

Ground Truth Solutions 2020–2025

A strategy to bring lasting change
to the humanitarian space



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We envision a humanitarian system that fully recognises the agency of the people it exists to serve, and is responsive to their views, preferences, and needs.

We support this vision in our daily work by ensuring the priorities of people affected by crisis are systematically considered in humanitarian action, from individual projects and organisations to complex responses and system-wide humanitarian reform.



Less Talk, More Action



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Participation done right will lead to higher quality aid, better value for money, and increased acceptance of humanitarian action.

The case for sustained community engagement in crisis management has been made with devastating clarity. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown far too many people, far too late, that understanding community perceptions can be lifesaving. But for too long, the aid sector has invoked empty variations of the mantra that our action should be more accountable to the people it serves. Ambitious commitments were put forward in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s, enlarged upon as lessons learned from the Indian Ocean tsunami response in the early 2000s, and improved and formalised as part of global humanitarian reform initiatives such as the introduction of the Cluster System in 2005, the Transformative Agenda of 2010, and the participation revolution, called for in the Grand Bargain of 2016.

Well-meaning rhetoric, though, no matter how earnest, cannot tip the balance towards more accountable and participatory humanitarian action. People on the receiving end of aid still have little say over how it is provided, and none of the reforms have achieved the change required to establish aid recipients' influence at all levels of decision-making.

Past commitments to heed the voices of crisis-affected people have been voluntary and largely ineffective in influencing the way decisions are taken or power exercised. When we ask affected people on the ground about the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, they tell us plainly that these efforts have not worked. Why? The aid sector continues to be supply-driven, focused on

upward accountability to donors, and centred around the mandates and preferences of individual agencies that are keen to demonstrate their value to both their funders and the public.

Our plan through 2025 is to take on the challenge of bringing real change to the humanitarian space – change that is more urgently needed than ever – to improve the lives of people in need through more responsive action.

Our goal in developing this strategy is that accountability to crisis-affected people is no longer a list of subordinate activities to roll out or an add-on to deploy in certain instances. Neither will we treat it as the holy grail. We simply and firmly believe that participation done right will lead to higher quality aid, better value for money, and increased acceptance of humanitarian action among those supposed to benefit.

Firmly rooted in this conviction, we focus on practical, systematic improvements to programme design and monitoring based on robust research and evidence. We do so through regular consultations and by using people's feedback to measure progress. This involves facilitating interactive dialogue between aid providers and the communities they serve, and supporting practitioners to make their systems more conducive to people-centered aid.

We will focus externally on how to influence the most relevant actors during increasingly challenging times, and internally on how to constantly improve our ways of working. Based on our experience during the pandemic,

we are determined to experiment at the margins and learn new ways to support community engagement from afar. In doing so, we hope to play our part in lifting the rhetoric around localisation into a more practical realm.

Ground Truth Solutions' success is as a catalyst for change, and we are as strategic in our partnerships as we are in our activities. Without shifts in policy and practice on the part of donors, humanitarians, and authorities, the change we seek will not happen. We call on those who share this vision to join us and multiply these efforts.

Changing the System



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When the system changes, listening to the voices of the most vulnerable is more important than ever.

Ground Truth Solutions was founded in 2012, based on two traditions of inquiry that continue to drive the core of our work: participatory development thinking and the business world's emphasis on customers' perceptions of service.

We have tested and proven our methods in tens of thousands of conversations with people affected by crisis in dozens of countries. This research has provided valuable insight into how to improve the provision of many kinds of aid, based on the experience of those at the receiving end of humanitarian action. We have also conducted thousands of consultations with aid providers, seeking the perspectives of staff working for both local and international organisations, highlighting the stark contrast in how relief workers and aid recipients view success. Experience has taught us that attempts to understand community views by proxy do not work.

We work with a range of organisations that are eager to learn and improve based on feedback from the people they serve. These include UN agencies such as UNICEF, UN OCHA, the World Food Programme, and UNHCR; humanitarian country teams; the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement; INGOs such as Welthungerhilfe and the International Rescue Committee; as well as local organisations such as the Empowerment Centre for Women in Afghanistan.

