Placing accountability at the heart of humanitarian assistance

Lessons from the Listen Learn Act project

"Communities don't tire of being asked questions, they tire of not receiving answers"

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Author: Andy Featherstone

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Cover photo: A focus group discussion organised by the Listen Learn Act project in Makaisingh, Gorkha district, Nepal in December 2015, ©Nik Rilkoff.

Cover quotation: National NGO manager in Nepal remarking on feedback that he had received from communities that had participated in the Listen Learn Act survey rounds

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Contact: DanChurchAid, Save the Children Denmark, Ground Truth Solutions

Foreword

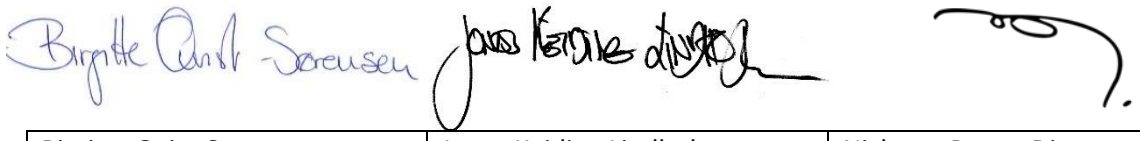
As humanitarians, we are responsible for providing assistance, which meet the needs and rights of the people affected by crisis. Driven to cover the ever-expanding humanitarian needs, we are faced with constantly having to adapt and address the daily complexities of the fluid operational environments where we work. Despite our best intentions we remain challenged to find the right balance between the priorities of meeting reporting and fundraising requirements, delivering high quality and professional humanitarian programming, and most of all we remain challenged to find the right ways and mechanisms to place the people that we serve at the very heart of humanitarian action.

Why is this so? And, more important, how can we address a problem that evaluation after evaluation, indicates is systemic across the humanitarian sector?

The project reviewed in this report is an attempt to answer this question while actively putting people and communities back into the centre of our work, using the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) as a framework. We've used an innovative, scale-able, relatively simple means to 'check the heartbeat' of humanitarian assistance — as perceived by those it seeks to help. Whilst rights-holders' perceptions of aid effectiveness is not the only stream of information to which we hold ourselves accountable, their views are utterly crucial, and all too often overlooked.

The report you hold in your hands, or see on your screen, is something altogether revolutionary. It is not only the story of thousands of affected people, it is also the story of hundreds of aid workers, from 15 agencies in four countries, who sought to turn the aid system on its head. They did this by asking simple questions in plain language to statistically significant sample sizes, and then visually representing the results in a clear format, that is easy to understand and react to. They reflected the results both back to their teams of aid providers and to affected communities, closing the loop and working together to course correct and make real-time improvements to both the aid delivered and the way aid is delivered. The Listen Learn Act project participants are seeking not only to hear what's being said, but to do something about it. We are proud that our agencies have come together in a spirit of learning and collaboration, sometimes at the risk of exposing our faults and shortcomings, in the hope of finding a better way to provide aid to those who need it most. We are very grateful to European Union humanitarian aid and Danida for having made this work possible.

For us, and the participants in this project, this report represents not the end but the beginning of a lifelong commitment. Through work under the Grand Bargain work stream on Participation, the IASC Task Team on Accountability to Affected Populations, other global processes, and perhaps most importantly, on the front lines of disaster responses, we will continue to search for new ways to prioritise not organisations' interests or funding, but the needs of affected people. These are the rights to which they are entitled.



Birgitte Qvist-Sørensen, General Secretary, DCA	Jonas Keiding Lindholm, Secretary General, Save the Children Denmark	Nick van Praag, Director, Ground Truth Solutions

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 using the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) – the accountability component of the Sphere handbook - as a foundation, the Listen Learn Act (LLA) project has been 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 are 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 findings from the project 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). It 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 to 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 organisations[1] 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 Constituent Voice™ (CV) process

At the heart of the approach is Ground Truth Solutions's CV™ methodology. This offers a light-touch way to integrate feedback from affected people into the design and implementation of humanitarian programmes. CV™ collects 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 the 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.

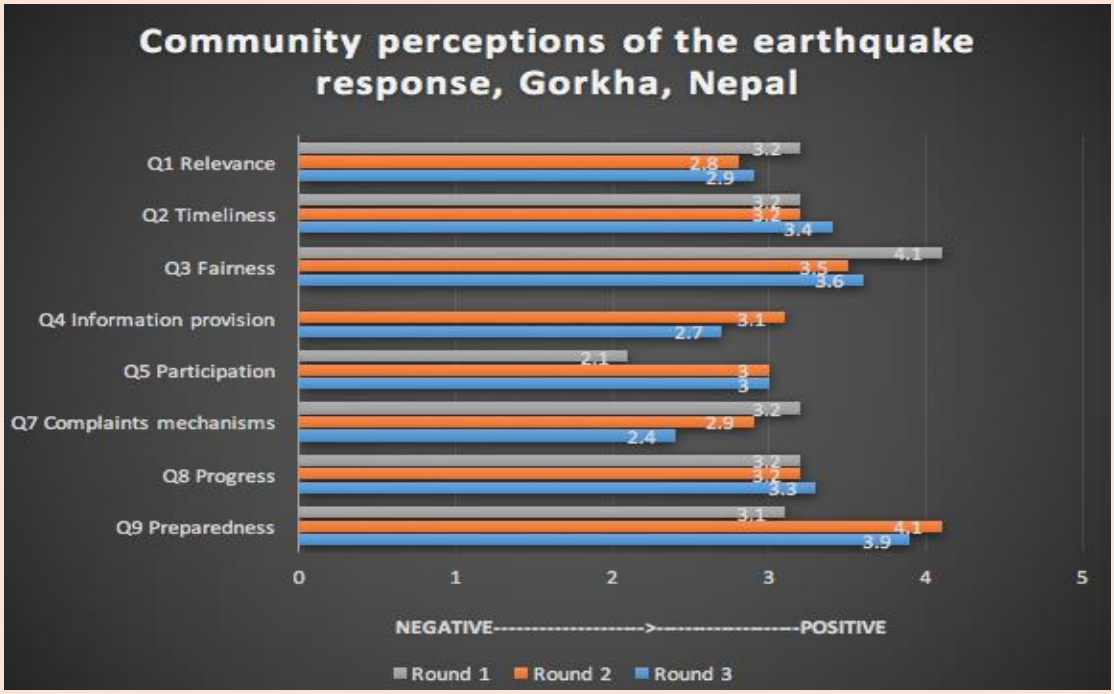
Ground Truth Solutions's 'performance dimensions' link to particular CHS Commitments; Commitments 1-3 which focus on the relevance, timeliness and quality of interventions, and Commitments 4 and 5 which examines the relationship between an organisation and the people it serves, covering how well humanitarian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

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

LLA achievements at a country-level

During the LLA project, three rounds of surveys were conducted in each of the four pilot countries. In each country, three or four NGOs piloted the methodology in at least one of their programmes which between them covered a range of different contexts. Rather than showing progressive improvement with each successive survey round, the survey results revealed both increases and decreases in the scores which also differed significantly between NGOs, reflecting the variety of factors that shaped communities' experiences of the assistance they received. Analysis of the results, internal discussions within the NGO delivering assistance and follow-up discussions with beneficiary communities provided important context to the changes in perceptions. The example of one of the participating NGOs in Nepal offers a case study of how community perceptions shifted over time (examples from the other 3 pilot countries are given in section 1 of the report).

Nepal case study: results from three rounds of surveys in Nepal



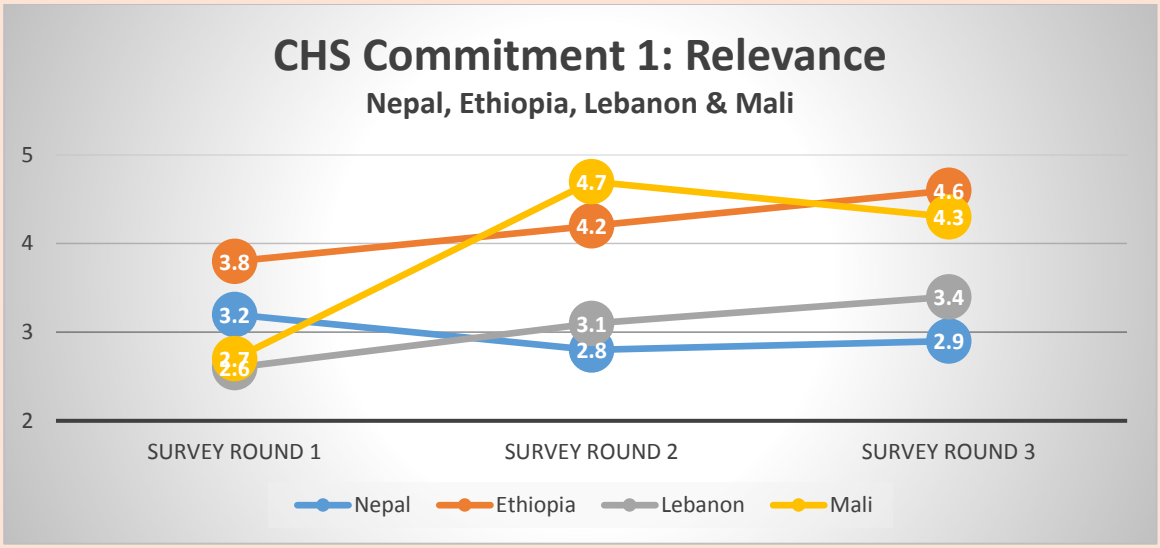
The three rounds of data collection for one of the NGOs providing earthquake relief and reconstruction assistance in Nepal shows mixed results; across all the rounds, respondents were mostly positive on the fairness (Q3) and timeliness (Q2) of support. As the rounds have progressed, people saw progress in their community (Q8) and felt better prepared to cope with another earthquake (Q9). There were a number of concerns highlighted; perceptions of the relevance of support were inconsistent across the three survey rounds and there was room for improvement (Q1). People also did not feel well informed on the progress of the programme (Q4), the score for which dropped between the second and third round. There was low awareness of mechanisms to raise complaints or make suggestions and people were uncertain whether their complaints will receive a response, the score for which has also dropped over successive survey rounds (Q7). The NGO used these results as the basis for internal discussion and analysis which was followed up by dialogue with communities about the issues that were raised. These were used to identify and drive change in programmes in order to try to strengthen community satisfaction.

LLA achievements by Core Humanitarian Standard

The collection of community perceptions about agency performance in 15 programmes against selected CHS Commitments from four countries also offers an opportunity to analyse how agencies are faring in implementing this important set of accountability standards. While it is important to note that the different contexts in which assistance is being delivered makes it impossible to make a like-for-like comparison of NGO performance, an examination of the results does provide a more general view of how NGOs are performing against specific CHS Commitments. This report focuses attention

on three CHS Commitments; relevance (Commitment 1), information and participation (Commitment 4), and complaints handling (Commitment 5). Findings from Commitment 1 are highlighted in the box below.

CHS1/relevance case study: results for Commitment 1 for three rounds of surveys in the four countries



CHS Commitment 1 captures the primary purpose of responding to humanitarian crises, which is to alleviate distress and suffering, uphold people's rights to assistance and ensure their dignity as human beings. It stresses the importance of understanding the context and the needs of the different people affected and how these needs might change over time as well as the necessity to recognise the capacity of different groups of people.

The chart above shows the scores for an NGO in each pilot country against the first CHS Commitment. It shows that community perceptions of the relevance of the humanitarian interventions to peoples' needs improved with each round of surveys for two of the four NGOs; in Ethiopia and Mali, a third-round score of 4.6 and 4.3 out of a total score of 5 on the Likert scale suggests very good performance. In Lebanon, the NGO increased its score for each successive survey albeit to a more modest total of 3.4 out of 5. In Nepal, the scores decreased over time from a first-round total of 3.2 to 2.9 in the third round.

While the changes were sometimes closely linked to a change in the internal or external context, it is noteworthy that NGOs were not always able to provide a specific explanation for the changes in perceptions. Some felt that the act of engaging with communities and seeking to gauge their satisfaction may have led to better scores, or that monitoring and minor course corrections that strengthened the relevance of their programmes had a role to play, but NGOs often failed to identify specific programme modifications that would have driven the change in perceptions.

What is clear is that while comparisons between NGOs in different countries can offer some interesting results, the most important unit of analysis is that of the individual agency and how it is perceived by communities that it is seeking to assist. It is the strength of this relationship that LLA and the CV™ methodology has shed important light on.

While the results of the surveys were mixed as the first comprehensive report showed, it is the provision of information to communities, their participation in decision-making and recourse for them to make complaints and receive redress (CHS Commitments four and five) that continue to be the most stubborn in terms of NGO performance. Community perceptions for these Commitments generally showed the least signs of improvement over time. There is nothing new in these finding as these same concerns can be observed in successive iterations of ALNAP's *State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS)* report[2] but the findings of the LLA project do serve to underline the fact that there is

[2] The SOHS reports are available at http://sohs.alnap.org/#introduction.

still much work to do if those affected by conflict and disaster are to have a say in how, when and what assistance is provided to them. This is the glaring gap in humanitarian accountability that the LLA project has been seeking to fill.

What lessons have emerged?

The development, roll-out and implementation of a methodology to support regular and systematic community feedback on agencies' interventions against the CHS has offered significant opportunity for learning. Lessons from the project documentation and interviews cover three specific areas; the LLA process, agency practice, and humanitarian accountability (see table below).

