their responsiveness to community feedback, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recommendation 1: Humanitarian organisations need to place greater emphasis on routinely listening to people and responding to their concerns

Complaints mechanisms are good but not good enough. A review of the baseline data suggests that the LLA process has begun to strengthen participating organisations' responsiveness to community feedback. This is one of the most significant achievements that is emerging from the project but it is one that is also fragile and may be easily undone. It is essential that the changes which have come about because of the LLA process are used as a stepping stone for changing organisational culture within participating organisations with a view to shifting to ways of working that routinely place communities at the centre of operations.

Recommendation 2: Headquarters-driven initiatives don't work – accountability needs to be field-focused

During the research, several agency staff commented on the challenges they faced with headquarters-driven, top-down approaches, which frequently lacked buy-in from field staff. Often seen as “*extra work*” or “*getting in the way of the real work*”, new checklists and procedures can be a significant burden on people who are also expected to deliver quality and accountability in communities. The LLA project's approach during survey inception visits and in-person trainings, has been to listen to the frontline staff, to learn from them about why they believe putting people at the centre of their work is important, and to support them to build skills and experience to act and do that. During the LLA project, many staff have spoken about the lack of space they have to do this effectively and so the approach which has been adopted has been one that seeks to build support from the bottom-up through the pilots, the training workshops and the e-learning materials which has offered an important opportunity for field staff to drive an important change agenda.

Recommendation 3: Humanitarian organisations still need to get better at informing and listening to the people they are seeking to assist

Accountability can only exist when people have access to information, participate in the design and delivery of programmes and have a means of providing feedback. The feedback gathered so far during the LLA project suggests that there are significant weaknesses in the ways that agencies listen to people and respond to their feedback (CHS commitments 4 and 5). Details about programme delivery issues including the application of technical standards such as Sphere and its partner standards must be routinely discussed with communities. Where standards cannot be adhered to or where gaps exist, these should be explained and mechanisms should be provided for affected people to feedback on the effect this has on their lives and livelihoods.

Recommendation 4: Donors have an essential role to play in setting an accountability agenda and in supporting and sustaining it

Donors have played a key role in supporting humanitarian accountability in the past by using both carrots and sticks. While this support has allowed the sector to significantly strengthen its understanding and application of feedback mechanisms and in so doing strengthen its accountability to communities, this approach has also seen the rise and fall of many competing and often uncoordinated initiatives. Participants at the WHS recognised the need to ensure people affected by crises are ‘*put at the centre of the decision-making processes and...are treated as partners, not beneficiaries.*’⁴ It is now more important than ever that donors make a clear statement of intent about their commitment to supporting agencies to deliver against these humanitarian accountability commitments in a way that meets the obligations that were made in Istanbul.

Recommendation 5: Agencies participating in LLA must document their experiences and lessons learned as a global resource for strengthening accountability.

The LLA project has been extremely diligent in documenting its application of the CV™ methodology and has prepared a comprehensive suite of training materials and an e-learning course to support this (which can be accessed via an online platform at <https://actlearn.org/enrol/index.php?id=86>). Materials and tools are also available through GT's Feedback Commons (<http://feedbackcommons.org>). What will be important in the coming months is that experiences and case studies from early adopters of CV™ are written up and included in a comprehensive library of LLA practice alongside the training materials. Such a guide will provide real-time

⁴ World Humanitarian Summit (2016) *Chair's summary: standing up for humanity: committing to action*, advanced unedited version, p.5.

assistance in problem-solving and will support agencies that may like to adopt aspects of the approach as well as making a broader contribution to strengthening global humanitarian accountability.

Recommendation 6: Humanitarian organisations need to continue exploring innovative ways to strengthen individual and collective accountability

As the dilemmas of collective accountability occupy ever greater space on the humanitarian agenda, agencies and the humanitarian community are still developing practical examples to address and bridge this gap. With humanitarian need overwhelming response capacity, an efficient and accountable humanitarian architecture is now more important than ever before...The locus of analysis of LLA to date has been the individual agency and the focus has been on addressing agency-specific issues raised by communities. While this was the *raison d'être* of LLA, a potentially valuable unanticipated outcome is the opportunity that the project offers to explore project level and collective organisational performance against key CHS commitments. There would be significant value in maintaining an overview and analysis of this throughout the remaining survey rounds . As the humanitarian community continues to develop and improve both collective and individual approaches to accountability, it will also be important to consider how mechanisms at both levels can complement and reinforce each other, without duplicating effort and resources.

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

CDECF	Community Development and Environment Conservation Forum
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard
CV™	Constituent Voice™ methodology
DCA	DanChurchAid
DFID	Department for International Development
ECHO	The European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department
EU	European Union
GT	Ground Truth Solutions
IMC	International Medical Corps
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IRC	International Rescue Committee
LLA	Listen Learn Act
MCI	Mercy Corps International
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
UN	United Nations
SCD	Save the Children Denmark
SCI	Save the Children International
SSICDC	Shree Swarna Integrated Community Development Center
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

Location map of countries targeted by the LLA project



Glossary of terms

Accountability

'Accountability means using power responsibly and being accountable to different stakeholders, particularly those people affected by the use of power. Being accountable means: (i) involving different groups in making decisions, (ii) managing activities well, (iii) evaluating results, and (iv) making changes where necessary to better meet people's needs.'⁵

Core Humanitarian Standard

'The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (the CHS) tells organisations and individuals how to ensure they deliver quality, effective and accountable humanitarian responses. The CHS contains nine commitments, each of which includes key actions and organisational responsibilities ("what you should be doing") and indicators ("are you doing it right?").'⁶

Constituent Voice™ methodology

Developed by Ground Truth, the Constituent Voice™ (CV™) methodology draws on traditional social science models of participation and embraces techniques borrowed from the customer service industry. The research design is simple, and can be adapted to the needs and constraints of different contexts. Affected people are asked few questions - typically 5-8 per survey – and data collection is repeated frequently. Respondents are asked to score their answers on a scale so they can be tracked over time. Data is presented in ways designed to foster dialogue among both staff and with affected people, and to spur follow-up action.

Course Corrections

'*Course corrections*' are made when an organisation adjusts its programme to take account of feedback that it receives from a community. In some cases, it may not be an immediate adjustment, but feedback will rather help formulate new ideas about how to address a certain persistent obstacle down the road.

Quality

'Quality means that all humanitarian assistance satisfies need and respects the dignity of the people it aims to assist. It's about comparing performance with recognised standards in the sector, making sure a programme is '*fit for purpose*', balancing its content with costs and timing. It's about learning what's going well and less well, and then doing it better. It means finding out what we have to change to make sure the needs of affected people and other stakeholders are met.'⁷

⁵ CHS online training module (internet). Available at <https://kayaconnect.org/course/info.php?id=260>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

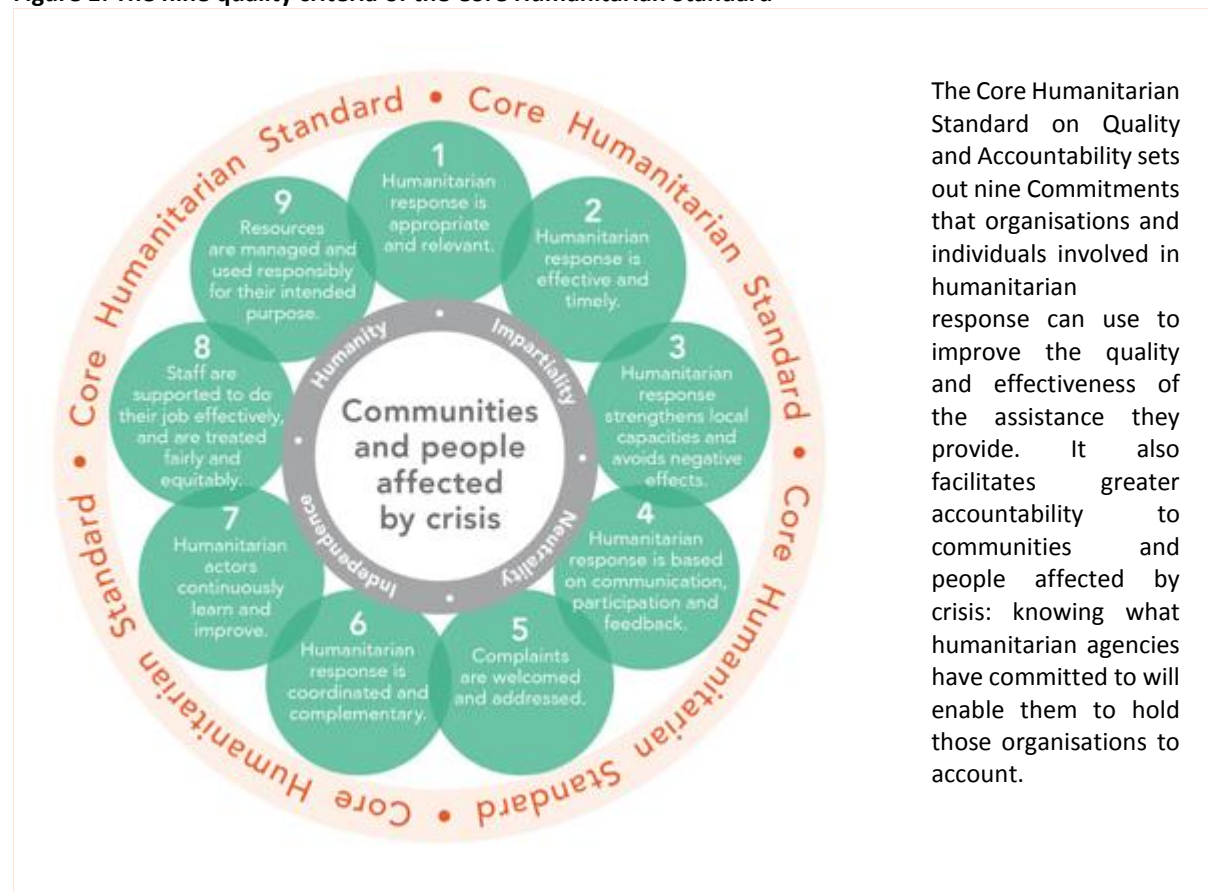
1. From principles to practice – an overview of the LLA journey

This section provides an introduction and background to the LLA project and process. It explains the purpose of this report and provides a brief outline of the evidence that has contributed to its findings. It provides an overview of the LLA journey and highlights key milestones that have been achieved.

1.1 What is Listen Learn Act?

LLA is a global quality and accountability project funded by European Union humanitarian aid (ECHO) and piloted in four countries; Mali (the humanitarian response in the north), Nepal (the earthquake response), Ethiopia (the response for South Sudanese refugees in Gambella) and Lebanon (support for Syrian refugees) and overseen by DCA, Save the Children Denmark and Ground Truth Solutions (Keystone Accountability). In addition to strengthening accountability to communities, the project seeks to reinforce the roll-out of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS – see figure 1), and supports humanitarian agencies in engaging affected populations in the delivery of their programmes.

Figure 1: The nine quality criteria of the Core Humanitarian Standard⁸



The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability sets out nine Commitments that organisations and individuals involved in humanitarian response can use to improve the quality and effectiveness of the assistance they provide. It also facilitates greater accountability to communities and people affected by crisis: knowing what humanitarian agencies have committed to will enable them to hold those organisations to account.

