World Humanitarian Summit briefing: Using IATI to improve operational effectiveness in humanitarian assistance

About this paper

This briefing is based on a paper written for the Grand Bargain Sherpas[1]. Now their discussions have concluded, and there has been positive agreement that IATI is the best approach to transparency for humanitarian actors, that paper has been expanded to present an overview of IATI, its benefits and how organisations can start their journey towards publishing IATI data.

Part 1 provides a non-technical introduction to IATI, outlining its origins and benefits to the humanitarian community, as well as how the IATI Standard has been adapted to better meet their needs. **Part 2** explains how the IATI Standard works and offers some advice on publishing IATI data, for donors as well as civil society organisations. It also looks at some of the ways IATI data could be used to drive operational effectiveness, as well as transparency and accountability, and concludes by examining how IATI relates to some of the existing platforms used in the humanitarian community.

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[1] The Sherpas are representatives of 15 donors and 15 aid agencies.

Introduction

Almost every time there is a new humanitarian crisis, key actors on the ground complain that there is little or no data available on financial pledges and commitments made by donors, or on actual expenditure, until some time after the event, when it has ceased to be so useful to them. Better data on financing is essential for the improved operational efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian action; a lack of reliable, timely data, particularly in fast-onset emergencies, impairs planning, coordination and delivery. If all humanitarian actors published timely data to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) Standard, this would play a significant role in bridging this data gap, providing freely available data for anyone to track commitments, expenditure and disbursements throughout the delivery chain.

The UN Secretary-General's *Agenda for Humanity*[2] includes a commitment for all humanitarian actors to publish their disbursements and expenditures to the IATI Standard. Implementing this recommendation creates a unique opportunity for humanitarian actors to use an existing data standard that has recently been adapted to their needs, that is flexible and open to further adjustments, and which many humanitarian organisations are already using to publish data on their development funding. Using the IATI Standard to publish data on humanitarian action would help bridge the humanitarian–development divide, enabling data on both to be compared side by side, rather than in isolation.

The transparency commitments (below) set out in the Grand Bargain[3], ahead of the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), provide an opportunity for humanitarian actors to commit to publishing IATI data and to make it more accessible to data users through platforms and tools:

"The Grand Bargain commits us to identifying and implementing a shared open-data standard and common digital platform which will enhance transparency and decision-making. This will demonstrate how funding moves from donors down the transaction chain until it reaches the final responders and, where feasible, affected people. The 'do no harm' principle will be safeguarded, both in terms of politicised context and protection concerns. The International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) is currently the most advanced option for a shared open-data standard. Consideration will be given to concerns expressed by partners regarding its functionality, but we recognise that it is better to develop an existing standard than to start a parallel process. The Financial Tracking Service (FTS) is a well-established, voluntary information platform for recording international humanitarian aid contributions, which we accept needs further improvements.

Aid organisations and donors commit to:

(1) Publish timely, transparent, harmonised and open high-quality data on humanitarian funding within two years of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul. We consider IATI to provide a basis for the purpose of a common standard."

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[2] The Annex to the UN Secretary-General's report, *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility*.
[3] A call by the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing for collaborative efficiency between donors and aid actors negotiated in the run up to the summit.

1. IATI and humanitarian actors – an introduction

1.1 What is IATI?

The International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) is a voluntary, multi-stakeholder transparency initiative, bringing together developing countries, providers of development cooperation and humanitarian assistance, civil society organisations (CSOs) and independent experts.

At the centre of IATI is a Standard – a framework for publishing open data[4] on development cooperation and humanitarian assistance in a comparable format. IATI is not a platform or a body that publishers must report to.

IATI grew out of the aid effectiveness processes launched with the Paris Declaration and was launched in 2008 at the Accra High Level Forum. The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) became the first publisher in January 2011, with more joining in the run up to the Busan High Level Forum, where aid actors committed to publishing to IATI by the end of 2015. As of May 2016, more than 450 organisations publish to the Standard, ranging from governments and multilaterals to CSOs, foundations and private sector consultancies.