We are proud to see our findings inform changes within aid agencies and to be included in response-wide monitoring frameworks, where they spur action. Demand for feedback is also strong at the global level, which has

allowed us to deepen our collaborations with the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the German Federal Foreign Office, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the foreign ministries of The Netherlands and Norway, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). We also share community feedback at global gatherings such as the High-Level Humanitarian Segment of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the annual Humanitarian Networks and Partnership Week (HPNW), and through our active involvement in Grand Bargain workstreams, the Results Group 2 on Accountability and Inclusion, through our membership of Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) and Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network, as well as at individual briefings with donors and relevant coalitions (such as the CHS and HQAI) and in documents such as the Global Humanitarian Overview.

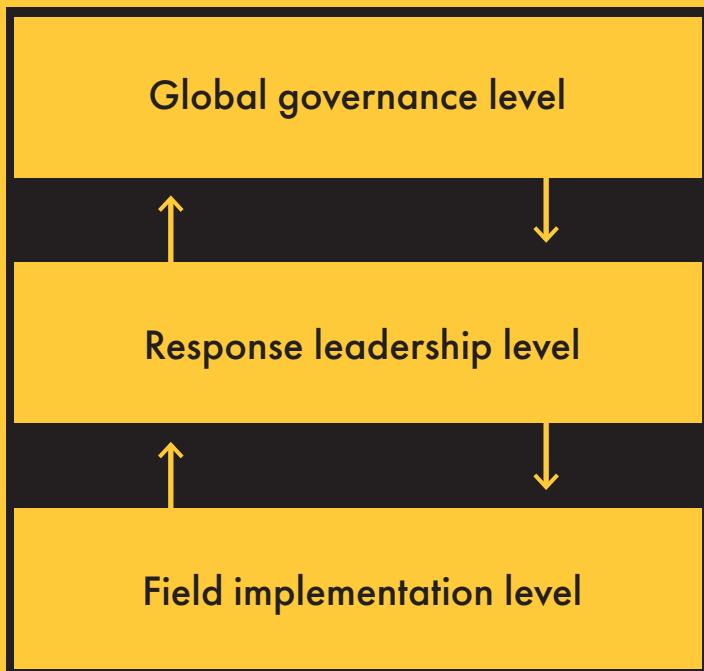
The many challenges thrown at us by the COVID-19 pandemic have also presented opportunities to self-reflect. While continuing to push for system-level reform, we must be more ready to adapt when the system changes on its own. At such times, listening to the voices of the most vulnerable is more important than ever. Our original focus on participatory development and perceptions is complemented by four fundamental realisations that underpin this strategy:

One: Through more agile, contextualised research approaches, we will support and challenge aid actors to do better.

Ground Truth Solutions was set up to help aid actors listen to and use feedback from crisis-affected people. Over the years, we have adjusted our mission to help affected people influence aid provision. This difference is more than a change in language. It is based on the realisation that despite positive outliers and an increasing number of accountability champions, aid agencies face strong disincentives to be honest about feedback data, to acknowledge shortcomings, or to coordinate their communications with communities. When they do embrace feedback and listening, they tend to do so in a disjointed way, setting up individual mechanisms that return fragmented feedback. This is not sufficient to tip the balance towards more accountable aid, and it makes the user experience unsatisfactory for those on the receiving end.

Constant nudging and championing of data is required to get relevant actors to pay enough attention to feedback and to coordinate their listening approaches. This requires us to go beyond providing data and analysis, and then simply expect agencies to act on what we provide. As we have seen from Burkina Faso to Somalia, close and continuing support of country teams and individual champions is one of the most effective means of promoting change.

Encouraged by this dynamic and inspired by ongoing conversations with aid recipients, our strategy is to make our country-level engagement smarter, working strategically with key partners, and getting more creative with our research methods. We will do this while protecting and capitalising on our independence, functioning as an honest broker and an effective advocate for people affected by crisis.



Two: We will achieve change on multiple levels.

We now know that feedback from aid recipients and affected people cannot simply be shared with decision-makers in an unfiltered manner but must be analysed and understood to be effectively represented across the three major levels of humanitarian action: at the field implementation level, at the response leadership level, and at the global governance level (Figure below).

All three are inter-dependent and need to be addressed simultaneously for maximum impact. Progress at the global level can lead to better humanitarian projects on the ground, for example, but only if implementing agencies have the skills and resources to improve their practice. Meanwhile, individual agencies can raise the bar for accountability in their own programmes, but this will have little overall effect if others do not follow suit.