1.2 Why was the project established?

All too often, humanitarian actors fail to thoroughly consult with affected populations, who are rarely given much chance to offer their perspectives on the assistance they receive or the agencies that provide it. This imbalance has been perpetuated by a humanitarian system that lacks incentives for organisations to put in place effective feedback loops and manage their performance based on evidence provided through beneficiary feedback. Despite this, in recent years a growing number of

⁸ <https://www.corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard>.

reports and evaluations have provided evidence that better accountability to communities leads to improved effectiveness of humanitarian interventions. It is also now widely accepted that management buy-in is crucial for such systems to flourish. As a consequence, there is a need to both strengthen the evidence of the effectiveness of feedback systems as well as establish an approach that is robust and systematic for eliciting community feedback and supporting management action to make course corrections. This dual approach has the potential to convince humanitarian actors across the sector of both the value of accountability to affected people as well as providing important guidance on how to do this effectively.

A project officer interviews women refugees from Syria in the village of Jeb Jennine, Lebanon



Photo © Paul Jeffrey/ACT Alliance

1.3 What is it seeking to achieve?

The specific objective of the LLA project is to enhance humanitarian response capacity through the development, use and integration of an innovative and practical methodology for monitoring and improving accountability to beneficiaries; training and awareness raising of humanitarian actors; and global dissemination of findings. To address the needs for improving feedback mechanisms across the humanitarian system, the project is structured around three components:

- Building the capacity of organisations providing humanitarian assistance to strengthen their accountability to the communities that they work with by applying the CHS and effectively implementing feedback systems, through face to face to trainings, on-the-job mentoring and through e-learning, on-line toolboxes, facilitation of communities of practice and sharing data.
- Refining and testing an innovative methodology to collect and use evidence on the implementation of the CHS by organisations providing humanitarian assistance on the ground.
- Promoting participating organisations' capacity by enhancing their quality and accountability and strengthening accountability across the sector through promoting an innovative beneficiary feedback system, disseminating findings and results via reports and online media and providing input to key humanitarian events and fora.

Fifteen organisations are participating in data collection on beneficiary feedback in their programmes which includes four organisations in Ethiopia, Lebanon and Mali and three in Nepal (see annex 1 for details of agency participation in the project). Each of the organisations work with GT to identify a set of up to ten questions which are rooted in the CHS. The questions seek to elicit feedback from disaster-affected communities on the aid that they receive from participating organisations, and the extent to which it is meeting the commitments outlined in the CHS⁹ and contextualised technical standards. Independent enumerators conduct the micro-surveys to enable real time feedback from disaster-affected populations, allowing organisations involved to ‘*course correct*’; in essence, to listen, learn and act in a timely manner to the feedback they receive from affected communities. The final stage of the survey pilot includes action planning with participants to discuss and plan for how elements of the methodology might be incorporated into their existing internal monitoring and decision-making practices.

The project seeks to go beyond piloting the methodology to creating tools and providing training to humanitarian organisations about how they can integrate the approach into their work. Based on learning from the early stages of the project, four trainings have been conducted to date (two in Lebanon and two in Nepal (Ethiopia and Mali will follow) with an objective to reach at least 200 participants from 40 organisations. The training workshops incorporate sessions on the methodology in addition to providing an introduction to the CHS and Sphere and Partner standards, as an overall framework for assessing performance. The training has direct links to LLA e-learning modules and an online toolbox which will be made available to the wider humanitarian community before the end of 2016.

1.4 How does it work?

At the heart of the approach is GT’s Constituent Voice™ (CV™) methodology. This offers a light-touch way to integrate feedback from affected people into the design and implementation of humanitarian programmes. The CV™ methodology is based on collecting feedback on four dimensions of performance: the relevance and value of services, the quality of service delivery, the quality of relationships (trust, respect, self-efficacy and empowerment) as well as how constituents perceive and experience the results of an intervention (positive or negative). These dimensions are based on the relationship and performance metrics used by the customer relations industry that have proven to be reliable predictors of business success. The underlying hypothesis in GT’s methodology is that by improving on aspects related to the performance dimensions, an organisation can also improve its results and this can be tested over time, allowing agencies to compare the trend in scores by asking a few questions and repeating data collection frequently.

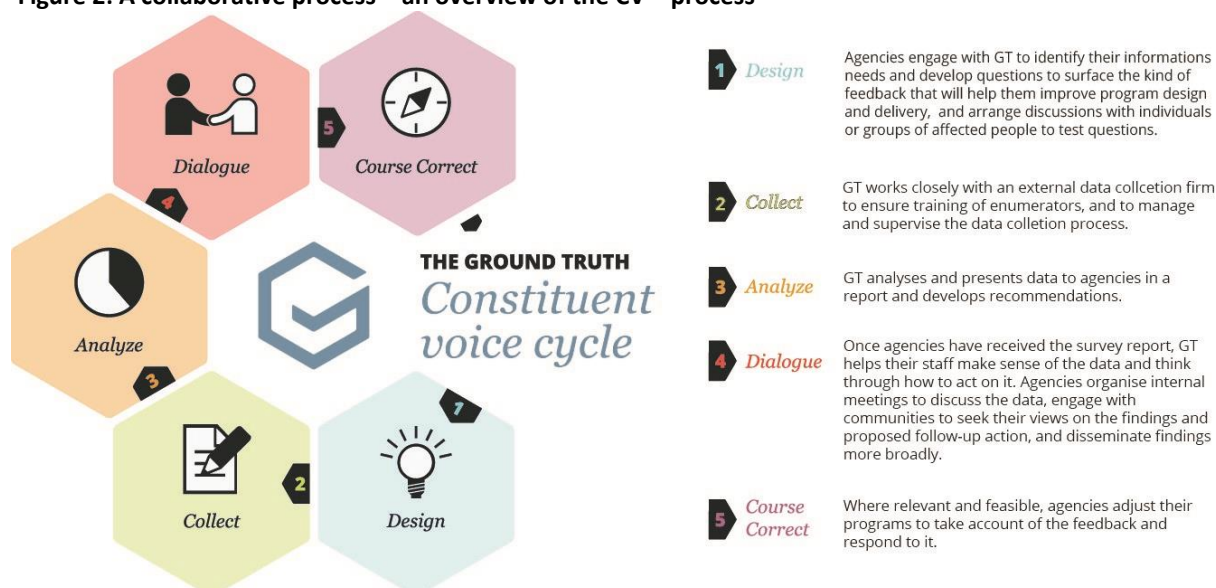
Ground Truth’s performance dimensions link to particular CHS commitments; commitments 1-3 which focus on the relevance, timeliness and quality of interventions, and commitments 4 and 5 which examines the relationship between an organisation and the people it serves, covering how well humanitarian organisations include affected people’s voices in their work and how responsive they are to the complaints they receive.

Data is presented in ways designed to foster dialogue both among staff and with affected people, and to spur follow-up action. A five-step feedback cycle lies at the core of the CV™ methodology: design, data collection, data analysis, dialogue, and course correction (see figure 2).¹⁰

⁹ Early learning from the Nepal and Lebanon survey tests revealed that it is difficult for communities to validate the organisation-facing CHS Commitments which include agency coordination (commitment 6), learning (commitment 7) and finance (commitment 9) but feedback on the first 5 commitments and staff capacity in the form of respectful relationships (commitment 8) has been routinely sought in each of the countries.

¹⁰ Adapted from Ground Truth Solutions (2015) *Quick Guide to the Ground Truth Approach*, p.1.

Figure 2: A collaborative process – an overview of the CV™ process¹¹



- **Design:** Designing the right questions is the starting point. The aim is to draft questions likely to bring out issues that are at once important to affected people and amenable to action by agencies. In LLA, the CHS provided the framework for designing up to 10 questions that were field-tested with communities for comprehension and relevance to ensure data would be fit for purpose¹².
- **Data collection:** Ground Truth's CV™ approach asks few questions, but asks them frequently. The aspiration in the LLA project is for three rounds of questions to be asked in each of the four countries, with intervals of 2-3 months. Independent enumerators were hired to undertake the data collection to allow pilot participants to focus on the learning process.
- **Analysis:** The next step is to make sense of the data that has been collected, and to present it in a clear, simple, and visually compelling way so that agencies can understand and track emerging messages. In the pilot phase, GT itself disaggregates and analyses the data, and produces a short report with recommendations. Triangulation is an important step in analysis, and in the LLA project, participating organisations compared the data with findings from other sources.
- **Dialogue:** Once agencies have received the report, in LLA, GT helped staff make sense of the data and think through – with them – how to act on it, including specific issues to probe in dialogue with communities. GT can also advise on the dissemination of feedback findings and planned follow-up actions to the wider affected communities so they recognise that their feedback is considered important and taken seriously.
- **Course Corrections:** The last step is for agencies to adjust their programmes to act on the feedback – where this is feasible and relevant. Feedback often helps teams think through how to address persistent obstacles and formulate new approaches. Once changes are introduced – or indeed in some cases in LLA, before or as they are introduced - the cycle begins over again.

1.5 An overview of key milestones (see also figure 3)

A **kick-off workshop** took place in Copenhagen in September 2015 during which implementation arrangements and an indicative work plan were agreed. Staff were then hired and lead agency responsibilities in each country were agreed. Project information was prepared, and participants were selected who demonstrated their commitment and enthusiasm to share learning and try a new feedback technique, testing their accountability performance on a selected project and how to operationalise the CHS framework. In November 2015 **Lebanon** was selected as the participating country in the Syria regional crisis and in February 2016 a change of plan was agreed with ECHO to

¹¹ Adapted from Ground Truth Solutions (2015) *Quick Guide to the Ground Truth Approach*, p.1.

¹² In Mali the security situation did not allow for field tests so the questions were tested through phone interviews, followed later with field tests by the partner organisations.

focus on South Sudanese refugees in the Gambella region of **Ethiopia** rather than pilot the project in South Sudan as had originally been proposed. These two countries joined **Mali** and **Nepal** to form the four pilot countries. Organisations were selected to participate in the four countries between November 2015 and April 2016.

Figure 3: A timeline of key LLA milestones

Date	Description of milestone
September 2015	Kick-off workshop in Copenhagen CHS training for Save the Children Denmark (SCD) and DCA project staff
October 2015	Recruitment preparation Participant selection criteria, expressions of interest circulated (Nepal) Monitoring framework designed
November 2015	Selection of Nepal agency participants Promotion of LLA with Sphere Board members and other external forums
December 2015	Nepal inception visit (5-17) and survey design & project launch Baseline reporting starts (continues through to April 2016)
January 2016	Expressions of interest circulated (Lebanon) Linking to stakeholders including Sphere and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Training plan designed with external input from Sphere and the ACT Alliance
February 2016	Expressions of interest circulated (Ethiopia) Selection of Lebanon/Ethiopia agency participants Lebanon inception visit (21-28) and survey design & project launch LLA blog project introduction
March 2016	Ethiopia inception visit (6-12) and survey design & project launch with ECHO participation Expressions of interest circulated (Mali) Participation of LLA in International Rescue Committee Learning Event in Geneva (16,17) Discussions on similar initiatives with UN agencies and IASC Nepal first survey reports prepared by Ground Truth
April 2016	Selection of Mali participants Mali inception visit (24-30) Nepal dialogue calls for round 1 Links made to Nairobi Accountability Working Group and Transparency International LLA project cited in Overseas Development Institute "Time to Let Go" report (Ch. 4)
May 2016	Nepal dialogue telecons between agencies and GT, round 1 In-person training content design LLA blog for World Humanitarian Summit (on ECHO website), LLA press release in Mali
June 2016	Lebanon first reports/dialogue calls, round 1 Nairobi Accountability Working Group – LLA presentation
July 2016	Nepal second reports
August 2016	Ethiopia and Mali first reports/Nepal dialogue, round 2 Lebanon/Nepal in-country trainings (12-30)
September 2016	Online training design Lebanon second reports commence Ethiopia/Mali dialogue calls, round 1
Nov2016	CHS Alliance Learning Event – panel presentation

Country-level **inception visits** took place, involving a project launch and an introductory workshop to design a contextualised survey to assess programme performance and compliance with the CHS from communities' perspectives. Next steps were explained and an **LLA baseline** was constructed for each of the countries and written-up. The **first round** of GT-supervised process of data collection-dialogue-course correction commenced in Nepal in February 2016 and was followed over the next 4-months by the other three countries. In mid-2016 the **second round** of data collection commenced in Nepal with Lebanon starting a month later.