Lessons	Description
Lessons about the LLA process	▪ The LLA project represents a step-change in how agencies engage with communities by initiating and sustaining dialogue throughout the project cycle and use feedback to make course corrections in the assistance they provide. ▪ The CV™ methodology offers a proactive feedback mechanism which routinely elicits the views of a representative sample of community members on key aspects of humanitarian performance which is preferable to complaints response mechanisms (CRMs) which require people to react to problems and raise concerns. ▪ The CV™ methodology encourages organisations to work across silos, bridging different parts of humanitarian agencies (monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning, operations and management) and is so doing ensures that accountability is a discussion across the whole organisation rather than being siloed in a team or department. ▪ The successful piloting of the LLA project in Ethiopia, Lebanon, Mali and Nepal demonstrates that the methodology has relevance across a broad range of contexts. ▪ Despite the benefits, there were some concerns that courtesy bias or interactions between the survey team and communities may have influenced the results. ▪ Due to the nature of the pilot which had a comparatively short timeframe, the frequency of the surveys did not fit with agency project cycle management or funding. This was felt to have limited its relevance. ▪ The survey reports were widely credited with presenting community responses in a clear and action-oriented way which supported NGO follow-up.
Reflections on agency practice	▪ The CV™ methodology was considered extremely valuable in promoting the CHS internally within participating organisations and more broadly with peer agencies. ▪ As is the case with any change, it has taken time for NGO staff to familiarise themselves with the LLA project and additional support in the early stages of the project may have strengthened implementation in the initial stages. ▪ Staff turnover within the implementing NGOs was a considerable hindrance and over the course of the two-year project, a significant proportion of the staff changed which negatively impacted on levels of knowledge and familiarity with the project.
Insights into humanitarian accountability	▪ There is a common misunderstanding within humanitarian staff about the role of CRMs such as complaints boxes. There is a need to clarify that a CRM only partially addresses humanitarian accountability which is more fully articulated through the implementation of the Nine Commitments of the CHS. ▪ Humanitarian organisations may not always be able to make changes to the assistance they provide in response to the feedback they receive from communities but there is far greater scope for them to change their internal processes and ways of working.

What has enabled or inhibited change?

A transformative change in how humanitarian organisations seek to hold themselves accountable to the communities they work with has been a long time in coming and for many years the rhetoric has outpaced the reality. A recent ALNAP report on how change happens in the humanitarian sector[3] offers some import reasons for why this might be the case as well as shedding light on some of the challenges faced by the LLA project in promoting and sustaining change. Chief among these are the risks associated with pilot projects as they can serve to silo the changes as an outlier rather than

[3] Knox-Clarke, P. (2017) *Changing humanitarian action? ALNAP Working Paper*. London: ALNAP/ODI.

bringing them into mainstream organisational practice. For this reason, it is important to identify linkages with key staff as ultimately change is about people and in this respect, LLA has performed unevenly as the table below suggests.

Level	Engagement of the LLA project at different levels within participating organisations
Field-level	The LLA project has supported efforts to strengthen the understanding and capacity of field staff both within implementing NGOs (international and national) and the broader humanitarian community in each of the four pilot countries. This has been part of a strategy to strengthen understanding among NGOs about the CV™ methodology, the CHS and Sphere standards. Engagement at the field-level was the main focus of the project.
Country-level	At a country-level, the LLA project most frequently engaged senior monitoring and evaluation staff members and community engagement focal points albeit with some interactions with senior managers. In only a few organisations were country leadership directly involved in the project and there were concerns that this represented a missed opportunity as it has been difficult for agency staff to kindle the interest required to sustain practice beyond the LLA project period.
Headquarters	Very limited efforts were made to engage with headquarters-based staff of implementing NGOs with the exception of two of the commissioning NGOs which had oversight of project delivery. During the interviews, several people considered that this was short-sighted as they worked for large NGOs which had centralised MEAL systems; efforts to supplement or change these would have benefitted from support with headquarters-based staff.

One of the most important messages from the project and interviews with participating NGOs is that change requires ownership and this can take considerable time and benefits from engagement at different levels of the organisation. Change also takes considerable energy and when aspirations for the future of LLA was raised, staff frequently spoke of the long list of other change processes and organisational priorities that were being rolled out that would affect uptake of the approach. Despite this, there were also examples given of plans that existed to adopt certain aspects of the CV™ methodology by a number organisations at country level as well as the potential for two international NGOs to incorporate aspects of the methodology into their global MEAL strategies (see table below).

Country	Potential use of the CV™ methodology after LLA project close-out
Ethiopia	In Ethiopia, there was enthusiasm for adoption of the CV™ methodology shown by several NGOs. One of the NGOs has already made a commitment to adopting it in the future and will roll it out across its programmes. Each of the other three NGOs felt they gained helpful insights into their accountability performance and are considering adopting elements of the approach either at the project or the country-programme level.
Lebanon	In Lebanon, the feedback was mixed; one organisation was committed to continuing to use its existing system and a second organisation did not feel able to make a commitment; the third NGO spoke about using the methodology in the future but still needed to see whether it could be incorporated into organisational MEAL processes. The fourth NGO spoke of expanding its use of the methodology at a project-level.
Mali	In Mali, each of the four participating NGOs had aspirations to adopt aspects of the CV™ methodology into their practice. Two of the participating NGO intend to fund raise with a view to adopting in specific programmes in the furture. A third organisation has already included it in its humanitarian strategy and plan to incorporate it into their MEAL system with a view to training staff and rolling it out across its programmes more broadly. The fourth NGO has already trained its staff and partners in the methodology and are in the process of embedding it into their humanitarian programmes with the potential for it to be rolled out to development programmes at a later stage. In Mali, there has been interest in presenting the methodology at an inter-agency group to explore the potential it offers for wider uptake.
Nepal	In Nepal, there is significant interest in the methodology, particularly given the engagement each of the participating NGOs has in the CHS but there are a lack of concrete plans about how to sustain current engagement or incorporate the methodology more broadly into NGO MEAL systems.

Conclusions

The LLA project was conceived as a practical field-led process to design and implement an innovative methodology to involve affected communities in the design, implementation and monitoring of humanitarian action which sought to address a long-standing challenge for humanitarian organisations. And it is in seeking to deliver this that the 15 participating agencies of LLA in the four pilot countries have achieved an impressive measure of success. In piloting a methodology that rigorously collects data, that presents it in a clear and compelling way and that supports agencies in interpreting it through a structured process of analysis and dialogue with communities, the CV™ methodology and broader LLA project has been successful in demonstrating the importance of engaging with communities in all aspects of delivering assistance accountably. One of the most significant messages to come out of the LLA project and one of the most important changes that it has fostered is the importance of maintaining a sustained dialogue with communities which places them at the heart of programme practice, enabling NGOs to live up the spirit of the CHS.

LLA has also demonstrated that it can play an important companion role to the CHS. During the project period, the CHS has moved rapidly from being a headquarters concept to being an operational reality with support throughout the humanitarian community. As the CHS has been promoted across the sector and within humanitarian organisations, there has been growing awareness of it at field-level, but despite this, knowledge of its practical application remains a work-in-progress. The LLA project has provided an important link between CHS policy on the one hand and agency practice on the other and in so doing has made a valuable contribution to helping staff to better understand the practical obligations to affected communities that are implicit in the CHS.

Where progress has been more variable has been in gaining NGO commitment to sustaining these important changes. Ironically, the field focus of the LLA which has been a key strength as it has offered important evidence of the value of the approach, may also have been a weakness as it has had important implications for the variable uptake of the methodology; by not engaging in a more structured way with senior leaders, the case has not always been made at sufficiently senior levels for it to significantly transform agency practice. Despite this, there is the potential for some of the positive changes to be sustained both at a country level as well as the possibility that LLA may influence wider organisational practice – but these potential changes are aspirational and it will require sustained commitment to the concepts of CV™ methodology for them to move into practice.

Measured against Alice Obrecht's three criteria for judging successful humanitarian innovation[4] (below), LLA would largely fall into the *'missing middle'* category, as the project offers significant improvements on current practice, albeit with the current likelihood of modest uptake at an agency level. While there are some immediate benefits, it will take time for impact to be observed. Given that LLA is still in the process of closing out, efforts to sustain some of the changes should be considered a work in progress and it is now the role of senior leaders linked to LLA or those organisations that have adopted some or all of the approach to continue to use their influence to strengthen uptake.

Success criteria	Description
Ideal scenario	innovation is fully successful and has causally contributed to improvements in humanitarian action
Missing Middle	Innovation has developed an effective idea for improving humanitarian action but may not have been adopted by many humanitarian organisations
Good fail	the original idea turned out to be ineffective or unfeasible, but lessons are generated that can support future successful innovations

[4] Obrecht, A. (2016) Separating the 'good' failure from the 'bad': three successful criteria for innovation in *Humanitarian Practice Network,* Issue 66, April 2016, ODI, p.7.

Recommendations

Given the potential that exists for LLA to strengthen agencies' engagement with affected communities and its focus on addressing key weaknesses in existing accountability practices, the end of the project should not be considered to be the end of LLA, rather the beginning of a new phase which uses the evidence that has been collected to continue to lobby for change to be made across the sector.

Recommendation 1: Humanitarian organisations must adopt mechanisms that routinely listen to communities across the project cycle and respond to their feedback. Donors should acknowledge and support these approaches.

Complaints response mechanisms offer only partial accountability and are reactive and yet they are frequently considered to meet NGO accountability needs. It is essential that the dominant accountability narrative in the sector is changed to promote accountability mechanisms that proactively seek feedback from a representative sample of the community across a broader range of accountabilities articulated in the CHS.

Recommendation 2: There is now ample evidence of the importance of strengthening humanitarian accountability but practice continues to be patchy. It is now essential that there is a convergence of policy and practice to give affected communities greater say in the assistance they receive.

The case for strengthening accountability to affected people has been made time and again and is underpinned by significant evidence. Despite this, many humanitarian organisations still fail to prioritise this essential aspect of their practice or implement approaches that achieve this in part. There continues to be scope for an accountability champion to go beyond pilot studies to adopt an approach that role models the step-change that is required across the sector. The LLA project offers an important blue-print for this.

Recommendation 3: To be responsive to community feedback, NGOs need to be able to make course corrections. Humanitarian organisations and donors need to acknowledge this and ensure that their funding and ways of working are responsive to changing needs. It will be important to communicate the flexibility that exists to field staff.

One of the challenges of '*always on'* accountability mechanisms is that feedback about satisfaction is no longer confined to mid-term or end-line evaluation but is received and analysed throughout the lifecycle of projects. In order to close the loop, humanitarian organisations not only need to be able to respond to feedback and complaints but they need to be able to make changes to their projects, processes and ways of working. Currently, the scope for doing this is constrained by internal organisational procedures and by concerns about a lack of donor flexibility where the feedback relates to budgets and inputs. It is now important for humanitarian organisations to examine internal organisational blockages to making course corrections and engage with donors with a view to clarifying what flexibility exists and where change is required.

Recommendation 4: While an emphasis on influencing accountability practice at the field-level is important, engagement at senior management level is necessary to bring about organisational change. There is scope for LLA champions to engage at that level.

As the LLA project comes to an end, it is essential that participating NGOs take stock of what has been achieved across the 15 organisations in the four countries and examines the potential that exists for a group of LLA champions to work together to seek to promote change within their organisations and more broadly across the sector.

Table of contents

List of abbreviations and acronyms

ALNAP	Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance of Humanitarian Action
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard
CV™	Constituent Voice™ methodology
DCA	DanChurchAid
ECHO	The European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department
EU	European Union
GT	Ground Truth Solutions
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
LLA	Listen Learn Act
MCI	Mercy Corps International
MEAL	Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
UN	United Nations
SCD	Save the Children Denmark
SOHS	State of the Humanitarian System
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 (listed in figure 1), 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 Solutions, 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 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.

[5] CHS online training module (internet). Available at https://kayaconnect.org/course/info.php?id=260.
[6] Ibid.

A guide to the LLA process

What is Listen Learn Act?

LLA is a global quality and accountability project funded by European Union 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) 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 (see figure 1) and supports humanitarian agencies in engaging affected populations in the delivery of their programmes.

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 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.

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 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,

Figure 1: The Core Humanitarian Standard

and the extent to which it is meeting the Commitments outlined in the CHS[7] 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.

How does it work?

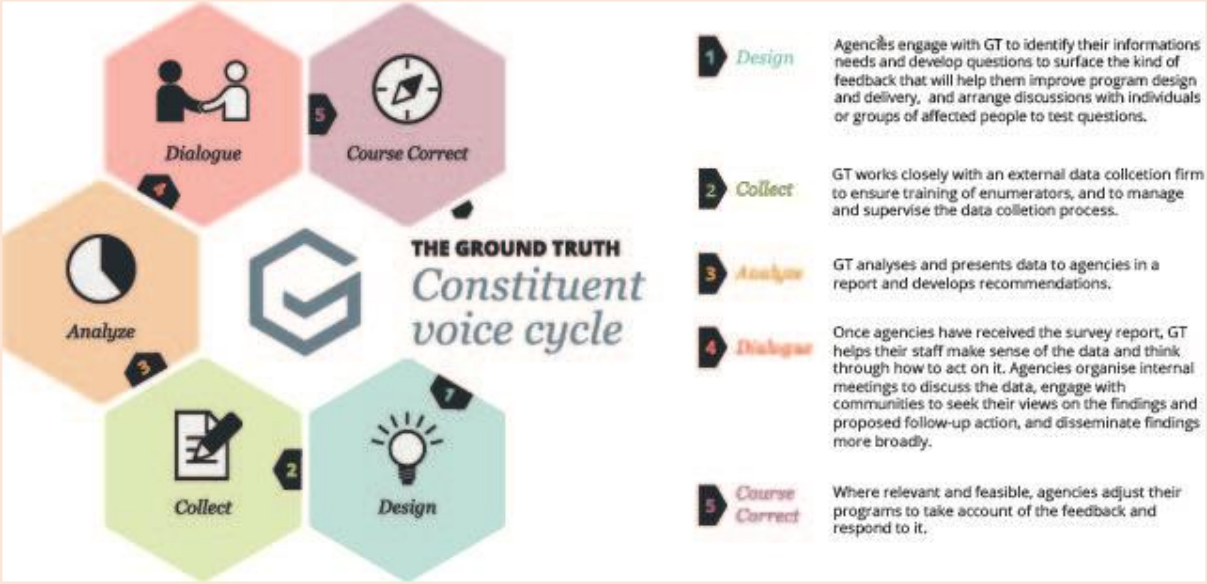
At the heart of the approach is Ground Truth Solutions's Constituent Voice™ (CV™) methodology. This offers a light-touch way to integrate feedback from affected people into the design and implementation of humanitarian programmes. CV™ collects feedback on four dimensions of performance: the relevance 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 Ground Truth Solutions'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 Solutions'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 over page).