IATI is governed by a Board representing the diversity of IATI's membership. Board members come from development cooperation providers (Canada (Chair), UNICEF), partner countries (Bangladesh (Vice Chair), Madagascar), CSOs (Bond, Publish What You Fund) and the IATI technical community (Chair of the Technical Advisory Group).

1.2 What are the benefits of IATI for humanitarian actors?

Donors, recipient governments, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs – international, national and local) all need comprehensive, up-to-date information about the range of resources provided in crisis situations. Parliamentarians, CSOs and affected populations also need reliable and comparable information on resource allocation in order to hold their governments to account. There have been repeated calls for better data on humanitarian financing for some time, particularly from the humanitarian community itself. The key factor is **timeliness** – it has not been possible to access sufficient 'real time' data in order to improve operational effectiveness, inform resource planning and management, and prevent duplication of effort, particularly during fast-onset emergencies. While the latest upgrade to the IATI Standard makes daily reporting possible, it is *not* necessary for all humanitarian actors to republish IATI data on a daily basis. The priority is for them to update their data whenever there is a change in circumstances, for example a new pledge, commitment or disbursement.

In a growing number of contexts, flows beyond humanitarian assistance play a critical role in crisis prevention and response. For example, in the recent Ebola crisis, longer-term health-related development funding to affected countries was vital alongside humanitarian support for immediate response. IATI covers all international development cooperation flows (including humanitarian, technical cooperation) from a broad range of actors, and thereby allows humanitarian assistance –

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[4] Open data is the idea that some data should be freely available to everyone to use and republish as they wish, without restrictions from copyright, patents or other mechanisms of control.

which represented less than 6% of all international financial flows going to the largest humanitarian recipients in 2013 – to be considered in the wider resource-related context and helps to bridge the humanitarian–development divide.
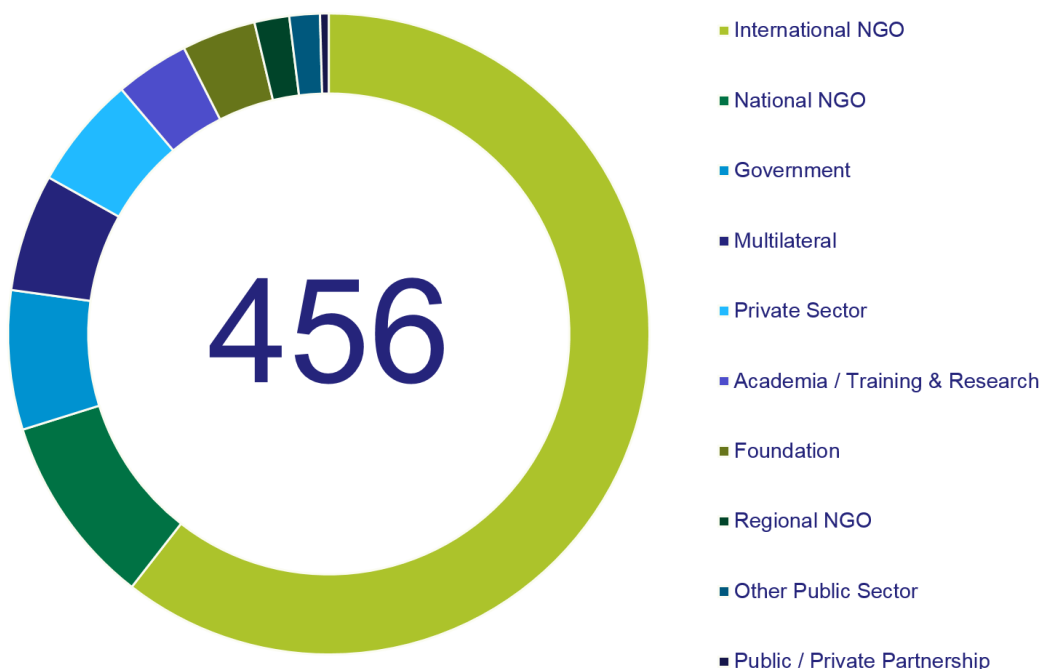
Data users want to compare information in the same format, rather than by looking in different places for different pieces of data. They also want to see humanitarian assistance in the context of other resources and in the wider picture of development flows to the same crises. This is particularly crucial in protracted and recurrent crises and is a key part of conversations within the Grand Bargain on bridging the humanitarian–development divide.