1.6 Purpose and organisation of this report

The purpose of this report (the first in a series of two) is to present and discuss beneficiary and organisational experiences from the four pilot countries and include initial practical recommendations, challenges and successes for putting in place agile constituent feedback systems. Challenges and opportunities of implementing the methodology and the broader project are highlighted so as to share lessons from the project as well as to open a space for comments, adjustment and feedback as the project proceeds. Recommendations about practical uptake of the approach in the future will be presented here, and in a second report at the end of the project, alongside broader advocacy messages of relevance to the ongoing humanitarian accountability conversation.

The report is based on the following information and interviews:

- Document review from the CV™ process for each of the survey rounds undertaken in Ethiopia, Lebanon, Mali and Nepal (205 documents);
- Key informant interviews with commissioning-agency staff (2 interviews);
- Key informant interviews with country-based agency staff in each of the four countries (6 interviews);
- Key informant interviews with external stakeholders (2 interviews).

Section 1 provides an introduction to LLA and describes the process associated with it. **Section 2** outlines progress that had been made in implementation and documents some of the findings of the project between December 2015 and October 2016. **Section 3** offers feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the CV™ approach and provides reflections on agencies' experiences of the initial stages of implementation of LLA. **Section 4** concludes the report by examining the contribution that LLA has made to strengthening accountability to date, highlighting some of the lessons that are emerging from the project and making some initial recommendations to maximise its potential.

2. Reflections on the results of the LLA project

This section reviews some of the findings that are emerging from the project and draws from the information and interviews to offer evidence of the emerging impact it is having on the quality and effectiveness of programmes, and how it has affected the relationships that organisations have with the communities they are working with.

2.1 Introduction and approach

To date a single complete round of the CV™ process has been carried out in all four of the countries and two have started the second round. As all three rounds of the process have not been completed, it is too early to speak of impact. However, the nature of the process – that designs surveys around CHS commitments and performance indicators and the interactions that are required both within agencies and between agencies and communities to discuss and diagnose problems, and agree course corrections - have already yielded some interesting results. Furthermore, the cyclical nature of the process, which will see successive rounds of community feedback occur in the months to come, places an onus on agencies making course corrections in a timely way. As a consequence, even at this relatively early stage in the process, there is already a significant amount of case study material that can be analysed.

2.2 What does the LLA project's baseline tell us about humanitarian accountability?

The country-level baseline reports that were developed at the beginning of the project explore current practice and organisational culture in collecting and using beneficiary feedback in the project cycle.¹³ The survey and interviews found that agencies collect information from communities about their specific needs in addition to soliciting feedback about the quality of the services provided by the organisation. The majority of organisations indicated that they use a twin-track approach by (i) collecting complaints and suggestions from communities via hotlines or suggestion boxes ('reactive' mechanisms), and by (ii) seeking feedback via focus group discussions or key informant interviews ('proactive' mechanisms – see figure 4 for an explanation about reactive and proactive feedback mechanisms). This report will focus on the baseline data relating to proactive mechanisms (of which CV™ is one example) in order to establish a benchmark for the project.¹⁴

Figure 4: The difference between proactive and reactive feedback mechanisms

The LLA project uses a proactive feedback mechanism – one that gathers peoples' perceptions of programme performance or what they consider to be of importance. That the questions are written, and data is analysed and fed back to agencies in a way that can inform management decision-making and action, and that the cycle is repeated lends itself both to harvesting peoples' opinions, and also making changes as a consequence of them. Reactive systems (like complaints boxes or phone hotlines or face-to-face contact with project staff) permit individuals to raise concerns at any time, and if they are working effectively, they can ensure that problems can be quickly identified and responded to.

The baseline documents for Nepal, Lebanon and Ethiopia suggest that most of the organisations participating in the LLA project collect information about the communities they work with through a mix of different proactive mechanisms including through community and household surveys, needs assessments, and post-distribution monitoring. In all three countries 80-90% of respondents said that proactive feedback mechanisms were 'always' or 'usually' used in projects (figure 5). That said, the periodicity of data collection varied considerably across the different countries; almost 70% of

¹³ It is important to note that the baseline reports do have some inconsistencies as more than one member of an organisation participated in the exercise and on some occasions provided different results. It is also important to note that the results are largely based on agency staff perceptions rather than validated facts.

¹⁴ The survey results are based on feedback from 18 respondents from 5 participating agencies in Nepal; 17 respondents from 4 participating organisations in Lebanon, and; 15 respondents from 4 participating organisations in Ethiopia. The survey results from Mali have not yet been compiled but will be included in the final Listen Learn Act report in 2017.

respondents reported that they collected data on a monthly basis in Nepal compared to just over 20% in Ethiopia (figure 6).

Figure 5: The use by LLA participating organisations of proactive feedback mechanisms in projects

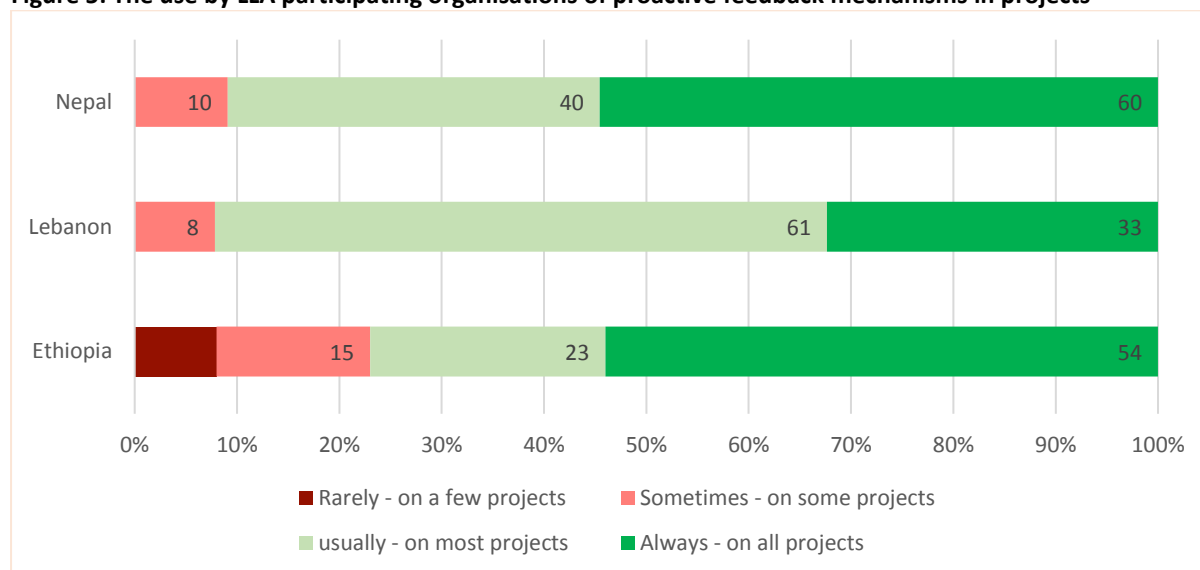


Figure 6: The frequency with which feedback is collected using proactive feedback mechanisms

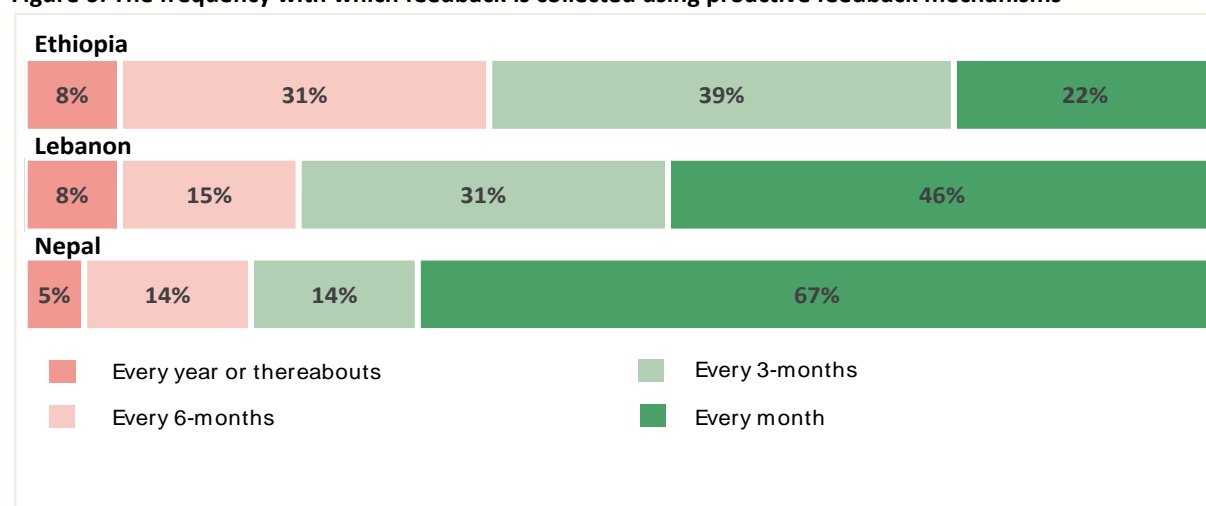
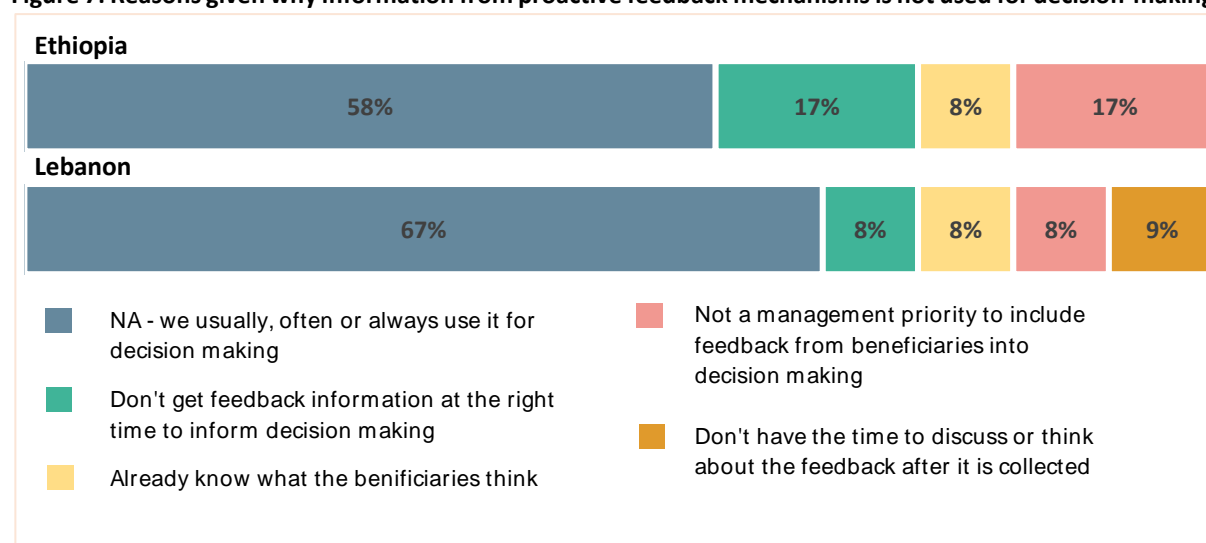