Our primary focus is at the response leadership level, analysing what combination of support will best enable improved accountability to and engagement with crisis affected people. From this level as the starting point, we will systematically work to inform global policies, as well as help to improve the work of individual agencies and projects.

Policymakers at the global level can benefit from both information provided by affected people and the logic behind our methodology – as well as the iterative improvements it yields – as they formulate and roll out system-wide reforms. This means the reforms are more likely to be demand-driven, delivering better results for affected people. We will develop a broader range of analytical tools and information products to shed light on our findings and provide the basis for tailored analysis. We aim for these to include more timely, frequent analysis, with sharper focus on how to translate the data into action. We will use our existing data more strategically to inform and refine the way we design surveys and conduct analysis. We will enhance our global feedback database, which brings together pertinent data from our surveys and dialogues as a public good.

We will also support individual agencies in acting on the data we collect and analyse, helping them to translate findings into action in their own programmes through regular feedback loops and dialogue. We have developed a menu of activities – from diagnostics to co-designing feedback systems – to help organisations use feedback and track progress against their objectives. We will continue to adapt these tools as the world changes around us.

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Ground Truth Solutions: Levels of impact



Level 1: Global governance

OUTCOMES

Global humanitarian policy incentivises people-centred programme design and implementation, placing the perspective of affected people at the centre of humanitarian action.



Level 2: Response leadership

OUTCOMES

Planning, funding, management, implementation, and monitoring of humanitarian responses at the country level are strongly influenced by, and adapted to, the perspectives and priorities of affected people.



Level 3: Field implementation

OUTCOMES

Local and international humanitarian actors manage their performance using feedback and insight from affected people while enabling their target groups to express their views through ongoing dialogue.

Three: Through our focus on country-wide reform, we will reach a tipping point towards more accountable humanitarian action.

As the new decade begins, we are at an inflection point in the way humanitarian actors approach the accountability and quality agenda. Rhetoric has resulted in a proliferation of feedback mechanisms, but not in systemic change. The humanitarian system is a messy, loosely controlled ecosystem, made up of diverse actors with individual agendas and freedoms who tend to adapt their behaviour depending on the actions of others. If the right actors adopt the right changes, then the needle moves.

Globally, a trend towards collective accountability is palpable, and the tipping point from tick-the-box collective mechanisms to systemic changes leading to real improvements for affected people is now within reach. It has been further spurred by the COVID-19 epidemic, when the sudden need for remote support brought to light glaring gaps in agencies' community engagement capacity and localisation claims. However, achieving change now requires systemic shifts in a critical mass of countries.

Our work with humanitarian country teams (HCTs) will continue to support the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) so teams are better able to develop, implement, and monitor response plans that consider the views, priorities, and feedback of affected communities.

Monitoring targets based on people's perceptions will surface the quality of responses and how to improve them. Learning based on feedback will inform course correction and encourage more effective, accountable action. This will require deeper engagement, further investigation, and piloting new research approaches by our teams. At the same time, we will work with a small group of partners in each country who can leverage our findings and maximise impact. These partners include donors, local organisations, the United Nations, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and INGOS that aspire to increased uptake of – and improvement on – our findings.

In countries where we are already active as well as in future operations, we will ensure that our work with individual agencies is linked to broader system-wide objectives, which in turn will increase in ambition. We will work harder to include local and national agencies.

We will review our geographic focus periodically, considering evolving circumstances including new health, natural disaster, and human-made complex emergencies. Three factors will guide our selection of countries and will influence whether we scale activities up or down:

- the openness of humanitarian country teams and key actors to enhanced accountability to affected people;
- the scope of crises, in terms of number of affected people, overall vulnerability analysis and available

funding;

- synergies with existing activities, which ensure value for money.

We will always work where we feel it is most ethical to do so. We will weigh the potential benefits of adding new countries against the advantages of deepening our impact in those places where we already have a presence. We recognise the fact that most people affected by humanitarian crises live in protracted settings, and it takes several years to reach the deep, lasting change we want to see on the ground through our work. We have also seen how health emergencies and the vagaries of the climate crisis can shift priorities quickly.

The depth of engagement in-country varies depending on the demand for our data and findings, access, funding cycles, and the duration of a humanitarian response.

We strive for comprehensive engagement in the countries where we work. We push for longer-term planning and funding cycles in order to develop a more contextualised and bespoke approach to in-country work.