1.3   Who is publishing IATI data?

As of May 2016, over 450 organisations are publishing data to the IATI Standard (see Figure 1). These include bilateral and multilateral donors, foundations, CSOs and private sector consultancies. Key humanitarian donors and agencies currently publishing their development funding to IATI include the US, the UK, the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO), Sweden and Japan, as well as the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)'s Financial Tracking Service (FTS), UNICEF, the World Food Programme (WFP), Save the Children and Oxfam. A full list of publishers can be found on the IATI Registry.

The fact that so many of these organisations are already publishing to the IATI Standard presents a real opportunity for their humanitarian data to be included in their datasets; in some cases it is already being published – for example, Global Affairs Canada already includes all its humanitarian expenditure in its IATI data. Expertise and experience (policy, operational and technical) already exists within these organisations and can be harnessed to open up information on humanitarian flows using IATI.

The 456 organisations publishing data to the IATI Standard, by type.

- International NGO
- National NGO
- Government
- Multilateral
- Private Sector
- Academia / Training & Research
- Foundation
- Regional NGO
- Other Public Sector
- Public / Private Partnership

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

While the IATI Standard was originally developed with traditional development flows in mind, it has since been modified to better meet the needs of other actors, as well as adapting to the changing external environment; for example, we recently added new fields so that publishers can indicate which of the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) their activities relate to.

Here are some of the ways that IATI has been modified for humanitarian data following consultation with FTS and other humanitarian stakeholders to ensure that the new fields would meet the specific data needs of humanitarian reporters and data users:

- Organisations can already publish data on humanitarian activities using version 2.02 of the IATI Standard, which includes new fields specifically developed for humanitarian assistance
- These new features include the ability to mark activities as 'humanitarian' and to tag them to specific crises and sectors
- IATI has always provided a streamlined framework for daily updates of financial and logistical information to be exchanged automatically between donors, implementing agencies and coordination structures – something particularly pertinent to data needs in fast-onset crises
- Results data and needs assessments can also be published to IATI, activities can be tagged to particular SDGs, and more general activity-level information can also be provided

Further adjustments can easily be made to the Standard, based on feedback from publishers and data users.

2. Implementing IATI for humanitarian actors

2.1   How does IATI work?

Organisations publish raw data in the IATI format (XML), in line with the Standard, using one of the existing publishing tools (see section 2.3) or by developing a download or automatic feed from their own internal systems. This data is hosted on the publisher's own website and a link is posted in the IATI Registry, which acts as a library of links so that anyone with an internet connection can access the data.

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

The FTS already uses IATI data and has been piloting the use of data from specific publishers within its system. Some existing platforms driven by IATI data include the UK Department for International Development's Dev Tracker, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs' openaid.nl, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency's openaid.se, Open Aid Search, Open UN-Habitat and d-portal. This is not an exhaustive list and there are many other examples.

Eventually, assuming that all actors are publishing good-quality data, financial flows will be traceable through the implementation chain, as money passes from one organisation to another.

2.2   I want to publish IATI data – where do I start?

Preparation is the key to producing good IATI data and ensuring that publication is embedded in your organisation's business processes. Investing time in the discussions and decisions at the beginning of the process will bear fruit further down the line, making the actual publication of IATI data much more straightforward.

The good news is that there are resources and guidance to help publishers through each step of the process and the IATI Technical Team are on hand to work closely with publishers, supporting and advising according to your specific requirements and business model. The Technical Team have a wealth of experience working with a wide range of organisations and can bring examples of how similar organisations to yours have approached IATI, or connect you with peers to share learning.

The publishing process usually involves the following steps:

- **Prepare your organisation** – What resources will you need to publish and what sorts of issues should be considered when moving to become more transparent?
- **Establish publishing policies** – Decide who, what, when and how information will be published. Finance, programmes, IT, legal, human resources and communications functions will usually need to be involved in these discussions.