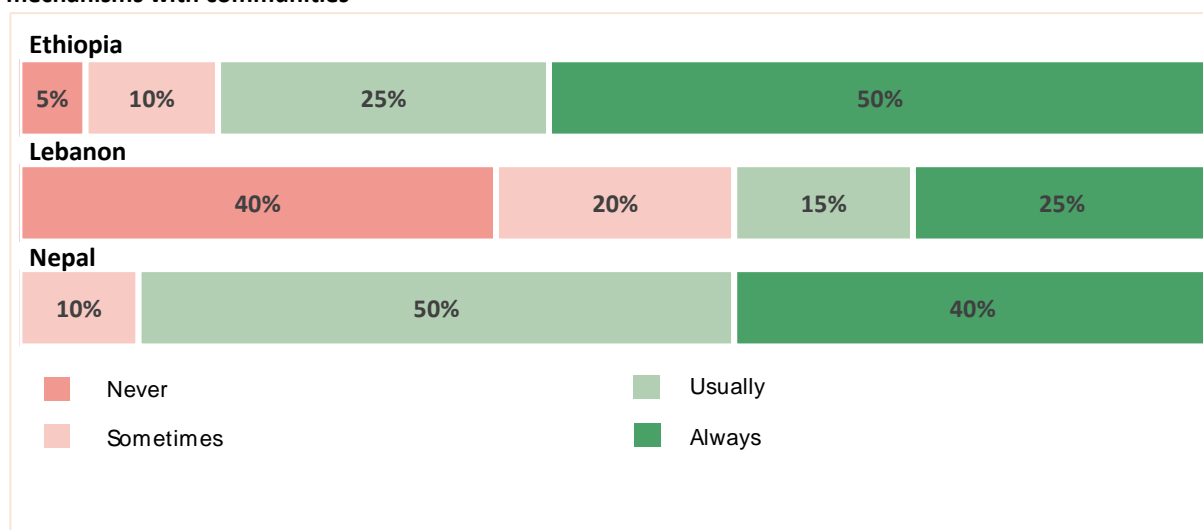
Figure 7: Reasons given why information from proactive feedback mechanisms is not used for decision-making



The baseline shows that the majority of respondents in both Ethiopia (58%) and Lebanon (67%) considered that feedback from proactive feedback mechanisms was routinely used for decision-making (figure 7). Where this was not the case a number of reasons were given; in Ethiopia the lack of timeliness of feedback (17%) and the fact that including community feedback was not a management priority (17%) were the most frequently cited reasons for why feedback did not influence decision-making. In Lebanon, these two reasons plus two further reasons – that community concerns were already known and due to a lack of time – were cited.

The baseline survey results confirm some of the basic assumptions about the need for new approaches to systematically collect and use feedback from affected communities, and to report findings back to them. Follow-up consultations in each of the countries revealed wide variations in the systematic use of feedback and the challenges that organisations faced in regularly ‘closing the loop’ and taking information back to the communities they work with. In the case of Lebanon only one of the four participants reported that they ‘always’ or ‘usually’ report back to beneficiaries compared to three of the four participants in Ethiopia (see figure 8). Despite the high frequency in Ethiopia, the baseline report shows that formal management feedback is less frequent than verbal feedback, highlighting a gap in formalised or structured ways of responding to community concerns received through both proactive and reactive feedback mechanisms.

Figure 8: The frequency with which LLA-participating agencies share information from proactive feedback mechanisms with communities



2.3 How successful has the CV™ process been in identifying issues and prompting action?

The baseline studies for Ethiopia, Lebanon and Nepal revealed the variability in the frequency with which agencies provided a response on issues raised by the communities they worked with. While there may sometimes be valid reasons why responding is not possible, particularly in contexts where insecurity may preclude regular travel to a project area, in many circumstances, failure to respond to feedback is often due to a lack of prioritisation or as a result of community feedback being de-linked from management systems. The focus of the LLA project on integrating accountability and management action and feedback to communities offers the potential benefits of ensuring that follow up occurs. Experience from the first round of surveys bears this out with project documentation and interviews highlighting a range of issues that have been raised, discussed and acted upon (see figure 9).

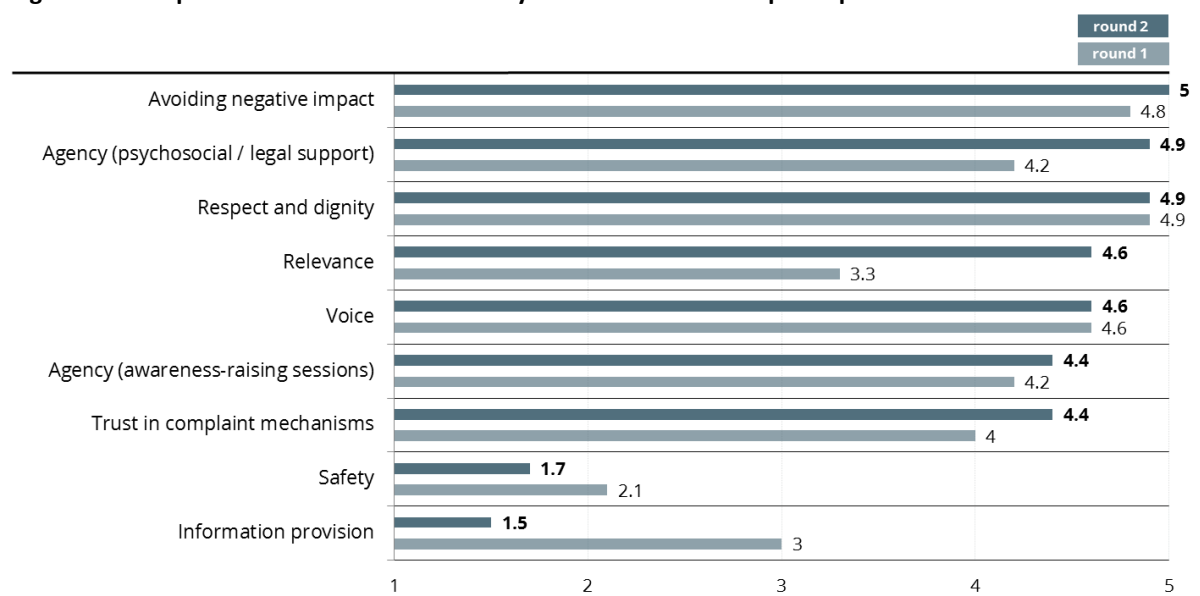
Figure 9: Issues identified in the CV™ surveys in Nepal, Lebanon and Mali and proposed actions

Country	Issue	Action taken
Ethiopia	Concerns were raised about security in the camp and child protection issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Validated the concerns raised with the children Action was taken to refer issues raised with duty bearers which include the police and the relevant government agency
Lebanon	Respondents were unclear about the comparative importance of the services in meeting their needs with 24% negative and 40% uncertain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness sessions to be conducted for local community to provide more information about the services. Discussions with beneficiaries about the relevance of the services to discover the reasons behind the low levels of knowledge.
Mali	There were concerns raised that some members of communities did not have information about the programme and that it did not reflect their priority needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The LLA study has helped reveal weaknesses in community engagement some of which are already being addressed A guidance note on accountability is being prepared and will be discussed with partners for use in their interactions with communities as part of a broader action plan to strengthen accountability
Nepal	Respondents had little information on how to access the relief assistance that was available from the NGO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of an information centre for communities to access information and set up help-desks to facilitate the flow of information about the programme Improve communication with communities by establishing proper feedback channels and complaints mechanism Inform people of their right to have information

After only a single round of surveys it is not possible to determine the effect of remedial action on community perceptions, which will be explored in greater detail in the next report. Initial feedback from agency staff participating in the LLA project certainly offer cause to believe that this will be the case.

2.4 Initial findings from the second round of surveys

Figure 10: Comparison of two rounds of survey results from one LLA participant in Lebanon

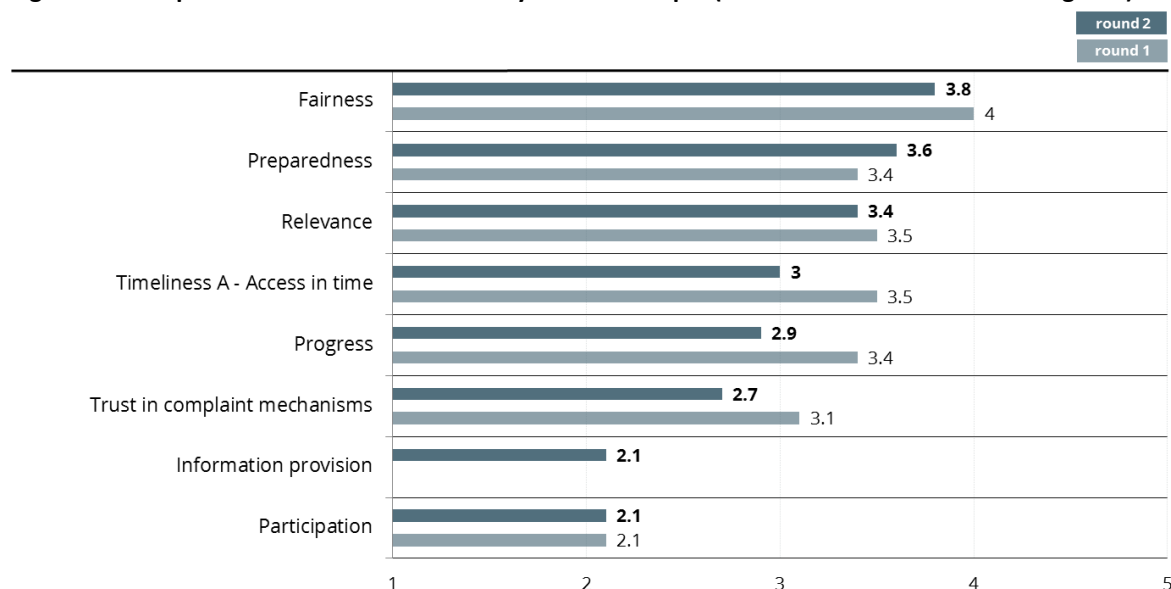


Lebanon and Nepal are the only two pilot countries that have commenced the second round of surveys, which offers the potential for comparisons to be made between the first and second round. As figure 10 below shows, after the second round of data collection for an organisation in Lebanon, the change in scores has been positive, with improvements across all of the areas of the survey since

round one, some by a significant margin.¹⁵ The trend of mean scores shows that many elements of the programme appear to be working well – for example, most people see the support they receive as relevant, timely and reaching those most in need. The trends in scores are upward and also positively reinforce the process of seeking and acting on feedback.