Four: Amplifying the voices of the most vulnerable, we will look beyond humanitarian action.

We are acutely aware that humanitarian action does not exist in a void. The methodologies we have developed and the approach outlined above are equally powerful in fostering improvements in crucial services, like health care, which can sustain social cohesion in fragile states.

The same goes for adapting to climate change, which has long been a potent driver of the conditions that provoke the breakdowns that require humanitarian action.

The reasons for adding these topics to our strategic focus are threefold. First, they provide opportunities to address growing vulnerabilities in fragile and conflict affected states. Second, they all require systematic community engagement. And third, they are crucial to addressing some of the root causes of the fragility that leads to humanitarian disasters.

We Need Strong Partnerships and the Right Culture to Grow



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Two factors inform how we identify partners: their alignment with our vision, and the leverage they can offer in achieving it.

Strong partnerships

The fundamental ethos of our work relies on actions taken by others. Our partnerships have enabled us to change processes, policies, and behaviour across a range of programmes and activities, despite being a small team with a modest budget. To be an effective agent of change into the future, we need strong allies at all levels of decision-making. Two factors inform how we identify partners: their alignment with our vision, and the leverage they can offer in achieving it.

First and foremost, our partners include a complex ecosystem of actors in-country, whose trust in our work enables changes to programmes, systems, and structures. We will work more intentionally to support governments and local disaster management or health authorities in countries impacted by crises. The exact combination of partners will continue to be determined locally in each context. Developing a more continuous, deeper understanding of countries will help us to more precisely identify the key agents for change on the ground – national NGOs and other local partners – that are likely to have the greatest impact.

In government-led efforts – in the humanitarian space as well as health and climate change – we will continue to partner with states and involve them in all phases of our work.

In areas of ongoing conflict, we will continue to be mindful of the political complexities involved and to explore

partnerships with actors who subscribe to the humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence, impartiality, and humanity.

However, we will not be able to make the changes we want to see without commitments from institutional donors, who still supply most humanitarian funding globally and exercise considerable influence over other actors. That is why we will deepen, grow, or add partnerships with innovative donor agencies, helping them to maximise their influence on accountable aid. Rather than calling for requirements imposed on grantees to merely collect feedback, or simplistic ratings of implementing organisations based on arbitrary criteria, we will work with leading donors to continuously optimise their operations. While mindful of the political and bureaucratic challenges involved, we are convinced that real change is possible if the right donors put their weight behind this.

At the global governance level, we will continue to contribute to Inter-Agency Standing Committee Results Groups, global UN coordination bodies, and Grand Bargain workstreams. We will keep partnering with peer organisations that share our values, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) Alliance (building on the innovative approach of including perception indicators in Humanitarian Response Plans, which we piloted together) and others, and we will explore additional collaborations globally.

The focus of our relationship with the Red Cross movement will shift towards greater response-wide impact,

as will our relationship with REACH. We will work more closely with national organisations and select UN agencies, recognising the leading roles they play in response leadership and coordination, inter-cluster coordination structures, and individual clusters. Our pilot programmes will see us work more closely with national authorities, whose action and policymaking on various health and climate related issues will impact countless lives.

Ground Truth Solutions will continue to deploy its services during emergencies as part of the H2H network.

Making a more concerted effort to ensure that de-velopment and community service actors have access to and can act on our data – notably our sizeable datasets on resilience – will be a critical element in linking the hu-manitarian-development nexus.

Organisational growth

In the years since our launch in 2012, the GTS team has grown to include more than 20 individuals, each of whom brings their unique talents, diverse background, and tireless commitment to our work. We have established small country offices in Chad (2018) and the Central African Republic (2019). In line with our growth trajectory, and in order to implement an integrated approach in our focus countries while strengthening the headquarters in Vienna, our annual budget will need to roughly double by 2025.

We have learned that funding for our public good activities is central to our ability to effect change in the system more broadly. From the deeper analysis we can offer thanks to our Humanitarian Voice Index database to speaking engagements, communications, and on-going policy advice to decision-makers based on our research findings, we have realised that some of the most valuable

opportunities for impact arise outside the scope of individual projects. We have also learned that investments in methodology and advocacy pay off in positive outcomes, as do investments in long-term staff development.