- **Consider the data** – Establish which specific fields from the IATI Standard will be used and whether you will need to exclude any information, for example to protect staff or partners' information, or for security or commercial reasons.
- **Select a publishing tool** – Decide what publishing tool is the best choice for your organisation or whether you can build a feed directly from your internal systems.
- **Produce your data files** – Make sure appropriate change and quality control procedures are in place.
- **Publish your data files** – Update the IATI Registry and host the data files on your own website.
- **Update your data** – How will you ensure your data is regularly updated once you have initially published?

2.3   What about NGOs and CSOs?

Many existing IATI publishers are NGOs ranging in scale from local to international[5]. In many respects, it's easier for a small- or medium-scale NGO to publish IATI data: they have comparatively less data than a government, multilateral or large international NGO; they don't have complex internal systems that need to be aligned to the Standard; there are *free* publishing tools that are specifically designed for their needs (e.g. AidStream and the soon-to-be-launched IATI Studio); and sign-off processes are less likely to involve multiple levels within their organisation. Small and medium NGOs can start publishing almost straight away using a free online tool and some web guidance.

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

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

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

The time investment will be greater for larger and more complex organisations but the commitment will be weeks not years, and thousands not millions of dollars.

2.4 How could IATI data on humanitarian assistance be used to improve operational effectiveness?

Good quality, comprehensive and up-to-date IATI data could provide a single automated data source for existing and new platforms, reducing the reporting burden while ensuring a ready availability of information.

Moreover, internal reports, websites and accountability dashboards could be driven by IATI data, providing a rich source of information for decision- and policy-makers. The availability of a wealth of financial and activity data, along with needs assessments, could improve evidence-based decision-making and, thus, enhance operational effectiveness both in the field and at HQ level.

Additionally, IATI data could be a vital source of information for external audiences, such as researchers, or used for reports to donors and other stakeholders. Much of the reporting information required of grantees could be provided by IATI data, reducing the need for agencies to produce separate reports for each of their donors – something that is already being explored by a small group of donors and NGO platforms. Reduced reporting requirements across the delivery chain would also help to reduce transaction costs.

Examples of some of the ways in which IATI data can feed existing systems and platforms.
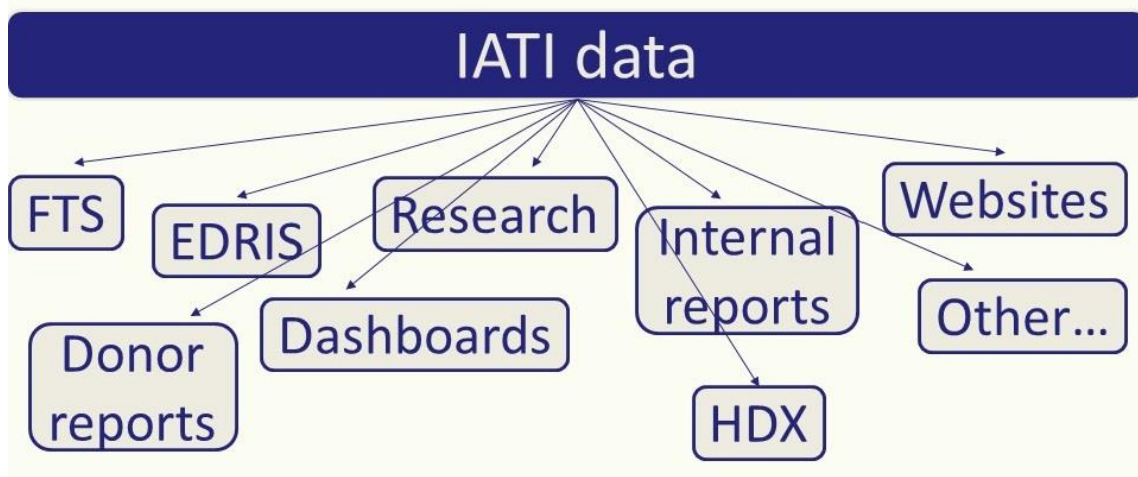
HDX: Humanitarian Data Exchange

If publishers update their data on a frequent basis then this real-time data could be used to create a picture of the existing and changing resource landscape, and (in tandem with needs assessments) drive decision-making in fast-onset and rapidly developing emergencies.