The situation is different for one of the organisations in Nepal as the second round of data collection elicited some lower scores than the first round. Figure 11 below shows these mixed results with a positive increase in the score on people’s sense of preparedness for another earthquake and notably lower scores on performance dimensions relating to timeliness, fairness, confidence in complaints systems and progress on living standards. Within the feedback cycle, the next steps for the organisation are to discuss these results with the community and seek to further understand why scores are trending downwards. Greater understanding is required about whether the first cycle of course corrections have come into effect, or whether more needs to be done to address issues and improve scores in the next round.¹⁶ Areas where special attention is warranted in dialogue and course corrections are the provision of information about the programme (CHS commitment 4) and participation of the community in decision-making (CHS commitment 5).

Figure 11: Comparison of two rounds of survey results in Nepal (round 1 in blue and round 2 in green)



As Nepal prepares for its third round of surveys, it will become far easier to identify downward or upward trends. When twinned with community dialogue and internal organisational reflection and action, this should offer a clearer indication of the key problems and what needs to change in the provision of services, or levels of community engagement or in the external environment to start addressing them.

2.5 Highlighting organisational performance against CHS commitments and technical standards

While the initial focus of the LLA project has tended to be at an individual agency level, given its potential to monitor and measure performance over time, it also offers the possibility of shedding important light on collective performance against the CHS commitments across agencies and countries participating in the LLA project and in so doing highlight areas of strength and weakness.

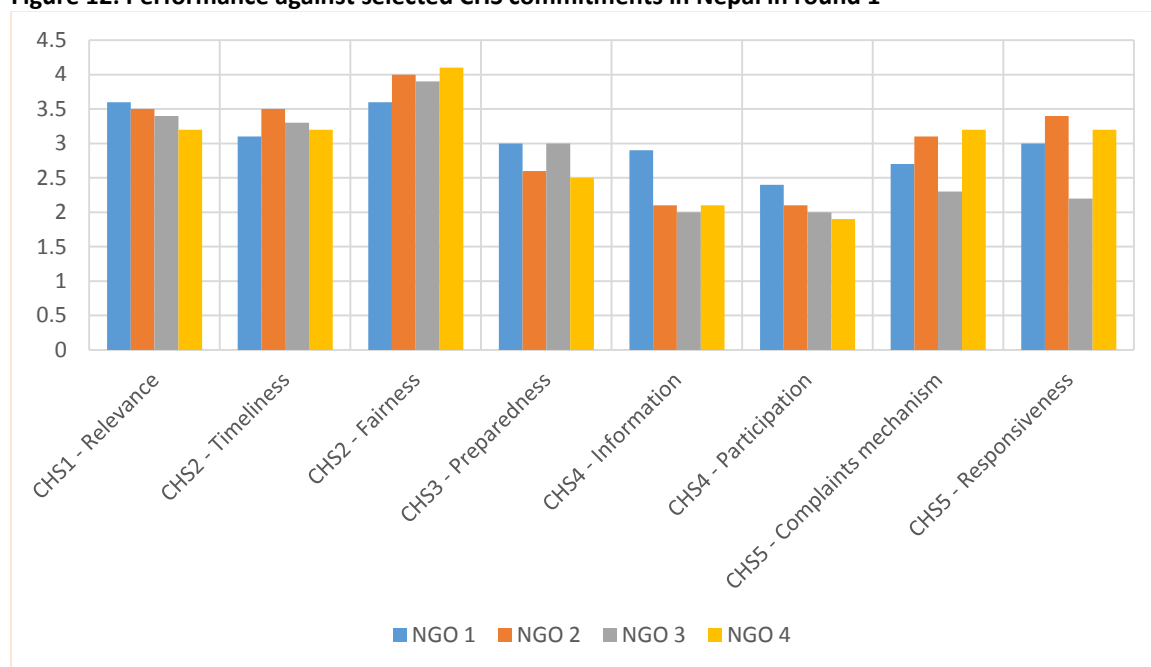
¹⁵ Each of the questions on the bar chart represent a closed Likert scale question that was asked during the first and second surveys in Lebanon. The bars show the mean average score of the responses given by survey participants on a scale of 1-5 with 1 representing ‘not at all’ and 5 representing ‘very much so’. The lighter bars represent the first survey scores and the darker bars represent the second survey scores.

¹⁶ It is noteworthy that within the LLA project period, cycles have a ‘false’ timeframe as they are relatively short, but if they are incorporated into an organisations’ own monitoring schedule, there is sufficient time for course corrections for some of the issues raised.

At a country-level, the performance of the four participating NGOs against key CHS commitments can be examined (see figure 12). The spread of scores for the four NGOs across the first five CHS commitments show a distinct trend: performance against the first three CHS commitments is better than against the latter two (see section 2.6 below for a discussion on this issue). It is important to add that there was broad support from within the participating agencies for the use of the CHS as a framework for the survey questions; during interviews, several considered this to be a considerable attraction since beyond the formal certification process there are currently few ways to obtain a ‘temperature check’ on agency performance against their commitments “on the ground”.

In the LLA project, the performance and accountability of an organisation are measured through the perceived quality of its programmes. When working with CHS commitments, an opportunity within and beyond LLA is to work with and communicate contextualised technical standards, such as Sphere and its Partner standards. This is particularly important for CHS commitments on information, participation and complaints (see section 2.6.)

Figure 12: Performance against selected CHS commitments in Nepal in round 1¹⁷



2.6 Placing a spotlight on communities that struggle for space to participate in decision-making

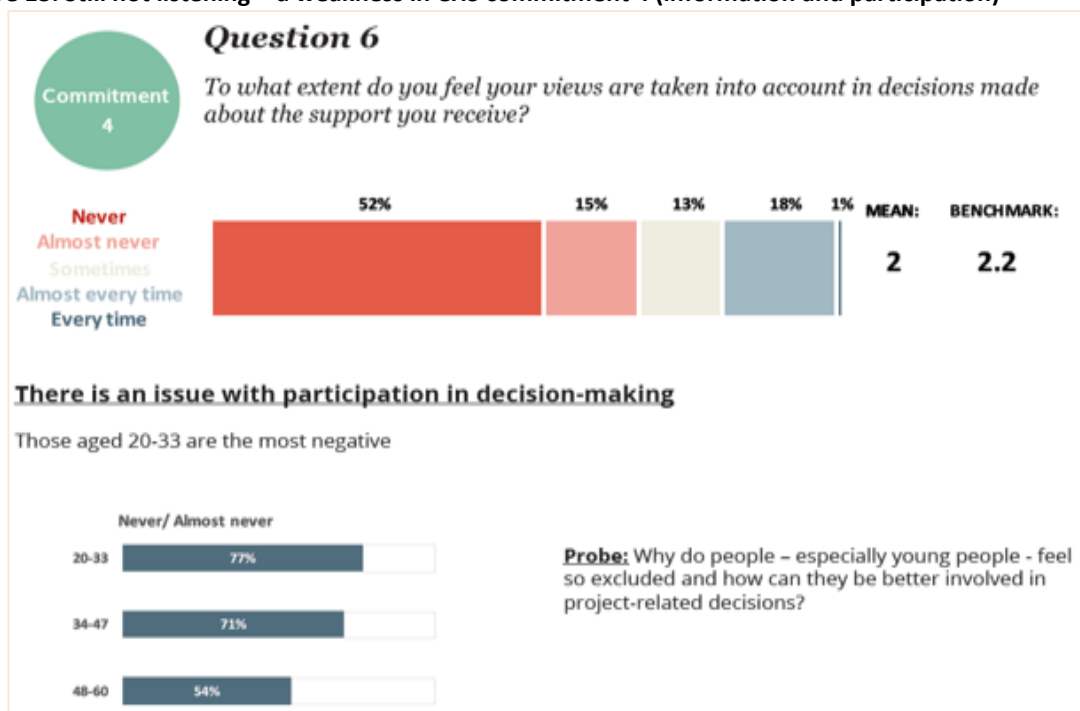
Across all of the agencies and all of the LLA countries, it was questions that related to agency performance against CHS Commitments 4 and 5 – information, participation and complaints - that most frequently received the lowest scores from communities. For example, in the first round of surveys for Nepal, for one of the participating NGOs, 67% of people interviewed, never or almost never felt that their views were taken into account in decisions about the support they received (see figure 13); this increased to 77% for those aged between 20 and 33 years of age. It is important to add that this example is not an isolated case but was the area where performance was the weakest across all of the participating organisations.

The low scores are disappointing for the recipient organisations, although not necessarily a surprise given widespread acknowledgement from within the sector that community engagement is often a weakness. It is precisely this challenge that the LLA project is seeking to remedy through its formal process of community survey, feedback and dialogue. As the project moves into maturity and moves

¹⁷ Each of the CHS commitments on the bar chart represent a comparable closed Likert scale question that was asked to project participants of each of the agencies for the first survey in Nepal. The bars show the mean average score of the responses given by survey participants on a scale of 1-5 with 1 representing ‘not at all’ and 5 representing ‘very much so’.

through the three rounds, an improvement in the scores for commitment 4 and 5 will be an important indicator of the success of course corrections. As a consequence, these should be the focus of particular scrutiny by participating organisations in Nepal during the remaining survey rounds.

Figure 13: Still not listening – a weakness in CHS commitment 4 (information and participation)



2.7 The impact of the CV methodology implemented in the LLA project on relationships

Recent research suggests that accountability between agencies and the communities they are seeking to assist offers a range of mutual benefits ranging from strengthening the relevance and effectiveness of projects to building trust and promoting acceptance and enhancing community ownership of projects.¹⁸ While the changes that agencies have made to their engagement of communities in adopting the CV™ methodology will understandably take some time to be felt, feedback from the interviews suggest that there is already optimism about the effect that participation in the LLA project is having on relationships:

“We’ve not worked like this before and so it’s strengthened our relationship with the community. They have greater confidence in us because they think this is a professional approach. [As part of the dialogue] they are beginning to tell us inner things which is creating trust between us” Senior INGO staff member, Nepal.

It is noteworthy that the LLA process and the country-level workshops have also helped focus the attention of field staff on the needs of communities; several of the interviewees spoke of the greater appreciation that their staff had of the need to listen to the communities that they were working with. There have also been lessons learnt about the need to engage more widely within communities. One organisation that received a poor score from the community because of their lack of knowledge about how to raise concerns and their lack of confidence that action would be taken, reflected that they had invested too much time engaging with community leaders and not enough in seeking to engage with other community members. The disaggregated data generated by the survey has prompted them to consult more widely with people within their project areas rather than working through a minority of village leaders.

¹⁸ For example, see Featherstone, A (2014) *Improving Impact: Do accountability mechanisms deliver results?* Christian Aid, Humanitarian Accountability Project, Save the Children, p19-20.