[7] 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.

Figure 2: A collaborative process – an overview of the CV™ process[8]



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 purpose[9].

Data collection: Ground Truth Solutions'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. Ground Truth Solutions disaggregate and analyse the data, and produce 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, Ground Truth Solutions 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. Ground Truth Solutions 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.

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

[9] 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.

1. LLA results – What has been achieved?

This section provides a brief introduction to the report and provides a summary of the methodology. It reviews some of the findings that have emerged from the project and draws from the data collected during the project and interviews to offer a series of case studies to highlight key findings.

1.1 Introduction and approach

The purpose of this report (the second in a series of two[10]) is to present and discuss beneficiary and organisational experiences from the four pilot countries and to discuss the successes and challenges that NGOs have experienced in putting in place agile constituent feedback systems. Reflections from the project and recommendations about the practical uptake of the approach are presented here as a complement to broader advocacy messages about the importance of continuing to strengthen humanitarian accountability within the sector.

The second report builds on the findings of the first and is based on the following information and interviews:

- Document review from the CV™ process for each of the three survey rounds undertaken in Ethiopia, Lebanon, Mali and Nepal (1st report: 205 documents + 2nd report: 124 documents);
- Key informant interviews with commissioning agency and headquarters staff (2 + 8 interviews);
- Key informant interviews with country-based agency staff (6 + 8 interviews);
- Key informant interviews with external staff (2 interviews)

Organisation of the report

Section 1 outlines progress that had been made in implementation and documents some of the findings of the project between December 2015 and April 2017. **Section 2** provides a series of lessons about the LLA process, reflections on agency practice and broader insights into humanitarian accountability. **Section 3** explores the challenge of sustaining positive changes from the project into the future. **Section 4** concludes the report by examining the contribution that LLA has made to strengthening accountability and makes recommendations for the future.

1.2 Case studies of what has been achieved over three rounds of surveys in four countries

Since the LLA project commenced, it has successfully conducted three rounds of surveys in each of its four pilot countries. In each country, three – four NGOs have been piloting the methodology in at least one of their programmes (see annex 1 for a list of participating agencies). One of the most important findings is that each agency's experience was unique based on its particular circumstances and the context in which it was working. For this reason, it is difficult to provide a generalised overview and so instead, a series of case studies is provided (one from an agency working in each pilot country with the exception of Nepal, a case study from which is provided in the Executive Summary). A summary table and a brief analysis of the three rounds of survey results is provided for each case study alongside a narrative outlining the trends.

The Ethiopia case study

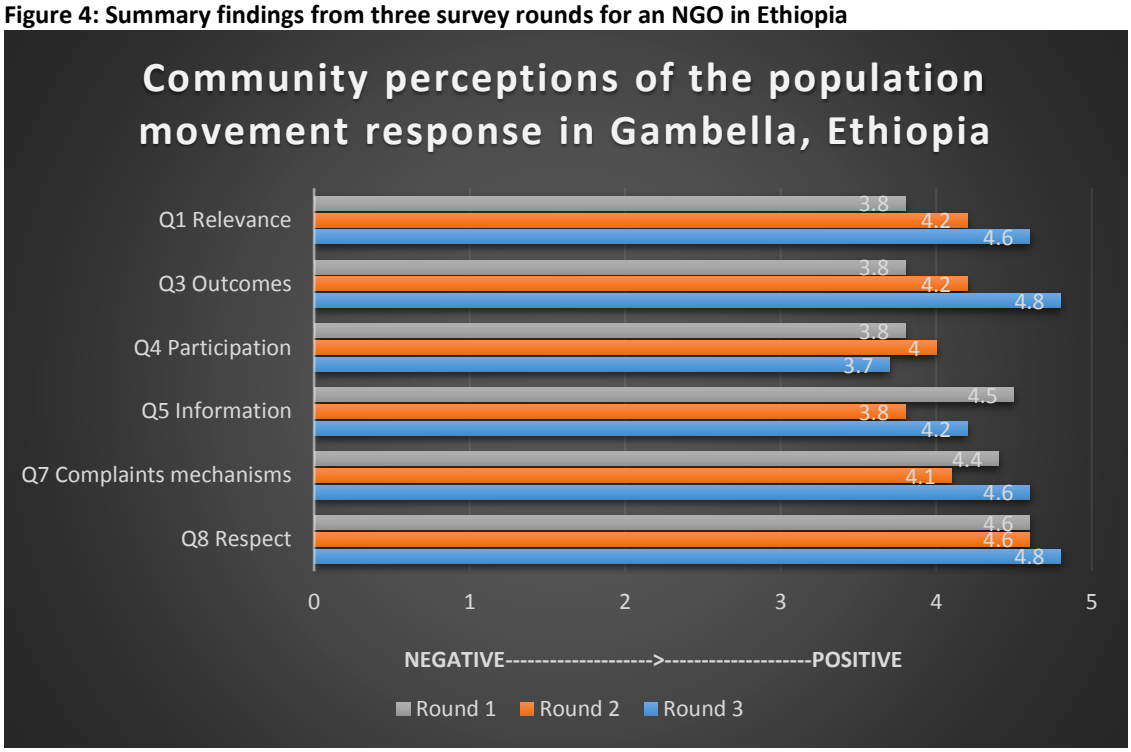
In the Gambella region of Ethiopia which is currently hosting 330,000 South Sudanese refugees,[11] the survey results of an international NGO implementing its programme through a local partner show that perceptions of women who receive support remain overwhelmingly positive and have improved

[10] The first report entitled, '*Checking the heartbeat of humanitarian assistance: Initial reflections from the Listen Learn Act Project'* is available at the link below https://www.danchurchaid.org/content/download/148020/2125580/version/1/file/Checking+the+Heartbeat+of+Humanitarian+Assistance+-+Listen+Learn+Act.pdf

[11] UNHCR and government of Ethiopia (last updated on 06/02/2017), available at http://data.unhcr.org/SouthSudan/region.php?country=65&id=36.

across a range of issues (figure 4). Respondents found the services relevant to meeting their most important needs (Q1 in figure 4) and had the desired impact (Q3). Every woman surveyed knew how and where to make suggestions or complaints about the support provided (Q6) and the vast majority felt that they would get a response if they did so (Q7). Importantly, the perception among respondents that the NGO's staff treat them with respect was almost universal (Q8). While each round of surveys was generally positive, there has been a general improvement in perceptions between the first and last rounds of surveys showing fairly consistent progress between the rounds.

Figure 4: Summary findings from three survey rounds for an NGO in Ethiopia



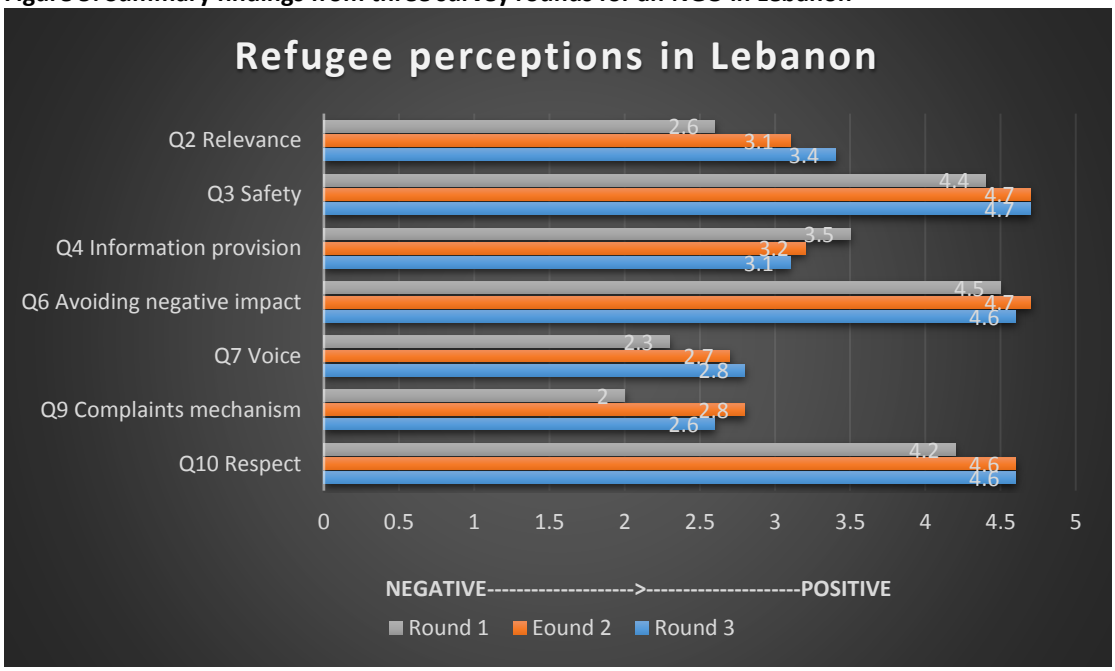
Despite the positive trend in the results, findings for some questions indicate certain areas that merit further attention. Most markedly, there was a significant increase in the number of women indicating that they did not receive support at a time that is convenient for them. Moreover, a notable proportion of women did not feel that they were included in decisions about the way assistance is provided (Q4) which is the one area where perceptions have failed to improve over the LLA project.

The Lebanon case study

For an NGO providing support to Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the survey rounds revealed mixed perceptions of the support (figure 5). While there were general improvements noted between the surveys, there were also a number of areas highlighted that required attention as the positive trend from the second round was not sustained into the third round. The programme consistently scored high on safety (Q3) and respect (Q10), and it avoided causing tensions between the camp population and local communities (Q6).

On the negative side, respondents reported tensions rising among the camp residents because support was not delivered in a timely manner (Q5) and it also failed to cover all required needs. The relevance of the support improved over the three rounds, but still required further attention (Q2). The data revealed that the NGO needed to focus on providing affected people with relevant information about available services (Q4), include them in decision-making (Q7), and inform them about complaints mechanisms (Q8). While there was some improvement, there was still significant scope to better respond to people's suggestions (Q9) at the end of the three surveys.

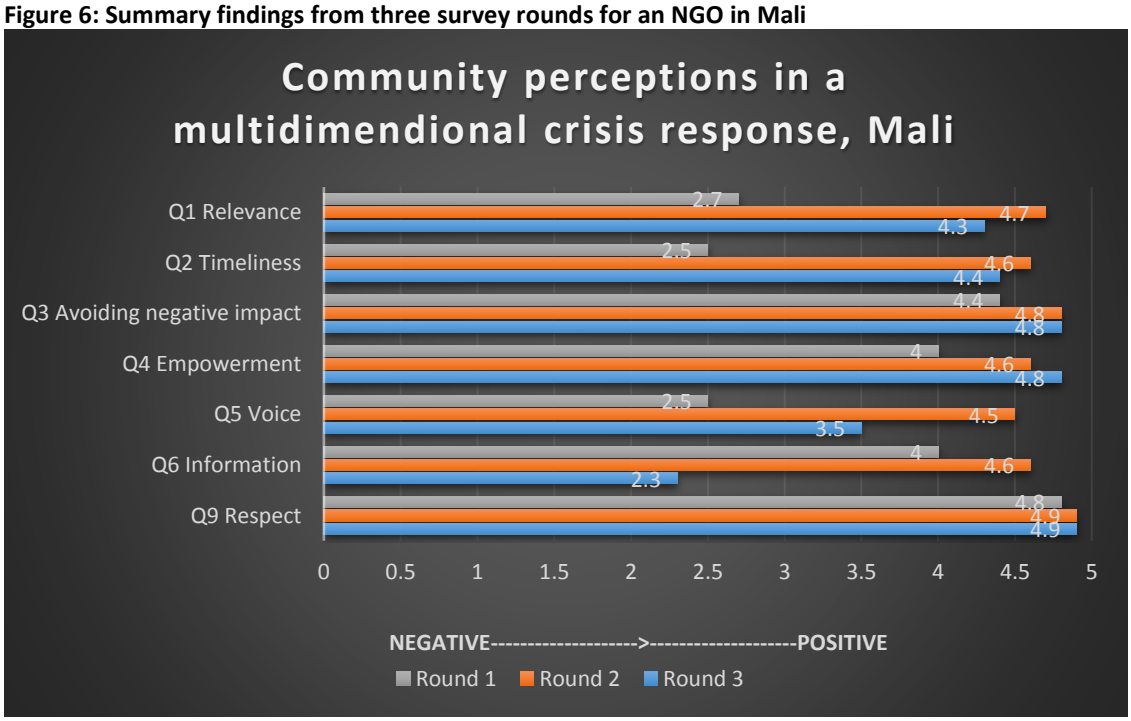
Figure 5: Summary findings from three survey rounds for an NGO in Lebanon



The Mali Case Study

The NGO in the Mali case study is providing support to communities affected by conflict, and had achieved some high mean scores that were maintained from the second to the third survey round, but most declined in the third round as is evident in the summary bar chart (figure 6). Following the significant improvement in perceptions of the relevance of the programme between the first and second rounds, satisfaction remained high and communities considered that it addresses their main needs (Q1). There was also a widespread belief that the support has been provided in time (Q2) and did not cause tensions within the community (Q3). Survey participants expressed an increasingly positive outlook in regards to how they believed they would be able to maintain their livelihoods at the end of the programme (Q4). There was overwhelming consensus amongst respondents throughout each of the survey rounds that they were treated with respect and dignity by NGO staff (Q9).