## 2.5 How does IATI relate to existing systems and platforms?

IATI is not intended to replace, for example, the FTS or the European Emergency Disaster Response Information System (EDRIS), but to provide a much more efficient and effective way for these platforms to automatically access good-quality, raw data, rather than having to collect it from each

reporter in turn and manually enter and manipulate it. IATI data can provide the raw material to feed both existing and emerging systems and platforms; it is the core source on which other platforms are built and can answer the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing's report's call for a "specific time-bound commitment by the international community to provide open and transparent data, including on transaction costs, published on a single global platform with IATI … data at its core". Crucially, IATI can free up resources to focus on data analysis and curation, rather than data collection.

IATI data is also being used at country level, with some countries already integrating IATI data into their aid information management systems (AIMS). For example, the government of Myanmar's AIMS, Mohinga, was the first system built specifically to align with IATI data and enables officials and the public to track aid coming into Myanmar and assess its impact. In Bangladesh, work is underway to build an import module for their AIMS, which will allow government officials to access IATI data alongside other information they have collected.

Process diagram of how IATI data is published and used. The list of platforms is not exhaustive.
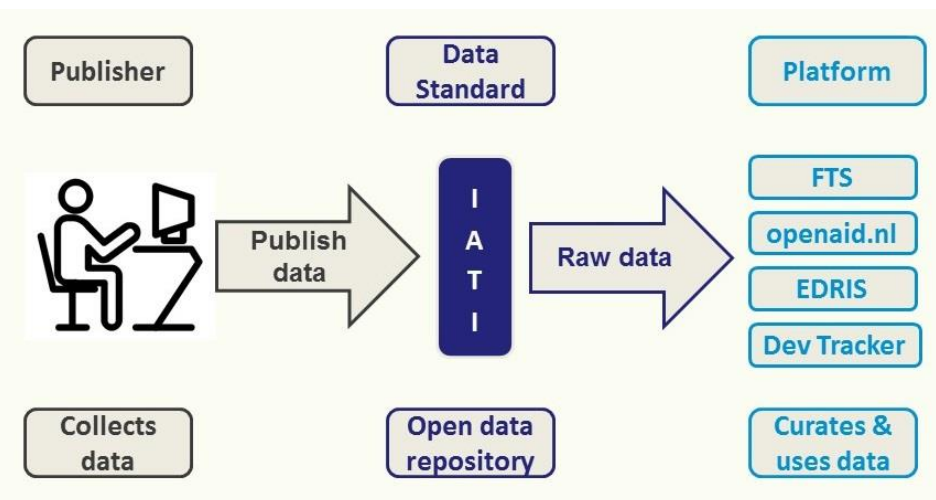
2.6   What about data quality?

The IATI Standard offers a format and a structure for providing useful, usable data. However, the actual usability and usefulness of IATI data is entirely dependent on the quality of the data that's published. Data quality is improving all the time, with some publishers already providing high-quality data, but there is still a long way to go. There is much more that donors and humanitarian agencies can do to improve their reporting of timely, high-quality data to IATI. The Grand Bargain commitment for humanitarian actors to publish IATI data should help to generate further momentum, as will users of the data providing feedback on its usability.

The IATI Dashboard is a useful resource for those who want to find out more about how existing IATI publishers are progressing on data quality. If you're new to the Dashboard, have a look at this blog post that outlines how to assess the quality of each publisher's data according to the four dimensions – timeliness, forward-looking, comprehensiveness and coverage.

2.7 Where can I find more information?

More information on IATI can be found online at the following locations:

- aidtransparency.net – Information on the initiative, news, governance, how to join.
- iatistandard.org – Detailed technical information on the Standard, code lists, schema etc.
- support@iatistandard.org – Helpdesk run by the IATI Technical Team to provide one-to-one, bespoke support to organisations wishing to publish IATI data.
- Dashboard – Statistics to assess the quality of existing IATI data, as well as a wealth of other information.
- d-portal – Search IATI data by recipient country or publisher.

To arrange a meeting at the World Humanitarian Summit to discuss IATI, please contact Joni Hillman (IATI Secretariat) via email at joni.hillman@devinit.org.

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