A local shopkeeper in Batase keeps records of each household receiving relief aid, Nepal earthquake 2015



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For international NGOs working with national and local partners, interviews revealed that the survey report offered an opportunity to level the playing field, permitting greater equity in relationships, which are often unequal. The perceived independence of the findings which are generated by an external organisation were considered to be advantageous as they provided a common agenda that could engage international, national and community-level stakeholders as joint partners.

“It’s our first time to work with this partner. LLA has given us an opportunity to discuss issues together – it gave us a joint platform and made a closer partnership” Senior INGO staff member.

2.8 The challenge of accountability where there is no duty bearer

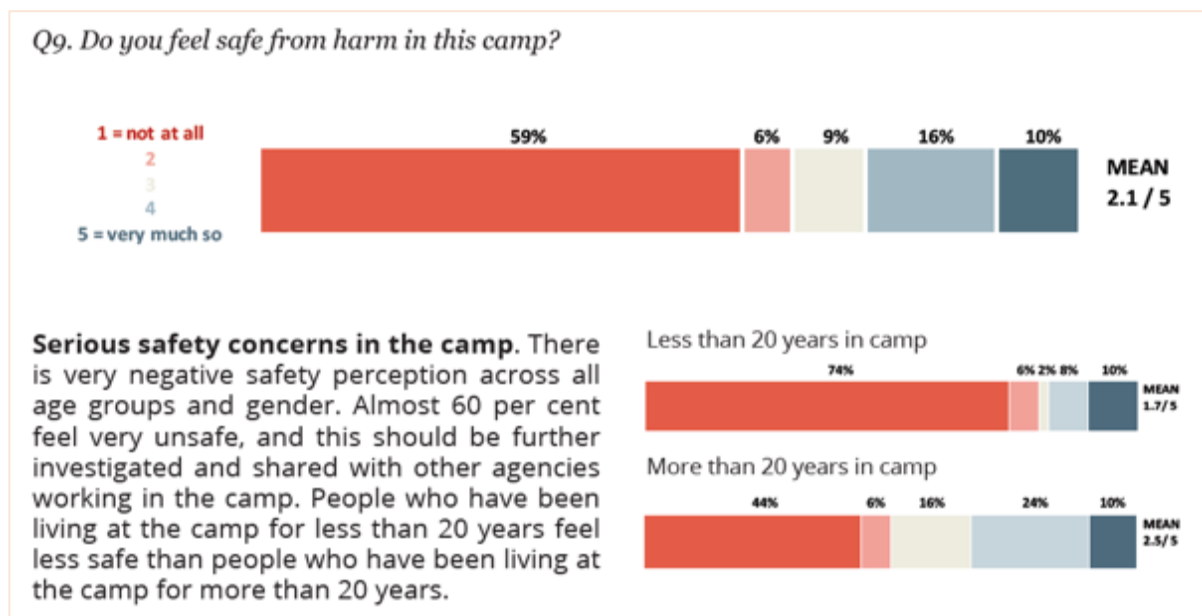
There have been several instances where concerns have been raised for which responsibilities go beyond the agency; one of the most frequently-raised examples has been security, where the duty bearer is ultimately the state. In two cases in refugee camps, there has been some success in escalating issues raised, up the chain of responsibility via the lead UN agency and the government authorities and so the NGO has been able to use community feedback for the purposes of advocating for protection and security. Here again, consistent reference to standards such as Sphere can support advocacy to raise the profile of protection and security issues.

‘As for general safety and security in the camp this is often linked to lack of food, shelter, health issues, absence of parents, etc. This goes beyond our immediate responsibilities, but we can advocate with other agencies through existing coordination platforms to try and improve the situation.’ NGO – GT dialogue minutes, Ethiopia.

However, there have also been cases which have been more complex and in a more insecure pilot country, it has not been possible to make progress on this important issue as it is beyond the power of the NGO to have direct or indirect influence on duty bearers. This has been particularly problematic for the camps in Lebanon where there is significant insecurity (see figure 14). In this example, and in

the absence of the duty bearer accepting responsibility for its action (or inaction), there are very clear limits to what can be achieved through lobbying alone.

Figure 14: Community perceptions safety in a camp where one participant works in Lebanon, round 1.



These sorts of complex issues can be ignored in the rush to prove and improve accountability, but initial findings from the LLA project show that government responsiveness continues to play a fundamental role in how people experience humanitarian crises. This issue was explored in the 2013 report of the Humanitarian Accountability Project which offered an important qualifier to the limits of NGO accountability: *'Humanitarian outcomes depend in practice to such an extent on the acts or omissions of political actors, and on such a wide variety of social and economic factors, that the accountability of specialized humanitarian organisations can only be properly understood in a wider political and socio-economic context.'*¹⁹ The initial findings of the LLA project would strongly endorse this.

¹⁹ Darcy, J., Alexander, J. and Kiana, M. (2014) *2013 Humanitarian Accountability Report*, Humanitarian Accountability Partnership, p.8.

3. Reflections on the CV™ approach in the LLA project

This section draws from the project documentation and interviews conducted with staff from participating organisations across the four pilot countries to offer feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of implementing GT's CV™ methodology in the LLA pilot and provides reflections from agencies about their experiences of the initial stages of implementation.

3.1 The focus on asking a small number of questions often

The CV™ methodology of asking a small number of survey questions frequently, is counter to the prevailing trend within the humanitarian sector of seeking to explore and understand complex situations through lengthy multi-sectoral assessment and analysis tools. While these may provide detailed information, they have also led to some criticism about 'information overload' during crises and have negatively impacted on the willingness of crisis-affected communities to engage in lengthy survey processes. In seeking to focus on quality rather than quantity of questions, the LLA surveys are consistent with a growing recognition of the need to be more targeted in the way that the humanitarian community engages with its clients.²⁰ It is also a recognition of vast amounts of data being collected and never used or acted upon in any meaningful way.

Women in Bhaktapur receiving food from the aid programme supported by DCA, Nepal earthquake 2015



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Despite a small number of agency project staff suggesting that more questions would have been better for capturing the detail, the majority of those interviewed welcomed the CV™ approach. It acknowledges the need to be respectful of the time pressures that community members often face while at the same time as providing agencies with information that was of a quality that permitted follow-up and action. There was also recognition that the surveys were being undertaken in addition

²⁰ Which includes the International Rescue Committees Client Voice and Choice Initiative undertaken with GT. For an overview of the project and feedback reports from the pilot countries, see <https://www.rescue.org/report/ircs-client-voice-and-choice-and-ground-truth-solutions-feedback-reports>.

to individual agency monitoring and evaluation processes which risked becoming overly burdensome, a concern that could be reduced if eventual adopters of the approach build perceptual surveys into existing monitoring processes, which is a component of the LLA project's pilot activities.

"We had some initial concerns about the small number of questions, but actually it is better as it keeps things light and avoids fatigue for both the organisation and the community"
Senior INGO staff member, Ethiopia.

It is noteworthy that it was reported on several occasions that communities had also praised the brevity of the survey, noting that it was in contrast to some of the lengthy consultation processes they had been engaged in in the past. As a result, in one of the case study countries, they expressed greater willingness to participate in future survey rounds.

3.2 The relevance of the CHS-focused survey to a range of different country contexts

Many of those interviewed spoke of their initial scepticism about the utility of using what were considered to be "quite general" questions based on CHS commitments. While these were modified in discussion between the agency and GT to take account of the context, expectations of what they would yield were frequently reported to have been modest. Hence, it is of interest that subsequent to the survey results being released, there is broad consensus on the value of the results - in some cases, precisely because the questions would not have been asked had they been prepared by the agency itself;

"The survey was very good at eliciting issues – it gave an initial insight which we then used as a basis for dialogue with the community" M&E staff member, Nepal.

"We would not have asked these questions – but because of this we received responses that we weren't expecting" Senior INGO staff member, Mali.

That is not to say that the questions were perfect and modification between rounds is an important strength of both the exercise and the CV™ methodology. This ensures that the surveys can be as relevant as possible, especially given the limited number of LLA survey rounds during the pilot process. While this may make it more difficult to undertake a consistent analysis across the rounds at project-end, the approach is meant to be iterative: it is better to change a question if it does not yield the desired feedback or provide actionable information.

There are also a small number of people who did not see such merit in the approach and felt that by offering community members space to voice their opinions, they were opening themselves up to unwarranted criticism.

"75% of the issues were accurate but some people have unrealistic expectations and have exaggerated their concerns. When we returned to validate the surveys, we found that it was not as bad as the survey had indicated. We have made some changes to strengthen our feedback mechanisms though." Senior national staff member.

The important qualification to the question of relevance is that all of those interviewed considered that the LLA process was an addition to their existing suite of accountability initiatives, which were most frequently reactive in nature (most often comprising complaints boxes and hotlines). Alternatively, they were dependent on face-to-face contact between community members and field staff. While it is too early to draw conclusions on the relative merits of different approaches, there was certainly an appreciation of the importance of different mechanisms as part of a holistic approach to understanding how communities are experiencing humanitarian services.

3.3 The strengths and weaknesses of using an external organisation to undertake the surveys

Using an external data collection firm is not strictly prescribed by the CV™ methodology but it was decided to hire external survey organisations for the LLA in order to remove the task of data collection from the participating organisations to enable them to focus on learning about the approach. Beyond lightning organisational workloads, there have also been some unanticipated consequences of this decision.

Historically in the sector, methodologies to routinely monitor agencies' responsibilities for accounting for their actions to the people they work with has been considered a *'nice to do'* rather than a *'need to do'*. There has been a failure across the sector to adopt formal approaches which scrutinise agency performance against standardised performance criteria (such as the CHS). As a consequence, it has been easy for staff to ignore or pay lip service to feedback as one of the agency interviews highlighted;

"We had a very robust accountability mechanism but some Country Directors refused to engage with it and so it failed to achieve its expectations". Senior INGO staff member.

For some of the participating organisations the engagement of a third party has been important for this reason alone – it ensured that they rigorously followed the process. Others appreciated the external engagement as it provided an additional layer of feedback that was outside of the organisation, which was felt to offer an important level of quality assurance. Moreover, in a couple of the countries where there was significant insecurity which precluded senior staff travel to the project area, an additional process to scrutinise agency performance was considered to have been extremely helpful. In such contexts, there was significant interest and engagement in the findings from the survey. However, accompaniment has also had its challenges, not least of all regarding the cost of the approach which many felt would make it unsustainable where committed funding did not exist.

As the project progresses, it will be important to capture reflections from participating organisations on issues of sustainability, especially during the action planning and handover process after the three rounds of LLA surveys.

A man provides a thumb print as evidence of having received food assistance, Ethiopia 2016



3.4 The benefits of adopting a rigorous process – closing the loop and making course corrections

Two of the most significant differences between the CV™ methodology and many organisations' pre-existing accountability initiatives are the emphasis that is placed on taking action to address community concerns (course corrections) and feeding back to the community (closing the loop). During the baseline interviews, these two processes were frequently cited as areas of weakness and were rarely undertaken as routine activities. Perhaps as a consequence of historic challenges in achieving closure, but also because of a desire to improve performance in advance of the next round of LLA surveys, interviews yielded many examples of how issues had been identified, discussed, validated and followed-up and agencies were routinely positive about the contribution that the LLA project has made to how they address concerns;

“The survey results permitted a helpful conversation within the team about how we deal with feedback and it helped us reflect on our organisational culture” Senior NGO staff member, Mali.