To maximise impact, we need to be strategic, not reactive. Through 2025, we will prioritise four strands of strategic activities, with the help of core funding:

At the global governance level, we will provide deeper analysis of aggregate feedback data, tailor advice to decision-makers, and expand our involvement in policy processes. Our analysis will be smarter, more targeted, more frequent, and driven more by our mission than evolving demand from partners. Our global analytical team will be bigger, more experienced and better equipped to support, via both remote and in-country methods, novel ways to garner and understand community perceptions.

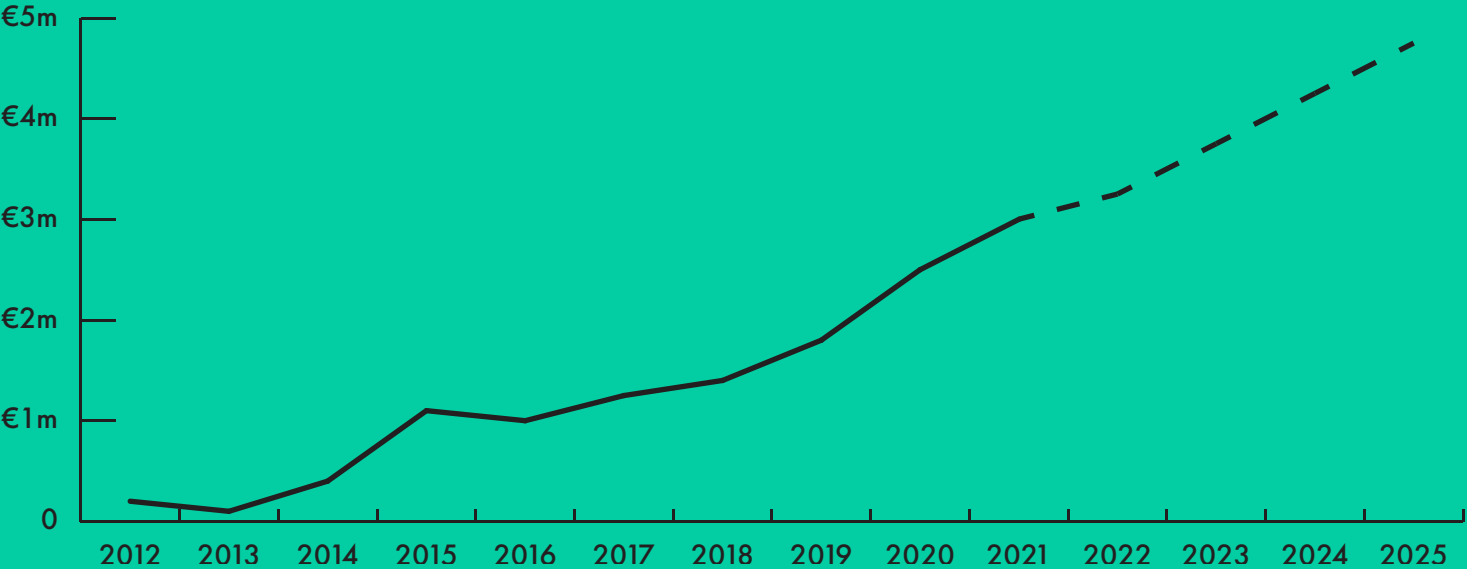
At the response leadership level, we will dedicate core funds to systematic feedback collection and accountability enhancement, even where in-country funding is lacking. Similarly, core resources will be used to ensure continuity in crisis contexts where we have time-series data going back several survey rounds, but where in-country funding shortfalls mean we risk missing a round of data collection and dialogue with affected people.

We will dedicate resources to strengthening accountability and developing the capacities of national actors as well as small NGOs that otherwise would not have access to our methods and findings.

Finally, we continue to learn about areas where we may expand our impact, such as health system resilience and climate change mitigation and adaptation, via pilot programmes and ongoing research.

In the light of these strategic priorities, our target is to receive around one-third of our total annual budget

Total funding 2012–2025 (in million Euros)



as core funding. Furthermore, we will advocate for longer timelines on project funding in our target countries. This will provide the flexibility to influence the system and to further professionalise and expand our organisation.

We will reinforce our human resources and financial management functions to match a growing portfolio of projects; we will then hire additional programme staff to bolster our in-country support.