Figure 6: Summary findings from three survey rounds for an NGO in Mali



However, findings for some questions suggested that there were areas which required further attention; respondents did not feel they had influence over the programme (Q5), neither did they feel well informed on the progress or other aspects of the programme (Q6); both of these questions saw a significant decrease in satisfaction levels between the second and third survey. All 100 respondents indicated that they were unaware of where and how to submit suggestions or complaints.

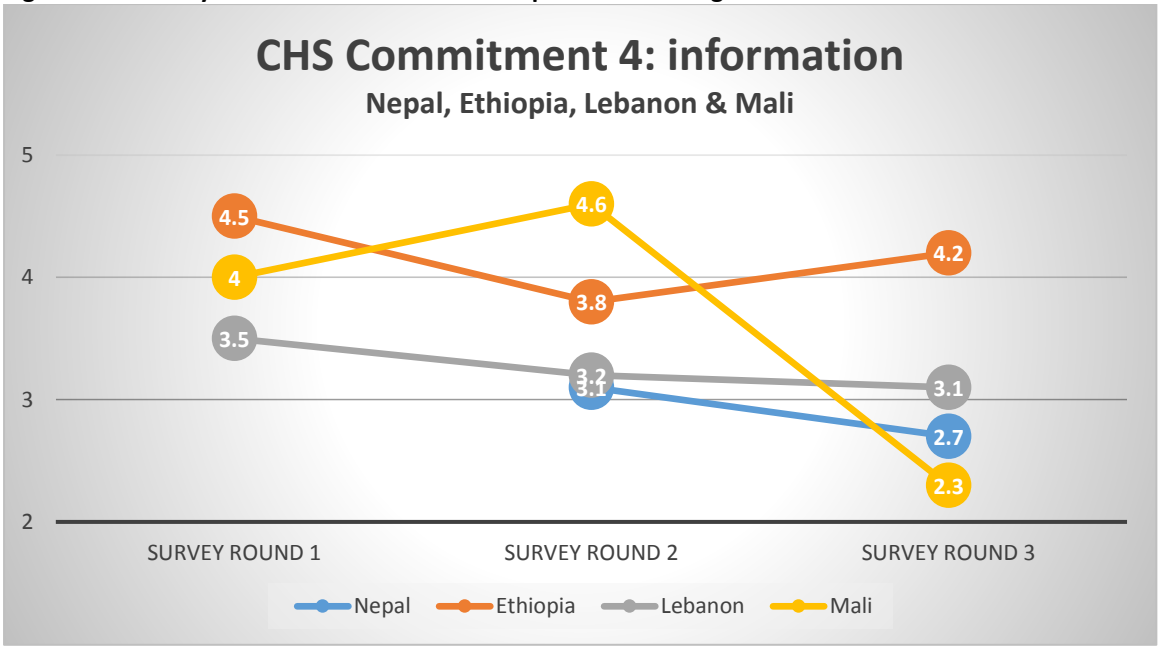
1.3 What trends are evident across the CHS Commitments?

The LLA project is aimed at examining the performance against the CHS Commitments of individual agencies, but it is possible to look across a selection of agencies to analyse performance at a country-level or across different countries. While it is important to note that the different contexts in which assistance is being delivered in different places by different organisations makes it impossible to compare NGO performance, an examination of the results does provide a more general view of how NGOs are performing against specific CHS Commitments.

CHS Commitment 4: Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them.

This Commitment emphasises the need for the inclusive participation of crisis-affected people which requires a willingness to allow and encourage people receiving aid to speak out and influence decisions. Information and communication are critical forms of aid, without which affected people cannot access services, make the best decisions for themselves and their communities, or hold aid agencies to account. When people have the opportunity to voice their opinions, this enhances their sense of well-being, helps them adapt to the challenges they face and better enables them to take an active role in their own recovery.

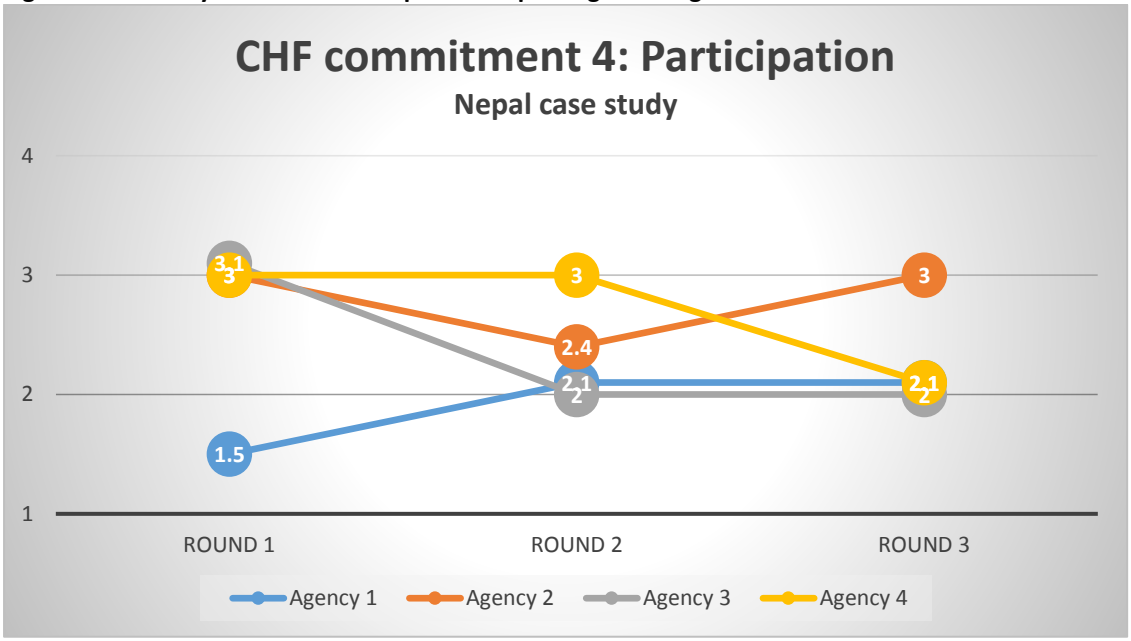
Figure 8: Summary scores from 4 NGOs in the 4 pilot countries against CHS Commitment 4[12]



In the LLA survey, CHS Commitment 4 was examined by reviewing the access that communities had to information about the assistance they were receiving and their participation in decision-making. The commitment has tended to be one of the lowest scoring as figure 8 and 9 demonstrate. Figure 8 shows the results for a single NGO in each of the four pilot countries while Figure 9 gives results for the four participating NGOs in Nepal.

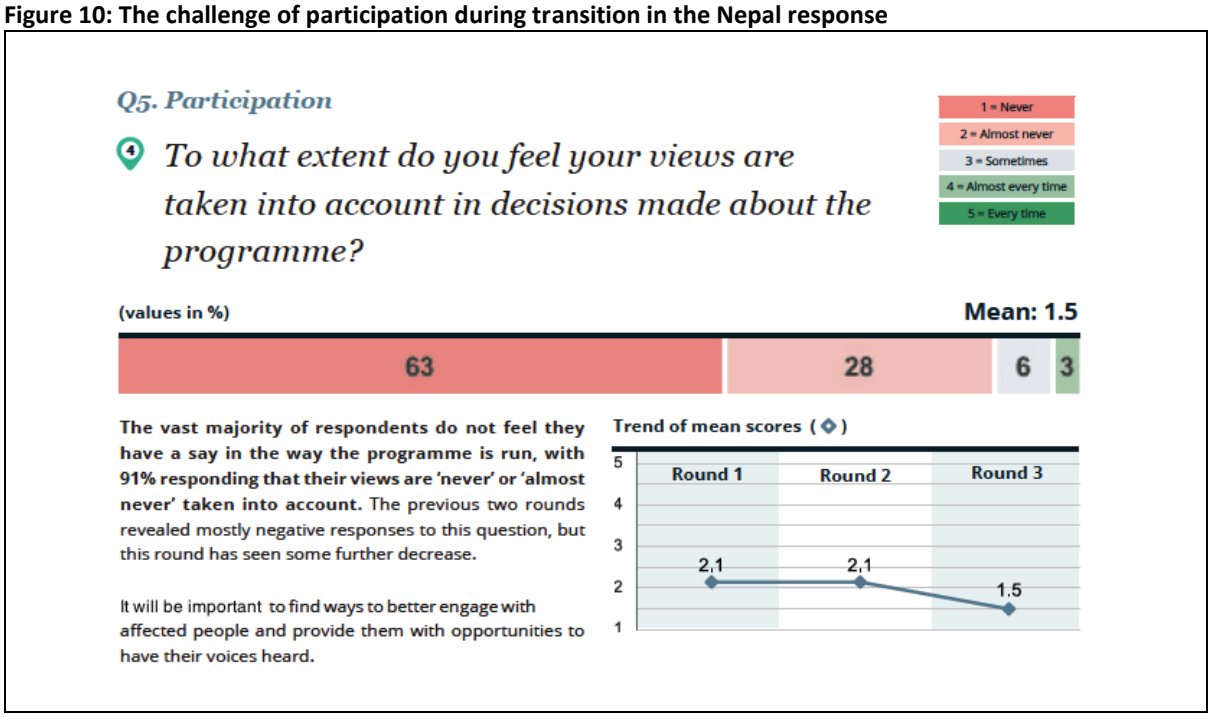
[12] Each coloured line in the chart represents the scores received by a single NGO in each of the four pilot countries.

Figure 9: Summary scores from 4 Nepal-based pilot agencies against CHS Commitment 4



It was often difficult to identify with any precision the reasons for the low scores, but internal reflection and follow-up discussions with communities did highlight a range of factors that may have contributed to them. Using Nepal as an example, the context likely had an influence on the low scores for community participation as the LLA project spanned the transition from humanitarian to longer-term programming. During this phase of the response, not only was there a reduction in the level of assistance being provided by NGOs but there was also a significant reduction in the level of staffing; as humanitarian resources reduced, community engagement was adversely affected. Figure 10 provides a specific case study of an NGO which was undergoing this transition and the survey scores indicated a decrease in community engagement as a consequence despite corrective action having been taken. It was felt that this had driven the negative perceptions and acted as a timely reminder for NGOs to find ways to engage communities in programme-related decisions.

Figure 10: The challenge of participation during transition in the Nepal response



CHS Commitment 5: Communities and people affected by crisis have access to safe and responsive mechanisms to handle complaints.

People affected by crisis have the right to complain to an agency and to receive an appropriate and timely response. Formal mechanisms for complaints and redress are an essential component of an agency's accountability and give affected communities some element of control over their lives. A complaint contains a specific grievance and can alert an organisation to serious misconduct or failures in the response, allowing them to take timely action to improve programme quality.

The NGOs in each of the pilot countries all had very different experiences and approaches to supporting feedback and complaints. An examination of the results for one agency in each of the pilot countries reveals markedly different levels of community knowledge about NGO complaints mechanisms. Community knowledge of complaints mechanisms varied from none at all in the case of Mali, to a thorough understanding in the case of Ethiopia. For Nepal and Lebanon, knowledge of the mechanisms was partial (figure 11). There were similarly variable levels of trust in the different complaints mechanisms as figure 12 shows.

Figure 11: Community awareness of complaints mechanisms from 4 pilot agencies in the 3rd survey

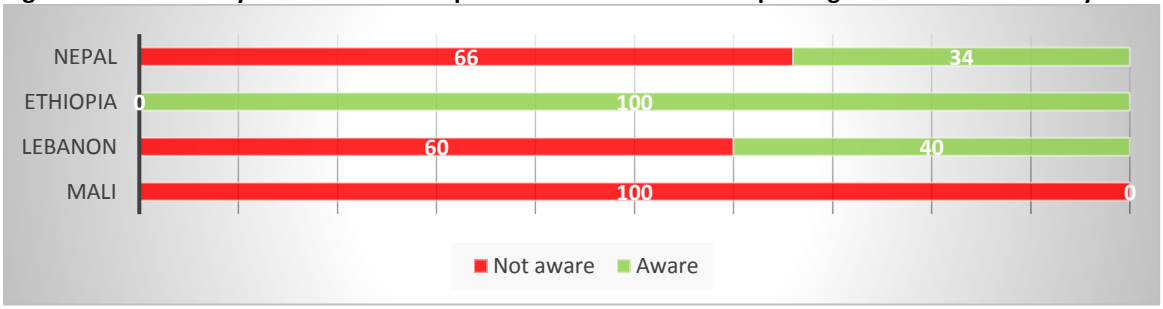
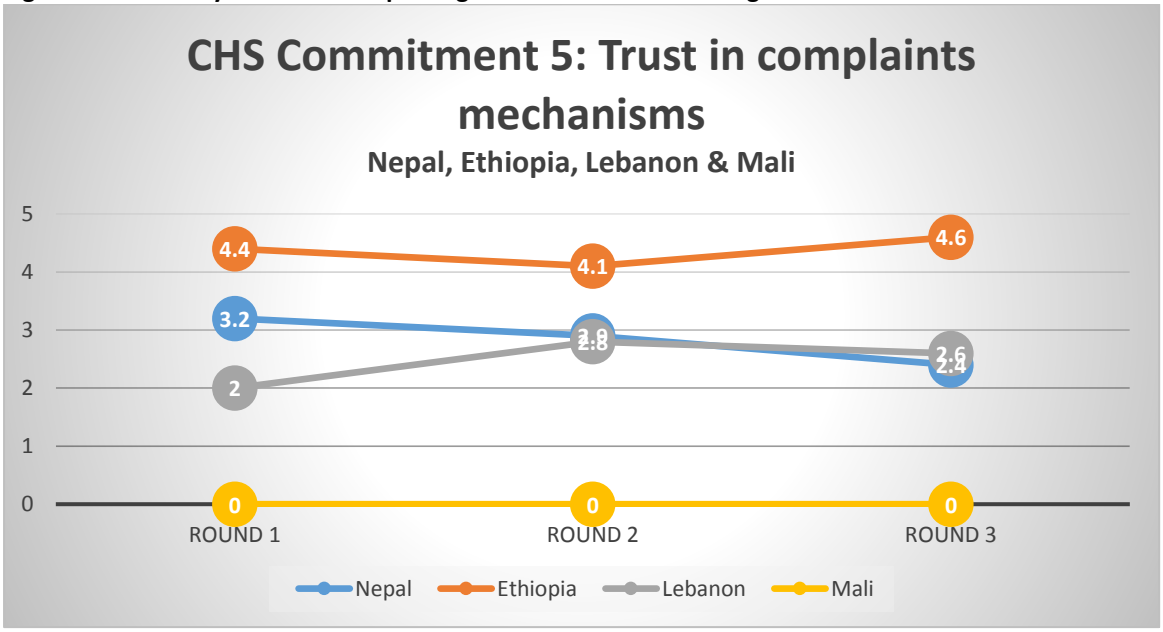