The baseline suggested that while proactive feedback approaches are frequently used during humanitarian response, the rigour with which they are used is highly variable and feedback is not routinely used in decision-making about programmes. This issue is addressed through the CV™ methodology where there is a dialogue internally within the agency to discuss the feedback as well as externally with communities to dig deeper and agree on corrective actions. Within the LLA project, this process has been supported by staff from GT and the participating agencies, which was considered helpful in clarifying issues but also prompted action. There is also documentary evidence of discussions about the issues raised, with each NGO receiving a formal ‘suggested next steps’ within the survey report and minutes of the conversations between the NGO and GT. This is followed by a management response from the NGO, detailing discussions and actions taken. This process of documentation was considered itself to be an important asset by many interviewees as it prompted management action;

“The built-in documentation of process in the LLA [project] is a real bonus; we’ve struggled in the past to do this and it ensures a focus on action” Senior INGO staff member.

The documents provide evidence of a maturity in discussions about how to follow-up issues with a recognition that some could be followed up in the short-term while others would require a longer timespan to be addressed adequately, either because resolution would require a change in strategy which could only be updated periodically or because it required additional resources and as a consequence action was linked to securing new funding.

3.5 Addressing perceived inaccuracies and bias in the CV™ feedback surveys

While most organisations considered that the survey results from the survey rounds were fairly accurate and often revealed new issues or issues that had escaped the attention of agency staff, a minority of interviewees felt that there had also been inaccuracies. These were often considered to be a consequence of the methodology used – either limitations of the sampling strategy (that the areas targeted for the surveys lacked breadth or were unrepresentative of the programme), or that interviews with non-beneficiaries (i.e. community members who were not directly benefitting from the programme that was the subject of the survey) registered false negatives which dragged their scores down. There were also some instances of questions being considered not fully fit for purpose.

Working through these challenges has benefited from the dialogue between GT and the participating agencies which has meant that where issues are raised, there has been space to discuss them and agree changes. The CV™ cycle revisits the design stage after every survey, and there has been scope between LLA rounds to review and amend the questions to ensure that they are relevant. Many of the agencies have agreed minor modifications. Some changes have also been made to geographic

targeting; one NGO that is seeking to provide services in remote locations requested that the areas surveyed reflect this prioritisation. A second NGO working in Nepal needed to change the survey questions as it had moved from the provision of relief distributions to recovery assistance and so it was working to a different set of objectives over a longer-timeframe. On both occasions, the discussion led to modifications being made which optimised the relevance of the survey results to the organisation. This reinforces the cyclical nature of the approach, where the survey design is reviewed and revised before each subsequent survey. The need to adapt the survey reflects the nature of humanitarian crises which themselves are dynamic. In order to be relevant and effective, feedback mechanisms need to be able to flex and adapt with the programmes they are linked to. Early experience from the LLA project suggests that the mix of ongoing dialogue with NGO partners and technical support from GT has permitted minor course corrections and modifications to be made in order to maintain the relevance of the approach as contexts have changed.

A second issue that becomes apparent from a review of the results across the four different countries is that surveys in some countries have a tendency to yield much higher scores than others. Of particular note is the case of Ethiopia, surveying South Sudanese refugees, where the majority of agencies received consistently positive feedback across most or all of the questions. At this stage it is difficult to understand if this is an accurate reflection of reality or if the high scores are a result of culture, gender (many respondents were women), quality-control issues with the data collection firm, or a particular bias connected with the community or the process (see figure 15). While there is no suggestion that there is bias, one of the advantages of returning for dialogue and subsequent rounds of surveying is that issues such as this can be explored in detail and can be addressed through methodological or format changes if needs be.

Figure 15: Identifying and addressing bias in survey results²¹

Acquiescence bias: This occurs when a respondent demonstrates a tendency to agree with and be positive about whatever the surveyor presents. In other words, they respond positively to every question that is asked. Some people have acquiescent personalities, while others acquiesce because they perceive the interviewer to be an expert.

Habituation bias: respondents provide the same answers to questions that are worded in similar ways. This is a biological response: being responsive and paying attention takes a lot of energy. To conserve energy, our brains habituate or go on autopilot. Respondents often show signs of fatigue, such as mentioning that the questions seem repetitive, or start giving similar responses across multiple questions. Moderators must keep the engagement conversational and continue to vary question wording to minimise habituation.

Sponsor bias: When respondents know – or suspect – the sponsor of the research, their feelings and opinions about that sponsor may bias their answers. This is an especially important type of bias for surveyors to navigate by maintaining a neutral stance, limiting any perceived affiliation to the organisation and by generally reinforcing an objective and independent status.

Courtesy bias: When respondents answer politely – but less candidly – so as not to offend or risk backlash or consequences of providing negative feedback.²²

Poor translation of survey questions can also play a part in introducing bias to surveys as can poorly trained survey teams which lack familiarity with the subject matter.

3.6 A commitment to learning: Reflections from the training workshops

A series of two-day training workshops are being held in each of the four participating countries to enhance quality and accountability in relation to the CHS. The objectives of the workshops are to:

²¹ Adapted from Sarniak, R. (2015) 9 types of research bias and how to avoid them, 20150825-2 (internet). Available at <http://www.quirks.com/articles/9-types-of-research-bias-and-how-to-avoid-them>. Accessed 10/10/16.

²² See <http://groundtruthsolutions.org/2016/09/09/lessons-south-sudan-syria/>.

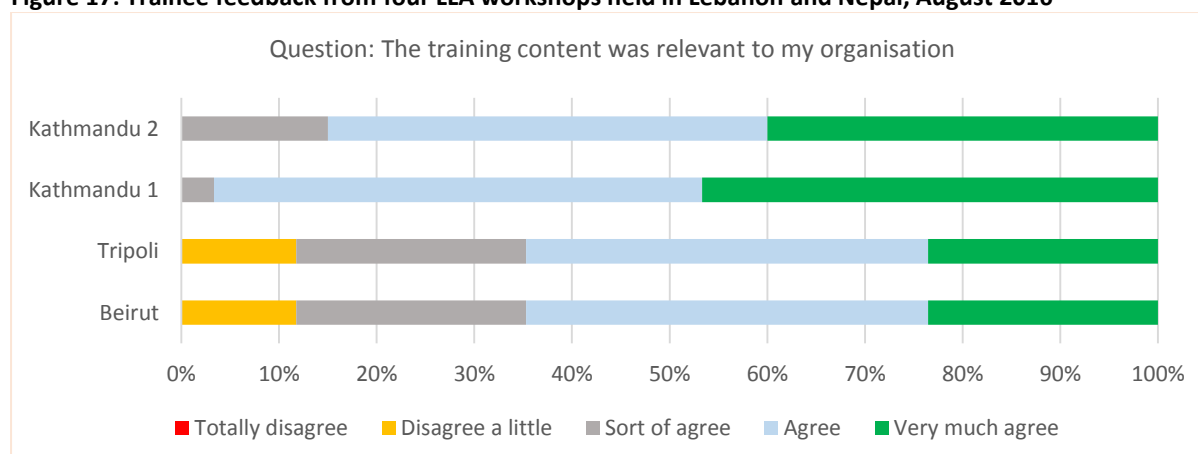
- Ensure understanding about the CHS and Sphere and Partner standards;
- Learn about GT's CV™ approach and methodology;
- Apply GT's methodology to the CHS and the Sphere standards;
- Place the methodology in the context of organisations' existing programme and monitoring and evaluation systems;
- Build relationships and create opportunities for experience-sharing.

The course seeks to target humanitarian staff at regional and country office level with a responsibility for monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning in humanitarian organisations, with intended representation of 50% from international NGO and 50% from national NGOs. To date, four workshops have been held in Lebanon and Nepal (see figure 16). Trainee feedback from the courses offers an indication of how the workshops have been received and have provided very encouraging results (see figure 17 below).

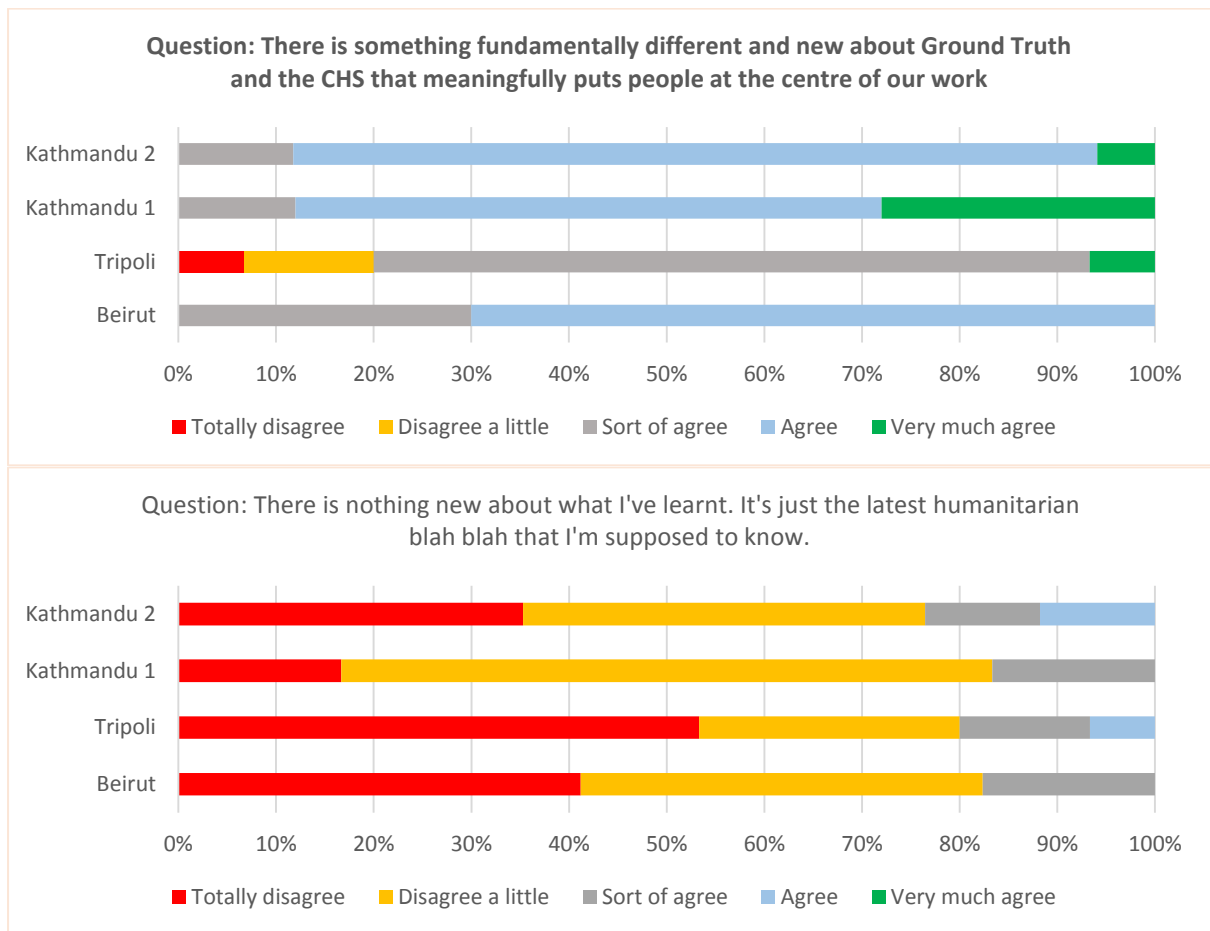
Figure 16: Training participants by country as of October 2016

	# trainees	NNGOs	INGOs	Other
Lebanon	47	6	16	Lebanese Red Cross, UNDP, UNRWA, UNICEF, WFP, Ministry of Public Health
Nepal	58	12	19	ASB Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund Deutschland e.V. (donor)
Ethiopia ²³	21	0	10	UN OCHA, Tufts University,
TOTAL	120	18	45	9

Figure 17: Trainee feedback from four LLA workshops held in Lebanon and Nepal, August 2016



²³ One training in Ethiopia (Gambella) was postponed due to a refugee influx, and the second, reflected in these registrations for a course on October 13&14 in Addis Ababa, was postponed due to a recently declared State of Emergency. Both are to be re-scheduled when circumstance permits, the final participant number will be higher.