We are committed to excellence and a diversity of talents and experiences in all our hiring decisions, and we aim for future growth to include individuals from crisis-affected countries. As we grow, we will attempt to reduce our per capita environmental footprint, travelling less and adhering to a new, evolving climate change policy.

Ground Truth Solutions, which began as a Keystone Accountability programme, was established as an Austrian association in 2016. It has since been granted international non-governmental organisation (INGO) status by the Austrian Foreign Office. We will continue to seek quasi-international organisation (QIO) status, and in the meantime, we will diversify the association's board of directors. We will also set up a diverse Advisory Council to provide expertise, guidance, and support in furthering our impact in the future.

A culture of excellence

We are aware of the challenges inherent in driving cultural change in a range of activities, and we are equally conscious of the environment we cultivate in our own organisation. This is particularly important for the projected growth period over the next years, ensuring that Ground Truth Solutions can attract and retain a diversity of talent while delivering exceptional impact.

To this end, a series of internal workshops have allowed us develop a culture statement that guides how we work and six virtues we aspire to:

1. We are honest. Whether it is about our take on the state of the humanitarian system or the limits of our own work. We pride ourselves on an open internal feedback culture.
2. We are curious. We do not know it all. So we ask questions and seek better ways to do things. We learn from affected people, we learn from colleagues and partners, we learn from external thinkers.
3. We are accountable. Once we have listened, we decide. Our goal is excellence because affected people, aid agencies and donors rely on us to use scarce funds to drive change for the better.
4. We are disciplined. When we say we will do something, we do it. We don't just do it quickly – we do it well. We don't just do it the way we did it last time – we do it the best way.

5. We are a dream team. All our colleagues are extraordinary at what they do and collaborate effectively. Where this isn't the case, we help colleagues to be their best. Where necessary, we will respectfully end the collaboration.

6. We are bold. We approach our work purposefully and without fear. We are always ready to challenge beliefs and anecdotes – including our own – with facts.

Measuring Our Own Performance



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Acknowledging the complexity of social change, we will get smarter about how we measure and track the outcomes of our work.

We recognise that the type of change we are seeking cannot be easily quantified or tracked in linear result chains and logical frameworks. We will resist the temptation to merely count outputs, such as reports published or surveys conducted. Similarly, we will not invest all our time in measuring our end goal of system reform, which may take years to realise, and which will be the result of many organisations' work, not just our own. Instead, we will focus more on measuring intermediate outcomes; things that we can realistically expect to influence in the course of our work and within individual projects.

Where we have previously relied on citations and informal feedback from humanitarian partners to gauge how and where our work is making a difference, we will be more structured in documenting evidence in both qualitative (narrative) and quantitative metrics.

Our new, iterative outcomes-tracking process will help us to better understand our effectiveness. Not only will this enable us to demonstrate the results of our work more persuasively, but it will also provide us with critical learn-

ing and allow us to improve what we are doing and how. This ongoing learning component within our measurement framework will be critical to our success moving forward. Our approach to monitoring outcomes will be flexible and simple, recognising that our work is varied and measuring cannot distract us from delivering. It is important we share the findings from our measurement framework externally and that we are open about our failures as well as our successes.

In each of our projects and for the organisation as a whole, we will track a small number of key performance indicators and interpret them in conjunction with more qualitative evidence. The table below shows a selection of indicators we will use for individual programmes and our organisation as a whole.

This new measurement framework will be operational from 2021 and adjusted throughout the strategy period as required. A deeper review of the measurement framework will happen half-way into the current strategy period and at its end.

CONSTITUENT GROUP	POSSIBLE INDICATORS
People affected by crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of respondents who would answer future surveys • Qualitative feedback on survey process from enumerators and respondents
Individual partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of partners who would recommend working with GTS • Their feedback on why / why not • % of partners who have changed their way of working because of feedback collected, including sustainable improvements of their own feedback practice • Examples of changes made
Global humanitarian actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of respondents (to annual survey amongst key actors) who see GTS as providing major contribution to more accountable humanitarian action • Examples of contributions, potential to improve
Ground Truth Solutions staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of staff who think GTS is living its values
Target audience for research uptake	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of web hits and document downloads • % of recipients opening email and links • List of speaking engagements, external publications, references made to GTS findings in action plans and policies

Photo sources

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Published in April 2020. Minor revisions made in April 2021.
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