Figure 12: Summary scores from 4 pilot agencies in four countries against CHS Commitment 5[13]

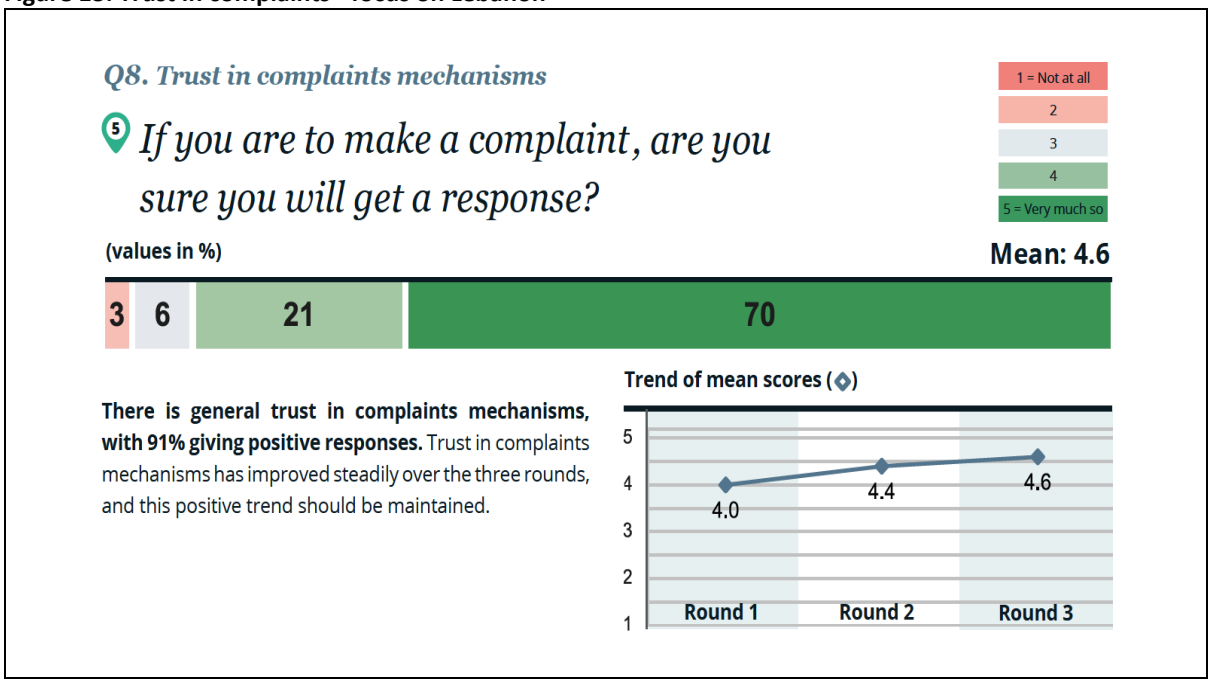


Overall there are no discernible trends across the pilot countries in the levels of trust in NGO complaints mechanisms with scores both increasing and decreasing throughout the survey rounds as

[13] The score for Mali is indicative only as the survey revealed that there was no knowledge of a complaint mechanism and so no further questions were asked about it.

figure 12 shows. Lebanon offered a case study where improvements were made over time which were evidenced by a steady improvement in community perceptions with each round of surveys (figure 13). In this case, while the NGO already had a strong relationship with the communities they were working with, specific action was taken after the first survey to strengthen their engagement with the community.

Figure 13: Trust in complaints - focus on Lebanon



1.4 What do the results tell us about accountability in humanitarian action?

Interviews with NGO staff found that the key benefits of the CV™ methodology compared with existing agency accountability mechanisms were two-fold; the prioritisation that it places on proactively engaging communities, and the perceived rigour of the process. A high value was placed on the focus of LLA on proactively soliciting feedback on a breadth of issues linked to agency accountability which was considered to offer significant advantages over reactive methods of obtaining feedback. NGO staff frequently reported the existence of gaps in their systems of data collection, analysis and response which meant that issues were not adequately followed-up. It is this aspect of LLA as much as any other that was considered to provide greater assurance that issues were both reported and stood a far better chance of being followed up. The use of a third party to oversee the process was also considered to ensure a level of honesty in following up and '*closing the loop*'.

However, not all of the feedback was positive and there was some concern that by keeping the questions simple, the findings sometimes lacked sufficient detail to determine how best to course-correct. There was also some concern about the accuracy of the translation of the surveys which may have been confusing to some members of the community. On several occasions, there was concern that by surveying a different sample of the community in each round, it was difficult to gauge whether perceptions of agency performance were improving. These are all important issues and the feedback demonstrates the importance of the dialogue between the NGOs implementing LLA and Ground Truth Solutions staff between each of the survey rounds which made an important contribution to fine-tuning the surveys.

While an upward trend showing improvement against core CHS Commitments with successive survey rounds would have provided much-wanted evidence of the important linkages between community engagement and effective humanitarian action, performance across NGOs was variable. This is understandable given the diverse and dynamic operational contexts where LLA was being

implemented. What the results demonstrate is the important need to maintain a dialogue with communities that permits changes in the operational context, the external environment or internal agency organisation to be accommodated in a way that maintains minimum standards of aid delivery and respects the dignity of those that it is seeking to assist. This is perhaps the most valuable contribution of LLA – and in so doing it provides a lesson in the importance of sustaining a conversation with communities affected by disaster. These lessons and others will be explored in greater detail in the next section of the report.

2. LLA learning – What lessons have emerged?

This section draws from the project documentation and interviews conducted with participating NGO staff to offer lessons about the LLA process, agency practice and to provide broader insights on humanitarian accountability.

2.1 Lessons from the LLA process

The importance of community engagement

One of the most significant benefits of the CV™ methodology when compared with existing agency approaches to accountability is its engagement with communities. Feedback from participating agencies and a review of the baseline documents suggests that the LLA project initiated and sustained community dialogue in a far more rigorous way than previously had been the case. While the baseline constructed at the outset of the project showed that many of the agencies already had means of checking in with communities, very few had a process that maintained this throughout the project cycle and that built on it through successive rounds of surveys. Moreover, the process of designing surveys was iterative which meant that survey questions could be modified with each successive round to ensure that they remained relevant as projects changed. In this way, the cyclical nature of the surveys allowed issues raised in one to be followed up in the next.

Figure 14: External dialogue with communities in Nuwakot, Nepal

©Santosh K Baidya/Save the Children/2016[14]

All too often, community engagement can be fractured between different teams within an NGO; monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) teams that engage periodically with communities may be divorced from operational teams that are tasked with project implementation.

[14] Nuwakot: Internal Dialogue**,** Save the Children-District Office, Nuwakot, 21st April 2016

The result of this is that efforts to engage with communities and to account for NGO actions have frequently fallen short of aspirations.

> *'Unfortunately, the focus on accountability systems and procedures, rather than on dialogue and relationships which are important to affected communities, has often lead to the 'projectisation' and 'proceduralisation' of accountability'*[15]

By linking the 'how' (the means for NGOs to account for their actions) and the 'who' (those that give assistance and those that are in need of it), the CV™ methodology makes an important link that is often overlooked in the rush to roll out an accountability mechanism. It is in emphasising the importance of community engagement throughout the process that LLA has sought to shift NGO accountability practice back to one which has people at its heart.

The value of adopting proactive feedback mechanisms

The difference between proactive and reactive feedback mechanisms was discussed in the first report.[16] In returning to LLA six months after this was written, one of the most frequently voiced benefits of the CV™ methodology compared with existing agency approaches was that it was proactive and as such did not require community members to write complaints, phone a hotline or meet with a member of staff – which were all considered to have their shortcomings in terms of community access. Interviews with NGOs highlighted concerns about the limited literacy of communities they worked with, the need for mobility and proximity to use complaints boxes and the associated risk that some of those in greatest need of assistance were also among those that may find it hardest to use reactive feedback mechanisms.

Figure 15: Community consultations with a male focus group in Mali

©Care Mali/2017

[15] Brown, D. (2015) Accountability: Everybody's responsibility, in CHS Alliance (2015) *Humanitarian Accountability Report 2015: On the Road to Istanbul – how can the WHS make humanitarian response more effective*, p. 13.

[16] '*Checking the heartbeat of humanitarian assistance: Initial reflections from the Listen Learn Act Project' available at* https://www.danchurchaid.org/content/download/148020/2125580/version/1/file/Checking+the+Heartbeat+of+Humanitarian+Assistance+-+Listen+Learn+Act.pdf

Through the three rounds of surveys that were conducted, NGOs participating in the LLA project sought to proactively reach out to a cross-section of community members engaging across beneficiary groups including some of those who may not have otherwise engaged with existing CRMs.

For one of the NGOs working in a conservative part of Lebanon, there was surprise at the limited knowledge that a community had about the assistance that it was providing. When the survey methodology and results were examined, it was found that women were among those that had least information about the NGO project which prompted the realisation that in a context where women rarely left the house, the NGO was failing to adequately engage with a key constituent group. Based on the findings, moves have been taken to find ways to better engage women in the project so they could better understand it and participate in it. It is in revealing the perceptions of '*hidden*' community members that LLA has had an important measure of success.

The benefits of making accountability a discussion for the whole of the organisation

Interviews with project staff highlighted a concern that accountability frequently exists in organisational silos; for some, it was the programme implementation team; for others, it was the MEAL team which was responsible for gathering and documenting accountability data. This was considered to be problematic when there was a failure of different departments to link up which meant that information was not always shared across the organisation or to partners. Importantly, the LLA process links MEAL teams with operations staff, senior management and partners and in so doing crossed some of the common fault lines within organisations that can de-link the intended beneficiaries of assistance from senior decision-makers.

The engagement of all of these parts of the organisation in examining and responding to the results of the perceptions surveys, ensured that there was a common interpretation of the feedback and strengthened the likelihood of joint action being taken. Dialogue with communities to clarify the concerns that had been raised through the surveys and the engagement between MEAL staff and senior management to discuss and agree course corrections made follow-up and corrective actions more likely. In this way, LLA offered a common accountability language for organisations.

The relevance of the methodology across different contexts

An important observation from the LLA project is the relevance of the methodology to a number of different organisations (national and international) working in very different contexts. That the project was rolled out across four very different pilot countries, each of which undertook three full survey rounds provides an endorsement of the relevance of the methodology. That it was successfully used in natural disasters, situations of refugee influxes and in protracted crises suggests that it has broad applicability across different contexts (figure 16).

Figure 16: The range of contexts within which LLA was piloted

Country	Context	Stakeholders	Scale of the crisis	Implementation
Ethiopia	Refugee influx as a result of conflict	South Sudanese refugees	Approximately 300,000 refugees in Gambella	Direct implementation and partnership
Lebanon	Refugee influx as a result of conflict	Refugee and host populations	Approximately 1,000,000 refugees in Lebanon	Direct implementation and partnership
Mali	Internal displacement as a result of conflict	Displaced and host populations	601,000 requiring food assistance and 40,000 IDPs	Direct implementation and partnership
Nepal	Earthquake	Disaster-affected communities	2,800,000 people initially affected	Direct implementation and partnership

The case of Nepal is of particular interest as it provided a real-time case study of the challenges faced by communities as humanitarian assistance transitioned to rehabilitation and reconstruction. During the life of the LLA project, most of the agencies participating in the LLA project transitioned from having well-resourced humanitarian responses to initiating more modest longer-term engagement and the survey results highlighted associated changes in community perceptions. As funding decreased, project staff were reduced which had important implications for the relationships between the NGOs and the communities they worked with. There were also significant programmatic changes as implementing agencies sought to move away from short-term service delivery and establish longer-term interventions. These changes were visible in the survey results which showed a reduction in the scores against some of the key CHS Commitments such as a lack of information within the community as programmes were re-orientated or a reduction in trust as humanitarian staff left or were replaced. These are important findings as they underline the impact of programmatic changes on community perceptions and highlight the importance of continuing to engage or even strengthening community engagement during such transitions.

The successful use of the CV™ methodology in different phases of a response provides some reassurance that the approach is sensitive to different modes of programming and more importantly, can play an important role in highlighting significant changes in community engagement which may require a re-orientation or re-focusing of organisational communications with those that it is seeking to assist.

The limitations of the surveys

Feedback on the results of the surveys has generally been quite positive with participating NGOs across each of the four pilot countries finding value in it. However, there were some issues raised about its shortcomings which are worthy of examination.

Figure 17: A programme team reviews the survey report in Nepal

©ECO-Nepal/2016[17]

- The issue of how bias might affect community perceptions of assistance was discussed in the first comprehensive report and the Ethiopia survey results provide an interesting case study. Results from these surveys, undertaken with South Sudanese refugees in Gambella, consistently indicated higher levels of satisfaction than the other three pilot countries. While it is not possible to

[17] LLA Report: Round 2, Follow up programs: Internal and external dialogue, 2016.

definitively determine the cause of this some suggestions were offered; some staff felt that it might be a consequence of courtesy bias[18] while others felt that it was linked to the low expectations of assistance that some recipients had. The preponderance of positive responses to survey questions could also reflect a fear that negative feedback may affect the provision of assistance. This speaks to a broader issue of how power dynamics between those providing and receiving aid can impact upon survey results and while the use of disaggregated data, good contextual analysis and the use of independent survey teams can go some way to addressing the negative impacts, the existence of these biases cannot be completely ruled out (see figure 18).