While the workshops have significant value in promoting accountability, they also offer the potential of strengthening the sustainability of the approach taken in the LLA project and promoting it within the broader humanitarian community. Several organisations participating in the pilot are already exploring how to incorporate a listen, learn act approach or key tenets from the CV™ methodology into their internal monitoring, evaluation and accountability systems. The LLA training materials and workshop guidance, which are available online offer the potential for any organisation to adapt and adopt the process, an important objective of the LLA project. At time of writing, formal discussions have already commenced with at least two of the 15 participating organisations about how they might adopt the approach.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

This section concludes the report by examining the contribution that LLA has made to strengthening accountability to affected people to date, highlighting some of the lessons that are emerging from the project and making some initial recommendations to maximise its potential.

4.1 A quiet revolution – documenting the achievements of the first 12 months

While the lessons from the LLA project are still emerging and there is much work still to do, the development, roll-out and implementation of a methodology to support regular and systematic community feedback on agencies' interventions against a set of commitments which are fast becoming the sector standard offers significant opportunity for learning. Aside from the programmatic changes that have come about as a result of agencies adopting the approach, some of the more important findings include the following;

- The design and delivery of an approach to routinely listen to community feedback through regular surveys with a focus on making course corrections addresses two of the most important gaps in humanitarian accountability; the failure to regularly consult with communities and the failure to act on the feedback received. Evidence suggests that organisations are listening and acting.
- The use of a single methodology for a range of interventions in four diverse humanitarian contexts is unprecedented and offers an approach to humanitarian accountability that has broad relevance across the humanitarian sphere.
- The initial round of surveys endorses the relevance of the CHS as an accountability framework to gather feedback on agency performance against the commitments for which community feedback can help verify compliance. It also offers organisations an opportunity to check that they are 'walking the talk' and putting their principles into practice.

A girl raises her hand in class in the Zaatari Refugee Camp, located near Mafraq, Jordan 2012



Photo © Paul Jeffrey/ACT Alliance

- Agency feedback on the survey findings suggest that CHS commitments, alongside contextualised Sphere technical standards are a relevant framework for measuring and improving programme performance and quality.
- Organisations participating in the LLA project have found value in an approach which is implemented and overseen by an external organisation. The role of GT in assisting agencies to validate the survey results, discuss corrective measures and ensure procedural clarity, and the rigorous approach adopted by LLA to documenting decisions, offering an important accountability paper trail.
- Findings from the LLA project show that when an accountability approach is partnered with a formal process for discussing and agreeing course corrections which benefits from strong management engagement, swift action can be taken to address the issues raised.
- Repetition of the surveys plays an important role in strengthening the motivation to address communities' concerns and to improve performance. Over the longer-term, it also has the potential to flag ingrained issues of culture or ways of working and thinking within organisations that need to change.

4.2 What has been learnt and what lessons are yet to emerge?

Building support from the bottom up

While the LLA project has doubtless gained important momentum from steps taken within the humanitarian sector to strengthen humanitarian accountability and community responsiveness, it has not been forced upon the participating agencies, each of which opted into the project. Possibly as a consequence of this, there has been very strong support from participating organisations, all of which have opened their operations up to an unprecedented level of scrutiny. Where this has revealed shortcomings in their programmes or their engagement with communities, agencies have generally been swift to adopt sensible and responsible approaches to ameliorating them. During the research, several agency staff commented on the challenges that faced with headquarters-driven, top-down approaches, which frequently lacked buy-in from field staff. The potential for LLA to build support from the bottom-up both as a consequence of the pilots, the training workshops and the e-learning materials offers an important opportunity for field staff to drive an important change agenda. While the project timeframe may be too short to gain a critical mass of support, in the countries where it has been rolled out, it does have potential to change the accountability landscape, which may go beyond its funding period.

The value of a temperature check on performance against the CHS

The LLA project has already offered a unique insight into the performance of a group of NGO programmes against key CHS commitments. In some of the world's most complex humanitarian responses, this offers an important assessment of the successes and challenges that humanitarian organisations face in delivering assistance. More importantly, rather than providing a view based on self-assessment, the feedback is entirely derived from communities who have been affected by disasters. That the data is generated from an external organisation serves to strengthen its credibility. Given that the vision of the CHS is that *'people and communities vulnerable to risk and affected by disaster, conflict or poverty, influence and access quality assistance and can hold organisations accountable'*,²⁴ then LLA goes a significant way to offering a very practical way for organisations to achieve this.

The dilemma of sustainability

At the end of its first year, the organisations that have participated in the LLA journey are enthusiastic about the future and some are already looking at the potential to transform their own practice by incorporating key tenets from the project into their internal monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning approaches. This is an exciting outcome and organisational investment in the approach

²⁴ See <http://www.chsalliance.org/who-we-are/vision-mission-and-strategy>.

piloted in LLA beyond the period covered by ECHO funding offers evidence of its perceived added value. Moving from an independent and externally-supported approach to an internal one will also have important challenges that will need to be overcome by early-adopters, including the need to maintain high quality support for the approach and the importance of committing to the same level of process rigour and management engagement. These are fundamental to ensuring that accountability is focused on serving communities in need, rather than meeting organisational reporting requirements. This is an important distinction as it offers an opportunity to elevate accountability from a tick-box exercise to one that offers the potential to shift power to those who experience disasters.

4.3 Summary of recommendations

Based on what has already been achieved by the LLA project and the potential it has to influence positive change in the way that humanitarian organisations prove and improve their responsiveness to community feedback, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recommendation 1: Humanitarian organisations need to place greater emphasis on routinely listening to people and responding to their concerns

Complaints mechanisms are good but not good enough. A review of the baseline data suggests that the LLA process has begun to strengthen participating organisations' responsiveness to community feedback. This is one of the most significant achievements that is emerging from the project but it is one that is also fragile and may be easily undone. It is essential that the changes which have come about because of the LLA process are used as a stepping stone for changing organisational culture within participating organisations with a view to shifting to ways of working that routinely place communities at the centre of operations.

Recommendation 2: Headquarters-driven initiatives don't work – accountability needs to be field-focused

During the research, several agency staff commented on the challenges they faced with headquarters-driven, top-down approaches, which frequently lacked buy-in from field staff. Often seen as "extra work" or "getting in the way of the real work", new checklists and procedures can be a significant burden on people who are also expected to deliver quality and accountability in communities. The LLA approach during survey inception visits and in-person trainings, has been to listen to the frontline staff, to learn from them about why they believe putting people at the centre of their work is important, and to support them to build skills and experience to act and do that. During the LLA project, many staff have spoken about the lack of space they have to do this effectively and so the approach which has been adopted has been one that seeks to build support from the bottom-up through the pilots, the training workshops and the e-learning materials which has offered an important opportunity for field staff to drive an important change agenda.

Recommendation 3: Humanitarian organisations still need to get better at informing and listening to the people they are seeking to assist

Accountability can only exist when people have access to information, participate in the design and delivery of programmes and have a means of providing feedback. The feedback gathered so far during the LLA project suggests that there are significant weaknesses in the ways that agencies listen to people and respond to their feedback (CHS commitments 4 and 5). Details about programme delivery issues including the application of technical standards such as Sphere and its partner standards must be routinely discussed with communities. Where standards cannot be adhered to or where gaps exist, these should be explained and mechanisms should be provided for affected people to feedback on the effect this has on their lives and livelihoods.

Recommendation 4: Donors have an essential role to play in setting an accountability agenda and in supporting and sustaining it

Donors have played a key role in supporting humanitarian accountability in the past by using both carrots and sticks. While this support has allowed the sector to significantly strengthen its understanding and application of

feedback mechanisms and in so doing strengthen its accountability to communities, this approach has also seen the rise and fall of many competing and often uncoordinated initiatives. Participants at the WHS recognised the need to ensure people affected by crises are *'put at the centre of the decision-making processes and...are treated as partners, not beneficiaries.'*²⁵ It is now more important than ever that donors make a clear statement of intent about their commitment to supporting agencies to deliver against these humanitarian accountability commitments in a way that meets the obligations that were made in Istanbul.

Recommendation 5: Agencies participating in LLA must document their experiences and lessons learned as a global resource for strengthening accountability.

The LLA project has been extremely diligent in documenting its application of the CV™ approach and has prepared a comprehensive suite of training materials and an e-learning course to support this (which can be accessed via an online platform at <https://actlearn.org/enrol/index.php?id=86>). Materials and tools are also available through GT's Feedback Commons (<http://feedbackcommons.org>). What will be important in the coming months is that experiences and case studies from early adopters of CV™ are written up and included in a comprehensive library of LLA practice alongside the training materials. Such a guide will provide real-time assistance in problem-solving and will support agencies that may like to adopt aspects of the approach as well as making a broader contribution to strengthening global humanitarian accountability.

Recommendation 6: Humanitarian organisations need to continue exploring innovative ways to strengthen individual and collective accountability

As the dilemmas of collective accountability occupy ever greater space on the humanitarian agenda, agencies and the humanitarian community are still developing practical examples to address and bridge this gap. With humanitarian need overwhelming response capacity, an efficient and accountable humanitarian architecture is now more important than ever before...The locus of analysis of LLA to date has been the individual agency and the focus has been on addressing agency-specific issues raised by communities. While this was the *raison d'être* of LLA, a potentially valuable unanticipated outcome is the opportunity that the project offers to explore project level and collective organisational performance against key CHS commitments. There would be significant value in maintaining an overview and analysis of this throughout the remaining survey rounds. As the humanitarian community continues to develop and improve both collective and individual approaches to accountability, it will also be important to consider how mechanisms at both levels can complement and reinforce each other, without duplicating effort and resources.

²⁵ World Humanitarian Summit (2016) *Chair's summary: standing up for humanity: committing to action*, advanced unedited version, p.5.

Annex 1: Summary of agency participation in the project

1. Consortium organisations

- DanChurchAid (DCA)
- Save the Children Denmark
- Ground Truth Solutions

2. Stakeholders

- The CHS Alliance
- The Sphere Project

3. Country-level implementing organisations

Ethiopia

- DCA
- Save the Children
- International Medical Corps
- Plan International

Lebanon

- Save the Children
- Najdeh Association
- Care International
- Kayany

Mali

- Mercy Corps International
- Care International
- Norwegian Church Aid and TASSAGHT
- Save the Children

Nepal

- DCA and ECO Nepal
- Save the Children and Shree Swarna Integrated Community Development Center
- Plan International and Community Development and Environment Conservation Forum