Figure 18: The use of disaggregated data in Nepal

In Nepal, the caste system plays an important role in the access of different members of a community to resources. For this reason, the surveys undertaken in Nepal were disaggregated by caste as well as gender and age which permitted an examination of how each caste group perceived the assistance that they were receiving. In this example, interpretation of the results by the agency providing assistance was essential for understanding the differential impact of assistance and analysis of the results by the participating NGOs provided important context to the findings.

- Gathering perceptions is resource intensive requiring significant time, money and skills in order to deliver consistently high quality surveys and analysis. Key competencies required to deliver high quality surveys include '*abilities to design context-appropriate interview and focus group guides, identifying best sampling strategies, build rapport, reflect on and mitigate personal biases, listen attentively and respectfully, probe for detail as necessary, record data, code and categorise data and discuss and report findings*'[19] It took time and effort to identify and train the survey teams and there were some occasions when the veracity of the results were questioned by NGOs.
- The surveys were considered by many of the participating NGOs to be out of sequence with their internal monitoring and reporting regimes and as a consequence were an ill-fit with organisational systems or funding periods. This was largely a consequence of piloting a project which had its own set of deadlines and as a consequence the survey rounds were designed to fit the project rather than the NGOs participating in it. However, outside of the pilot, there is potential for these to be moved in order for them to fit with NGO project cycles and/or reporting requirements.

2.2 Reflections on agency practice

The importance of supporting staff in shifting their practice

The shift in practice to deliver the LLA project took time to be fully understood by participating agencies. While the initial roll-out of the project was accompanied by a short training workshop (see figure 19), NGO staff initially struggled to fully understand the project; some also encountered challenges in seeking to challenge and change organisational accountability culture and practices.

Figure 19: Overview of the LLA training programme

The LLA training course was designed in April and May 2016, after the project team and organisations participating in the pilot had all undertaken the first cycles of the method (some had also completed the second cycle). The course provides an overview of the CHS and Sphere and companion standards; it presents Ground Truth Solutions' CV™ methodology; and works with trainees to apply it to the CHS and the Sphere standards, within the context of organisations' existing approaches to accountability and monitoring. A training-of-trainers' module was developed on request and delivered in Nepal. All training materials are available via the Listen Learn Act site at DCA's online learning lab (www.actlearn.org).

For many NGO staff, the use of surveys represented a change in the way that they solicited and received feedback from communities and the initial presentation and interpretation of the results

[18] The term courtesy bias is used to describe the tendency for respondents to understate any dissatisfaction because they do not want to offend the organisation seeking their opinion.

[19] Nouvet, E., Abu-Sada, C., De Laat, S., Wang, C. and Schwartz, L. (2016) Opportunities, limits and challenges of perceptions studies for humanitarian contexts, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 17 March 2016, Routledge, p.10.

proved to be a challenge. Some staff were initially skeptical about the accuracy of the results and how their interpretation and it is these organisations that were slowest to make the shift. Others were more open-minded and welcoming of the independent survey teams engaging with the communities they worked with, and it is these that tended to most quickly see the benefits of the survey results. This speaks to the importance of shifting mindsets as an integral part of strengthening accountability as expressed in the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership's (HAP) 2015 Humanitarian Accountability Report.

> *'Accountability is not going to be improved through more 'tweaking' with technical or procedural fixes. It requires a change in mindset to acknowledge that each and every person affected by and engaged in humanitarian crises has different roles and responsibilities to play.'*[20]

Given this challenge, the package of support which included training for NGO staff and real-time assistance provided by Ground Truth Solutions offered an important foundation. However, while it went some way to assisting the process of change that was needed, some interviewees considered that a more intensive training at the outset of the LLA project might have made for a quicker initiation into the methodology.

<u>The challenge posed by staff turnover</u>

Many of the NGO field staff that were interviewed had taken up their post during the LLA project and as a consequence, few could speak to the whole period of project implementation. This highlights the influence that staff turnover has had for the LLA project which has had important implications as staff have consequently had variable levels of understanding of and enthusiasm for LLA which has dictated the extent to which they have engaged with the project. Staff turnover has also necessitated constant re-engagement with agencies to ensure there is a good understanding of the project. Not only did this take energy, but knowing the important influence that personality has on interest and uptake, it also had implications for action as expressed by a member of an international NGO working in Africa;

> *"The data [from the surveys] is seen as very actionable but due to high staff turnover in the MEAL team and at project level no follow-up was carried out between the first and third survey rounds." International NGO Humanitarian Manager*

For another organisation which had experienced significant staff turnover during their implementation of the project, LLA was considered to have been helpful in overcoming some of the pitfalls as it provided an important level of continuity and maintained a dialogue with communities that otherwise could have been lost. The different survey rounds also provided a historical account of the relationship between communities and the organisation which was considered critical.

<u>The value of internalising the CHS within humanitarian organisations</u>

The LLA methodology was considered extremely valuable in promoting the CHS internally within participating organisations and more broadly with humanitarian agencies. The NGOs that participated in LLA were all at very different stages in their CHS journey and as a consequence there were varying levels of knowledge and engagement as the quote from an international NGO suggests;

> *'Our accountability mechanisms do not systematically assess the organisation's performance against the CHS Commitments - CV™ does this.' Headquarters-based staff member.*

Some of the international NGOs were more advanced in their understanding of the CHS than their national counterparts and participation in the LLA project was seen as an important means to ensure that programme practice was rooted in the CHS. To this end, the trainings that were conducted as

[20] Brown, D. (2015) Accountability: Everybody's responsibility, *in* CHS Alliance (2015) *Humanitarian Accountability Report 2015: On the Road to Istanbul – how can the WHS make humanitarian response more effective*, p.17.

part of the LLA roll-out were considered to have provided essential skills for agency uptake of the project as well as strengthening the understanding of key staff.

> *"We've got a project to improve accountability and this [training] gives us skills to make this more achievable. The training was useful and offered practical lessons about how the CHS can be adapted. We can now bring the CHS Commitments to our project activities and put community members at the centre of our programming. Usually trainings tell you what to do; what I appreciated about this training is it also showed us how to do it."* LLA training participant[21]

For agencies that were in the process of formally engaging with the CHS, implementation of the CV™ methodology also provided an internal means of measuring performance against the Commitments which was considered to have important value.

2.3 Insights into humanitarian accountability

There is more to accountability than complaints response mechanisms

In a number of cases, close-out conversations with participating NGOs about their plans to strengthen accountability with affected communities in the future tended to focus on CRMs, suggesting that there is still work to do to understand the breadth of accountabilities which go far beyond the ability or otherwise of communities to provide feedback or raise complaints. In this regard, World Vision's Resource Guide on CRMs offers two important qualifiers that despite the central message of LLA still appear to be poorly understood;

> *'A CRM is but one aspect of humanitarian accountability. A CRM alone will not make your programme accountable to beneficiaries…Systems are no substitute for trusted relationships with community members. Continue to encourage staff to informally discuss programs and issues with community members, and act on feedback they receive.'*[22]

Figure 20: Suggestion boxes offer only partial accountability

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[21] Interview conducted as part of an assessment of the training. See Rilkoff, N. (2017) Listen Learn Act – from feedback to action, project training summary, p.2.

[22] World Vision (2009) *Complaint and response mechanisms: A resource guide*, Food programming and management group, World Vision International, p.7.

One of the most important attributes of the CV™ methodology is that it spans many of the CHS Commitments which articulate a far broader set of accountabilities (see figure 21). Some of the close-out discussions with NGOs participating in the LLA suggests that there is still work to do in order for staff to fully appreciate the breadth of accountabilities and how to systematically elicit feedback from communities across these.

Figure 21: The role of the CHS in providing a holistic means of viewing accountability[23]

A unique and exciting feature of the CHS is that it provides a more comprehensive and holistic way to view accountability, one that has been hitherto lacking in the sector. Accountability to affected people, as promoted by HAP over the past decade, remains the centre piece of the CHS, and rightly so. But the CHS also provides a much-needed bridge linking issues of accountability to performance, and making sure the results of actions are relevant and appropriate for the people they are intended to assist. It also helps redefine donor-driven definitions of accountability around how and where money and resources are spent and, more importantly, whether or not aid efforts represent value for money in the eyes of affected communities. This logic underpins each of the Nine Commitments of the CHS, and as such, represents a step-change in how the sector thinks about the design, implementation, management and evaluation of aid programmes.

Limitations to agency responsiveness – both real and imagined

There were occasions when the perception surveys and follow-up with communities highlighted the need for changes to be made in NGO assistance, which has at times proved to be challenging to accommodate. In discussing this issue with agencies, there were different opinions about the scope that existed for agencies to course-correct and make changes to their programme inputs (as opposed to systems or processes) in response to the feedback from communities. The course corrections that were considered easiest to make were those that either did not require changes to inputs, or benefitted from flexible funding either from internal funds or with grants that had few restrictions. For these programmes it was relatively easy for NGOs to implement changes (figure 22).

Figure 22: Community feedback and course corrections in Nepal

In the second survey round for a national NGO providing sanitation services in Nepal, only 45% of those surveyed considered the programme was meeting their families' main needs. 67% of those surveyed identified their main need was drinking water with sanitation considered to be a secondary concern. During the external dialogue between the NGO and the community that followed the survey, the need for drinking water was verified and there a lack of livelihoods opportunities was also highlighted during focus group discussions.

In discussion with their international NGO donor, it was agreed that the focus of the programme should shift to reflect the priorities of the community; the number of latrines was reduced and a water scheme was included in the programme. In addition to this, a livelihood programme was established in the villages which were most affected.

However, for donor-funded programmes there was greater reticence to make changes or to engage with donor representatives about the need for change. Despite evidence which suggests that some donors are flexible when presented with evidence of the need to make changes, it was considered by NGO staff to be time-consuming and problematic to do so. It is also the case that agencies may limit their own flexibility by rigidly enforcing internal logical frameworks which act as a disincentive for making course corrections. In these circumstances, the penalties for making change are internal and bureaucratic which may make them time-consuming rather than impossible.

It is noteworthy that with the exception of Commitment 1, when an agency seeks feedback under the CHS, the changes required most frequently relate to planning, processes and how agencies work with communities. Changes in the provision of information, the timing of assistance and the participation

[23] Tamminga, P. (2015) Bringing aid to account: the CHS and third party verification *in* CHS Alliance (2015) *Humanitarian Accountability Report 2015: On the Road to Istanbul – how can the WHS make humanitarian response more effective*, p.68.

of recipients of assistance have far fewer cost implications and as a result should be easier to accommodate.

The importance of engaging different sections of communities

Most NGOs would endorse the importance of engaging with communities and yet the results of the surveys have shown it to be an area of weakness. Findings from the survey rounds have also shown that even when NGOs do engage with communities they often fail to do this in a way that ensures different members of communities participate equally. This was an important lesson from a pilot country where the NGO was working through community structures and yet received successively lower scores in response to the question about whether community views were taken into account in decisions made about the programme. A senior staff member struggled to understand the reason for the low scores given the NGO's engagement with the community;

> *"We send a lot of responses through the [community structure], we respond to them in a group. We sit down and talk to them in groups. We tell them what we will do and not do [and yet] community people don't feel they have been responded to. We have feedback committees set up at village level; we talk to them and share responses and they are supposed to disseminate this to people." Senior INGO staff member*

The challenge that this example shows is the importance of understanding and engaging with all parts of a community. This requires knowledge of the power dynamics and how information moves between different parts of a community. While this can be time-consuming, it is also essential if NGOs are to support those who are most vulnerable in a way that meets the most important needs. There is a risk that the community engagement 'box' can be 'ticked' by engaging with local structures, but it is essential that NGOs analyse how representative these are, and that alternative arrangements are made when key members of the community are not represented in these structures.

Accountability and humanitarian decision-making

In its exploration of the quality and use of evidence in humanitarian action, ALNAP highlight the important role that evidence plays in accountability.

> *'[E]vidence matters for accountability. Donor organisations, affected states and civil society have a legitimate expectation to know how – and how well – money is spent on behalf of people caught up in crises. To meet these expectations, humanitarian organisations must be able to prove that needs exist and demonstrate that they have made informed and deliberate choices about the most effective and efficient way to respond. They must also be able to provide evidence on the impact of the choices they make.'* [24]

As a sector, humanitarian assistance is frequently poor at gathering, analysing and presenting evidence which in turn negatively affects the ability of humanitarian organisation to make decisions about where they work, with whom and the nature of the assistance they provide. While there are understandable challenges in gathering information and analysis to provide evidence in time-critical contexts such as shortly after a humanitarian crisis, these challenges reduce with time and the focus of LLA on project monitoring and accountability, offers the immediate benefits of longer-term periodic engagement.

Despite a growth of interest in strengthening the quality of evidence, there is '*significant room for improvement'*[25] in its use in driving humanitarian decision-making. Where humanitarian evidence often fails to deliver is in its quality, relevance, accessibility, timeliness and its use in decision-making. It is in measuring LLA against these critieria that offers an indication of its value (figure 23).

[24] Knox Clarke, P. and Darcy, J. (2014) *Insufficient evidence? The quality and use of evidence in humanitarian action.* ALNAP Study. London: ALNAP/ODI, p.5.
[25] Ibid, p. 67.

Figure 23: The contribution made by LLA towards generating humanitarian evidence[26]

Criteria	Description	CV™ methodology
Quality	Much of the evidence generated in the sector is obtained through qualitative methods. However, these methods are often poorly understood and implemented. At the same time, some agencies are experimenting with the use of quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. These initiatives have demonstrated the possibilities, as well as the limitations of these approaches, and should be encouraged. Tentative moves towards 'mixed method' approaches to evidence generation should be welcomed.	Ground Truth Solutions develop survey questions in close collaboration with the NGO. Most closed questions use a 1-5 Likert scale to quantify answers. A random sampling methodology is used to identify settlements and households are selected using the transect walk method. The CV methodology includes a qualitative component in the form of the dialogue sessions. It is this mixed methods approach that builds up the evidence to inform decision-making.
Continuity	Short funding cycles and rapid staff rotation tend to work against the collection of bodies of comparable evidence over time. As a result, evidence is often produced episodically, in one-off assessments and evaluations. This significantly reduces the ability to understand the effects of humanitarian intervention over time, and so to be able to say, with confidence, when and how we should intervene in the future. Humanitarian actors should see evidence generation as a process, and not an event, and aim to build the body of evidence over time.	For the purposes of piloting the project, surveys were conducted every 2-3 months but the frequency of surveys can be changed to match agency monitoring practice or the requirements of the project cycle. If integrated into an organisation's routine monitoring, the methodology can be used throughout the life of projects
Inclusion	The people who are concerned most intimately with humanitarian action – those who are personally affected by a crisis – tend to be marginalised by current approaches to evidence generation in two important ways. First, they do not get to ask the questions: evidence is generally collected to meet the needs of international organisations, rather than those of affected people.	The methodology is designed around engaging and feeding back to communities that are receiving assistance. Male and female members are questioned and data is disaggregated by gender, ethnicity and geographical location to strengthen its utility.

Linked to the challenge of generating good quality evidence are challenges in the extent to which evidence is then used by humanitarian actors to take decisions. ALNAP list a number of principles to strengthen the use of evidence, a selection of which are relevant to the LLA project and which are listed below alongside a description and commentary (figure 24).

Figure 24: The contribution made by LLA towards strengthening the use of humanitarian evidence[27]

Criteria	Description	CV™ methodology
Accessibility	Decision-makers will seldom have the time (and on occasion may lack the inclination) to search through databases, reports or spreadsheets for the information they need to make a robust decision. Evidence should be packaged in ways that make it easily accessible: short reports in jargon-free language and infographics etc.	The data is presented in a clear, simple, and visually compelling way so that agencies can understand and track emerging messages. Data is disaggregated and analysed, it is compared with findings from other sources, and a short report is produced with recommendations.
Timeliness	Information that arrives after decisions have been made will often be ignored, and the most important decisions – the ones that set the broad scope of a programme – will often be made early	The goal is to gather feedback on the humanitarian response efforts and track how perceptions evolve over time. A focus is placed on seeking to

[26] Ibid, p. 68-69 (adapted).
[27] Ibid, p. 70-71 (adapted).

	on. Groups or individuals producing evidence should aim to understand the decision-making process and to make relevant evidence available at critical points in the process.	provide good quality information quickly in order to permit follow-up and course corrections.
Decision-making	Evidence is more likely to be used where organisations institute decision-making processes that include clear steps that require evidence to be considered. Humanitarian organisations should clearly outline the process by which programmes are designed (and redesigned), indicating key stages at which information is required, and – where possible – the nature of the information required to make decisions.	Closing the loop is an integral part of the process; staff and partners are encouraged to discuss the main findings with communities to verify and deepen the analysis and to demonstrate that feedback is taken seriously. Where issues go beyond what can be actioned by the NGO, it is encouraged to advocate for action with relevant duty bearers.

3. The LLA legacy – what has enabled or inhibited change?

This section examines the potential for LLA to change accountability practice. It draws on interviews from NGO staff at country-level and headquarters about how the LLA project may influence the way they seek to hold themselves accountable to those they work with in the future.

3.1 The engagement of the LLA project with participating organisations

At its initial start in September 2015, the LLA project had bold aspirations – to transform NGO accountability practice from the bottom-up. In seeking to assess the progress that has been made towards achieving this goal, there is value in looking at different levels of engagement between the LLA project and NGO staff and to study the extent to which they have been able to promote change within participating organisations; field-level, country-level and headquarters-level will each be examined.

Field-level engagement

The LLA project has supported efforts to strengthen the understanding and capacity of field staff both within implementing NGOs (national and international) and the broader humanitarian community in each of the four pilot countries (plus Kenya). This has been part of a strategy to strengthen understanding among NGOs about the LLA project, the CHS and Sphere. By March 2017, a total of nine training courses had been conducted in which 204 humanitarian staff from 125 organisations had received training (see figure 25).

Figure 25: Engagement of frontline humanitarian staff through the LLA training module

Country	# distinct International NGOs	# distinct Local NGOs	# other organisations	List of other participating organisations (UN/donor/research)
Ethiopia	12	0	2	UN OCHA, Tufts University
Kenya	9	10		
Lebanon	16	7	6	MoPH, UNDP, UNICEF, UNRWA, WFP
Mali	17	12	2	OCHA
Nepal	19	12	1	Donor
Total	**73**	**41**	**11**	**125 organisations in total**

The training course was intended for humanitarian staff at regional and country office level with a responsibility for monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning in humanitarian organisations; by focusing on practitioners, the aspiration was to create an understanding of LLA and increase demand more generally for quality and accountability in humanitarian organisations. The workshops received enthusiastic feedback from staff although at an individual agency-level, feedback on the use of LLA after the end of the project was mixed and it has played an essential role in familiarising NGO staff with the project and the CV™ methodology and has helped them to understand the different aspects of LLA.

However, even with this training and the support provided by Ground Truth Solutions, some of the implementing NGOs reported that it took significant time to fully understand what the project entailed and as a consequence, the shift in culture has taken time to promote within organisations. This is hardly surprising given that for all of the organisations the CV™ process entailed changes to their ways of working.

> *"We've had significant turnover in staff during LLA; I don't think the team initially fully understood the project, but we're now much clearer about how it works and the potential it has to strengthen accountability." Field manager in one of the four pilot countries*

Moving from a system of accountability that was internal to NGOs to one that was implemented by a third party (Ground Truth Solutions and the survey organisations) also required trust to be developed between field staff and the local research organisations. This took time but was strengthened as the survey questions were shaped over successive rounds.

Country-level engagement

At a country-level, the LLA project most frequently engaged senior monitoring and evaluation staff members albeit with some engagement with senior managers. In most organisations, country leadership was not directly involved in the project. In some of the NGOs, particularly national NGOs, MEAL staff have important reach into the design of agency accountability mechanisms and there are several examples of enthusiastic uptake by an NGO convinced of the potential that LLA has to reframe their relationship with the communities they are working with.

> *"If we master doing this, and continue doing LLA in our own way, then we can use this as a major component of our community response mechanism [to] enhance our organisation's transparency and know we are accountable. We can even go to government offices and present reports and show them how we measure complaints and feedback." National NGO implementing LLA*

Figure 27: Top-down or bottom-up? Children play tug of war in a school in Palestine

© Folkekirkens Nødhjælp/2013 (0023089.jpg)

Larger, international NGOs did not have the same agility as their national counterparts and performance has been mixed in fostering change at the country-level. However, there are a number of NGOs that have already started to think about how to modify their practice to incorporate key elements of the project and it is this group of organisations that offers the greatest potential for sustaining the project at a country-level beyond its close-out as interviews revealed;

> *"When we first started [with the LLA project] I was skeptical and didn't think we would be able to integrate it into our programme. However, I'm now thinking about integrating population-level data collection into our ongoing monitoring processes." Country-level INGO manager*

"We have now been trained in this method and we have trained our local partners in the method and [explained it to] our emergency team. LLA has only been a pilot so we are planning to extend it to other emergency projects as well…We have made an action plan about how the approach can be incorporated into the emergency sector. We are already including it in our emerging projects and the next step will be to enroll it into our development programmes." Country-level emergency manager

While it is difficult to distinguish NGO aspirations for of the CV™ methodology in the future from firm commitments, there are certainly some encouraging signs about the future of the LLA project across the four pilot countries (Figure 26).

Figure 26: Country-level aspirations for the LLA project – highlights from the four pilot countries

Pilot country	Potential use of the CV™ methodology after LLA project close-out
Ethiopia	In Ethiopia, there was enthusiasm for adoption of the CV™ methodology shown by several NGOs. One of the NGOs has already made a commitment to adopting it in the future and will roll it out across its programmes. Each of the other three NGOs felt they gained helpful insights into their accountability performance and are considering adopting elements of the approach either at the project or the country-programme level.
Lebanon	In Lebanon, the feedback was mixed; one organisation was committed to continuing to use its existing system which was considered to already incorporate some aspects of the CV™ methodology; a second organisation did not feel able to make a commitment; the third participating NGO spoke about using the methodology in the future but still needed to see whether it could be incorporated into organisational MEAL processes. The fourth NGO spoke of expanding its use of the methodology at a project-level.
Mali	In Mali, each of the four participating NGOs had aspirations to adopt aspects of the CV™ methodology into their practice. Two of the participating NGO intend to fund raise with a view to adopting in specific programmes in the furture. A third organisation has already included it in its humanitarian strategy and plan to incorporate it into their MEAL system with a view to training staff and rolling it out across its programmes more broadly. The fourth NGO has already trained its staff and partners in the methodology and are in the process of embedding it into their humanitarian programmes with the potential for it to be rolled out to development programmes at a later stage. In Mali, there has been interest in presenting the methodology at an inter-agency group to explore the potential it offers for wider uptake.
Nepal	In Nepal, there is significant interest in the methodology, particularly given the engagement each of the participating NGOs has in the CHS but there are a lack of concrete plans about how to sustain current engagement or incorporate the methodology more broadly into NGO MEAL systems.

For those NGOs that were less open to change, there were a number of reasons given by NGO staff that go some way to explaining the reasons for their reticence;

- The need to use existing organisational systems: Several organisations spoke of the limited flexibility they had to modify their MEAL processes which had been developed at headquarters and were part of the organisations project cycle management. While these did not always preclude the use of additional processes such as LLA, they would need to be implemented in addition to existing systems and would not contribute to organisational reporting. As a consequence of this, there was a concern that it may be difficult to secure organisational support to sustain them.
- A perceived lack of flexibility by donors: Organisations that had existing donor contracts were concerned that there would be limited flexibility to use funding for LLA. Where logical frameworks had been agreed with pre-defined means of measurement and indicators to report against, it was felt that change would not be welcome. To overcome this, some NGOs are seeking to incorporate aspects of the CV™ methodology into the MEAL budgets of new funding proposals.
- A failure to engage senior management: The prioritisation given by LLA to engaging practitioners was considered by some to have been short-sighted; while it was essential that field staff had a

good understanding of the project and a sound knowledge of the process, there were concerns raised about the failure to engage senior management which was considered to be a '*missed opportunity*'.

> *"There are competing priorities within my organisation; if we'd got more buy-in from the Country Director, we'd have stood a much better chance of sustaining the project." Country-level INGO programme manager*

- Limited guidance provided about how to sustain LLA: It was felt that had the LLA offered more scope for agencies to '*take a look under the bonnet*' of the project, then participating NGOs would have been better-placed to incorporate aspects of it into their practice.

> *"A longer close-out phase would have gone further in nailing buy-in [from NGOs]. A follow-up workshop about how to integrate LLA into existing systems and to understand the building blocks of the project would have been helpful…How to build LLA into budgets, and a meeting with senior decision-makers in the organisation would have strengthened the potential for uptake." Country-level INGO manager*

Headquarters-level engagement

Headquarters-level engagement by the LLA project has been mixed. Most attention was focused on the two commissioning NGOs in one of which there is the potential for LLA practice to be integrated into organisational MEAL practice in the future as it was felt to be more systematic in eliciting and responding to feedback and more representative than existing systems. Experiences outside of the commissioning NGOs were more mixed with senior staff from several international NGOs which had centralised MEAL systems suggesting that efforts to adopt the CV™ methodology would have been strengthened had LLA project staff engaged with their headquarters.

> *"LLA has worked bottom-up and engaged field staff, but if it had wanted [NGOs] to institutionalise LLA it would have needed to have taken a top-down approach. If there had been a greater emphasis placed on headquarters when developing the project, it would have had the greatest chance of sustaining the changes." Headquarters-based staff member.*

Efforts initiated by country staff of participating NGOs to engage with headquarters on LLA have been met with mixed reactions and the existence of well-established global MEAL systems in many of the international NGOs has meant that there is limited scope to make changes.

> *"In our agency, we have had no headquarters resources for LLA and we've been divorced from the process. It's a real dilemma how you promote support across the organisation" Headquarters-based staff member.*

Despite this, there is at least one other potential international NGO success with an organisation currently seeking to explore how the methodology can be adopted more widely after it had been promoted by country-level staff.

> *"We have been sharing the survey reports with headquarters. We have an advisor on accountability and CHS based there and we have been discussing the findings of the survey rounds with them; they are very interested to replicate the process in other projects" Senior country-level MEAL manager*

3.2 What has LLA taught us about how change happens?

A recently published ALNAP paper on change in the humanitarian system[28] makes extensive reference to the challenges experienced in trying to strengthen accountability despite a growing evidence base

[28] Knox-Clarke, P. (2017) *Changing humanitarian action? ALNAP Working Paper*. London: ALNAP/ODI.

about the benefits that exist. Despite this, the '*State of the Humanitarian System'* reports have consistently flagged it as one of the areas that has seen least change and improvement.[29]

A focus on strengthening accountability between those providing assistance and those receiving it has implications for how agencies resource their programmes and how donors fund them; implicit in the changes is a need to strengthen community engagement and to increase programme adaptability in order for NGOs to be responsive to the feedback that they receive. At a time of consolidation within the sector, these are both significant changes. However, given that accountability is receiving significant attention from donors and has received tacit support through the Transformative Agenda and WHS, it is hard to understand why practice continues to be so patchy and why change continues to be so slow; a concern that is raised in ALNAP's paper on changing humanitarian action;

> *'Lack of change in the area of accountability poses real questions about change. How much change is possible? Why does change fail to happen even when key stakeholders say they want it to? What are the best ways to address these constraints and support change? It is tempting to resort to fairly simple explanations… but the solutions seldom seem to be put into practice, or when they are they do not seem to work – so it may be time to reassess at least some assumptions about how change happens.'*[30]

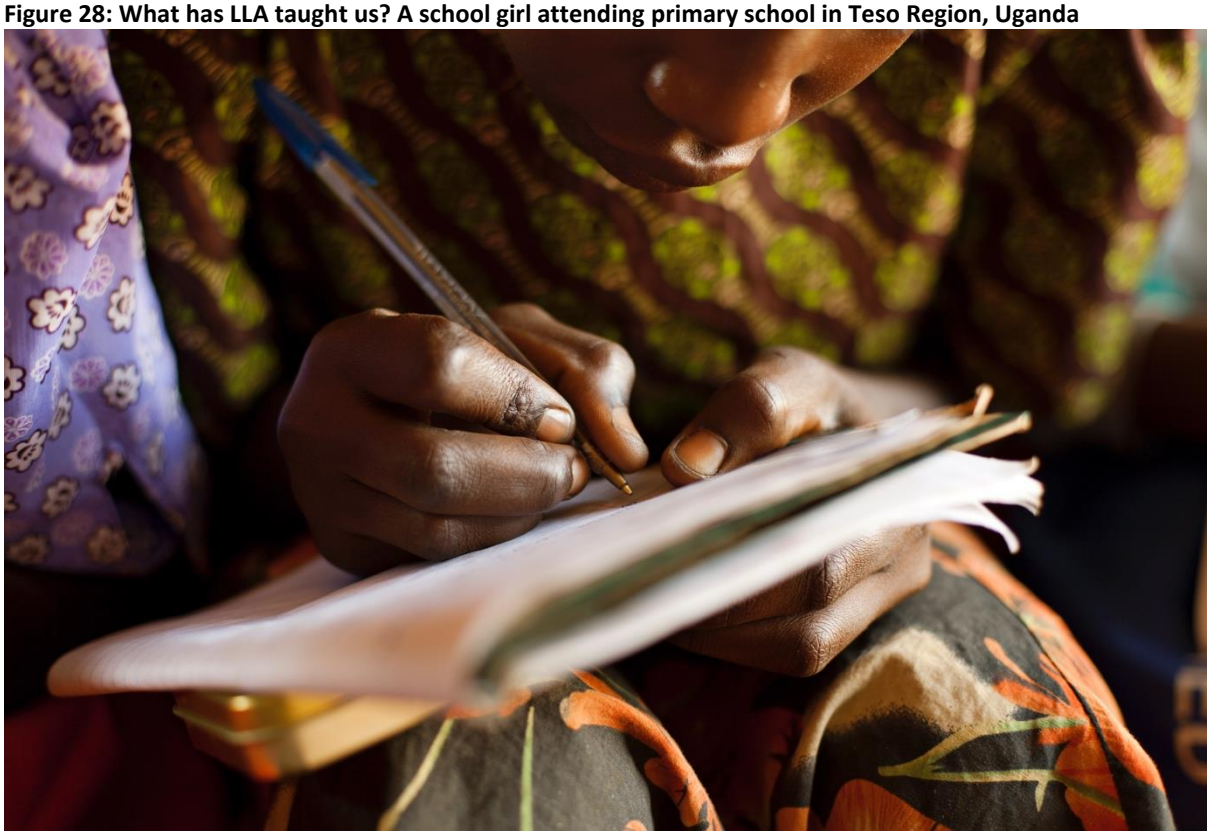
The LLA project offers some insights about the challenges of trying to foster change at the organisational-level from which a range of factors that enable and/or inhibit change can be identified. These insights complement the sectoral-level lessons identified in the ALNAP paper.

- The difficulties of trying promote change through projects: The project-based nature of LLA has been a significant strength from the perspective of piloting the approach within a pre-defined timeframe but is a potential weakness when it comes to sustaining the changes. In each of the pilot countries, LLA has been applied to a single project by participating NGOs and as a consequence, it has been divorced from the larger portfolio of programmes. As a result of this it may be considered to be an outlier or a novelty. That is not to say that it has been sidelined by NGOs as there has been significant interest in the approach, but as a project, it has been isolated from the broader work of NGOs and so runs the risk of failing to permeate into agency practice where it might have been able to make deeper changes.
- The importance of identifying linkages and communicating the benefits of change: Organisational change is influenced by a range of different factors which include structures, procedures, relationships, and skills. Perhaps the most influential of these is that of relationships and it is in this area that the impact of the LLA may have been constrained; a lack of joined-up engagement at the field-level, country-level and headquarters level made it more difficult to foster buy-in. A strategy of engagement with and communication to staff at each of the different levels of NGO operations would have offered the greatest opportunity for uptake as *'change is about people…Because change relies, ultimately, on people's behaviour, it is important that people understand the reasons for change, the benefits the change will bring, and the scope and nature of the change process.'*[31] It is worthy of note that it is the one organisation where these linkages were made at each level that there is the greatest potential for LLA to move from being a project-based accountability mechanism to more broadly influencing the organisation as a whole.
- The challenges of fostering ownership and creating organisational space for new initiatives: One of the issues most frequently raised during interviews with NGO project staff is that change requires ownership and this can take considerable time. If the benefits of change are backed up by evidence and are clearly communicated to different levels of the organisation, then the process of building engagement and ownership may be hastened. Interviews revealed significant

[29] The issue is documented in successive State of the Humanitarian System reports in 2010, 2012 and 2015 which are available at http://sohs.alnap.org/#introduction.
[30] Knox-Clarke, P. (2017) *Changing humanitarian action? ALNAP Working Paper*. London: ALNAP/ODI, p.23.
[31] Ibid, p.47.

enthusiasm for the CV™ methodology which many staff considered superior to existing accountability practices. However, change also takes considerable energy and in successive interviews when aspirations for the future of LLA was raised, staff frequently spoke of the long list of other change processes and organisational priorities that were being rolled out that might preclude uptake of the approach.

Figure 28: What has LLA taught us? A school girl attending primary school in Teso Region, Uganda



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3.3 Towards a judgment on the LLA project

While the CV™ methodology is not new, its use with the CHS as part of the LLA project across a range of contexts and by such a diverse range of NGOs has certainly been innovative and there is value in reflecting on the contribution that it has made to strengthening humanitarian accountability. In seeking to do this, it is important to define a judgment criteria in order to distinguish between success, a 'good' fail and a 'bad' fail. In her Humanitarian Practice Network Paper, Alice Obrecht offers a helpful means of doing this (figure 29).

Figure 29: Defining successful humanitarian innovation – three core criteria[32]

Success criteria	Description
Ideal scenario	innovation is fully successful and has causally contributed to improvements in humanitarian action.
Missing Middle	Innovation has developed an effective idea for improving humanitarian action but may not have been adopted by many humanitarian organisations.
Good fail	the original idea turned out to be ineffective or unfeasible, but lessons are generated that can support future successful innovations.

Measured against Obrecht's criteria, it may be argued that LLA falls into the '*missing middle'* category, as the project offers significant improvements on current practice, albeit with the likelihood of modest uptake at an agency level. While the benefits of the CV™ methodology over existing accountability

[32] Obrecht, A. (2016) Separating the 'good' failure from the 'bad': three successful criteria for innovation in *Humanitarian Practice Network,* Issue 66, April 2016, ODI, p.7.

approaches are evidential, it will take time for the impact of the project to be fully measured and communicated. However, with additional support to those agencies that are seeking to incorporate the methodology into their practice, there is potential for the project to lead to the adoption of the methodology across multiple programmes at country-level as well as the potential of being used more widely by two organisations.

Given that LLA is still in the process of closing out, efforts to sustain some of the changes should be supported where possible and it will be important for senior leaders linked to LLA or those organisations that have adopted some or all of the approach to continue to use their influence to strengthen uptake. Given the potential that exists for LLA to strengthen agencies' engagement with affected communities and the focus on addressing key weaknesses in existing accountability practices, particularly on closing the loop, the end of the project should not be considered to be the end of LLA. Rather it is the beginning of a new phase, during which the evidence collected during implementation is organised and used to lobby for wider change to be made across the sector.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

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

4.1 The future of accountability: lowest common denominator or highest common factor?

The LLA project was conceived as a practical field-led process and the initiative arose at the same time as humanitarian leaders were engaged in a series of meetings at headquarters level to craft the CHS. At the time, the focus of LLA on promoting field-level change was considered to be a way of compensating for the headquarters-focus of the early CHS discussions. The initial vision was to design and implement an innovative and practical methodology to involve affected communities in the design, implementation and monitoring of humanitarian action which sought to address a long-standing challenge for humanitarian organisations. Erik Johnson, one of the creators of LLA and the Head of Humanitarian Response at DanChurchAid, outlined the problem and his vision for how to solve it in a blog posted on the Sphere website;

> *"We humanitarians often get it wrong. We hand out food to displaced families, only to see it appear on the market so that they can buy what they really want. Near distribution sites, we put little cardboard boxes to solicit feedback and complaints, and then struggle to synthesise the handwritten notes into a meaningful pattern, to adjust our aid programmes to meet the real needs and wants of those whom we're trying to help…We need more feedback, more systematically gathered, to empower agencies to better respond. That's what Listen Learn Act is all about."*[33]

And it is in addressing these issues that the 15 NGOs that participated in the four pilot countries have achieved an impressive measure of success. In piloting a methodology that rigorously collects data, that presents it in a clear and compelling way and that supports agencies in interpreting it through a structured process of analysis and dialogue with communities, the CV™ methodology and broader LLA project has been successful in demonstrating the importance of engaging with communities in all aspects of aid delivery. One of the most significant messages to come out of this process and one of the most important changes that it has fostered is the importance of maintaining a sustained dialogue with communities which places them at the heart of programme practice, enabling NGOs to live up to the spirit of the CHS.

LLA has also demonstrated that it can play an important companion role to the CHS. During the project period, the CHS has moved rapidly from being a headquarters-driven concept to being an operational reality with support throughout the humanitarian community. As the CHS has been promoted across the sector and within humanitarian organisations, there has been growing awareness of it at field-level, but despite this, knowledge of its practical application remains a work-in-progress. The LLA project has provided an important link between CHS policy on the one hand and agency practice on the other and in so doing has made a valuable contribution to helping staff to better understand the practical obligations to affected communities that are implicit in the CHS.

Where progress has been more variable has been in gaining NGO commitment to sustaining these important changes. Ironically, the field focus of the LLA which has been a key strength as it has offered important evidence of the value of the approach, it may also have been a weakness as it has had important implications for the variable uptake of the methodology; by not engaging in a more structured way with senior leaders, the case has not always been made at sufficiently senior levels for

[33] Erik Johnson, The Truth is on the Ground, 29 January 2016, available at http://www.sphereproject.org/blog/the-truth-is-on-the-ground-listen-learn-act-erik-johnson/

it to significantly transform agency practice. Despite this, there is the potential for some of the positive changes to be sustained both at a country level as well as the possibility that LLA may influence wider organisational practice – but these potential changes are aspirational and it will require sustained commitment to the concepts of CV™ methodology for them to move into practice.

4.2 Recommendations

The recommendations made hereunder recognise the important contribution that LLA has made in strengthening accountability to affected communities and seeks to strengthen and sustain these in pilot organisations and throughout the humanitarian community more broadly.

Recommendation 1: Humanitarian organisations must adopt mechanisms that routinely listen to communities across the project cycle and respond to their feedback. Donors should acknowledge and support these approaches.

Complaints response mechanisms offer only partial accountability and are reactive and yet they are frequently considered to meet NGO accountability needs. It is essential that the dominant accountability narrative in the sector is changed to promote accountability mechanisms that proactively seek feedback from a representative sample of the community across a broader range of accountabilities articulated in the CHS.

Recommendation 2: There is now ample evidence of the importance of strengthening humanitarian accountability but practice continues to be patchy. It is now essential that there is a convergence of policy and practice to give affected communities greater say in the assistance they receive.

The case for strengthening accountability to affected people has been made time and again and is underpinned by significant evidence. Despite this, many humanitarian organisations still fail to prioritise this essential aspect of their practice or implement approaches that achieve this in part. There continues to be scope for an accountability champion to go beyond pilot studies to adopt an approach that role models the step-change that is required across the sector. The LLA project offers an important blue-print for this.

Recommendation 3: To be responsive to community feedback, NGOs need to be able to make course corrections. Humanitarian organisations and donors need to acknowledge this and ensure that their funding and ways of working are responsive to changing needs. It will be important to communicate the flexibility that exists to field staff.

One of the challenges of '*always on'* accountability mechanisms is that feedback about satisfaction is no longer confined to mid-term or end-line evaluation but is received and analysed throughout the lifecycle of projects. In order to close the loop, humanitarian organisations not only need to be able to respond to feedback and complaints but they need to be able to make changes to their projects, processes and ways of working. Currently, the scope for doing this is constrained by internal organisational procedures and by concerns about a lack of donor flexibility where the feedback relates to budgets and inputs. It is now important for humanitarian organisations to examine internal organisational blockages to making course corrections and engage with donors with a view to clarifying what flexibility exists and where change is required.

Recommendation 4: While an emphasis on influencing accountability practice at the field-level is important, engagement at senior management level is necessary to bring about organisational change. There is scope for LLA champions to engage at that level.

As the LLA project comes to an end, it is essential that participating NGOs take stock of what has been achieved across the 15 organisations in the four countries and examines the potential that exists for a group of LLA champions to work together to seek to promote change within their organisations and more broadly across the sector.

Annex 1: Summary of agency participation in the project

1. Consortium organisations

- DanChurchAid
- Save the Children Denmark
- Ground Truth Solutions

2. Stakeholders

- The CHS Alliance
- Sphere

3. Country-level implementing organisations

Ethiopia

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

Lebanon

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

Mali

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

Nepal

- ECO –Nepal in collaboration with DanChurchAid
- Save the Children and Shree Swarna Integrated Community Development Center
- Plan International


Save the Children

GROUND TRUTH
SOLUTIONS

DCA
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