

Improving humanitarian transparency with the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) and the UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service (FTS)

Background paper

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Written by Development Initiatives (with the support of the IATI Secretariat) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), on behalf of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Humanitarian Financing Task Team (HFTT).



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Introduction

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

Grand Bargain commitments on greater transparency

The Grand Bargain commitment states the following:

Aid organisations and donors commit to:

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

Implementing the Grand Bargain commitments on transparency provides an unprecedented opportunity for increased political momentum and practical action to improve the quality, availability and use of data on crisis-related financing. This offers potential benefits to all involved, from the donors that fund humanitarian programmes and the international organisations and national actors that implement them, to those who receive assistance on the ground.

Within this commitment, the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) Standard has been identified as a common format for publishing data on humanitarian activities. The commitment also highlights the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)'s Financial Tracking Service (FTS) as a well-established, voluntary information platform for recording international humanitarian contributions, albeit requiring further improvements.

In this paper we introduce the purpose and functionality of both IATI and FTS and respond to questions that have previously been raised by humanitarian stakeholders. It should be read alongside other resources that provide more technical detail on how to publish to IATI, report to FTS and access IATI and other data.

This background paper has been produced by Development Initiatives (with the support of the IATI Secretariat) and UN OCHA on behalf of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Humanitarian Financing Task Team (HFTT). It is one component of the HFTT's broader workstream on financial transparency.

Frequently asked questions

Why is transparency of humanitarian financing important?

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

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

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

What is IATI?

Established in 2008, the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) emerged as part of a wider movement aimed at increasing development effectiveness and mutual accountability. It provides transparent information on development and humanitarian resources and brings together a community of governments, multilateral donors, partner countries, civil society organisations (CSOs) and private sector organisations.

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

At the centre of IATI is the ‘IATI [Standard](#)’ – a framework for publishing open data³ on development cooperation and humanitarian assistance in a comparable format. Publication to the IATI Standard is voluntary, and publishers have control of the data they choose to put in the public domain. It is nevertheless worth noting that some bilateral donors require their implementing partners to publish to the IATI Standard as a condition of funding.

Currently, all data published to the IATI Registry is accessible and available for public use, interpretation and analysis. Concerns about security and commercial confidentiality are common to many publishers, and these are dealt with via exclusions. For example, if in a particular humanitarian context publishing data poses a risk to staff, partners or affected populations, the publisher can omit all or some of that data in line with their exclusion policy, provided details of this policy are made public.

All actors are welcome to publish to the IATI Standard, whereas membership of IATI – for which there is an annual membership fee – confers the right to also participate in the governance of the initiative.

What is the FTS?

The [Financial Tracking Service](#) (FTS) is a global humanitarian financial reporting platform and service. It was created in 1992 as a result of resolution 46/182,⁴ with the mandate to track financial contributions made to coordinated appeals (now known as humanitarian response plans), as well as all humanitarian funding more broadly. FTS is managed by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) under the oversight of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

Data published by FTS is continuously updated, providing a snapshot of the current funding situation and thus informing strategic and operational decisions (such as allocations made by the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to underfunded emergencies). Its reach is global: it applies consistent methodologies and standards for data acceptance and verification, ultimately allowing data from many different reporters, crises and contexts to be reliably compared to each other without double-counting. FTS does not merely track financial contributions, but it links them to projects, activities, sectors and response plans, showing how funding is being allocated and used.

Information published by FTS is based on data reported to it by donors and recipients of humanitarian funding through many different channels. Reporting is voluntary, but it is well established as a requirement when participating in inter-agency humanitarian response plans.

How do IATI and FTS work?

IATI

Organisations publish raw data in the IATI format (XML – a machine-readable language), in line with the IATI Standard, using one of the existing publishing tools (such as [AidStream](#) or [IATI Studio](#)) 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 an uncurated library of links that is accessible by anyone.

IATI promotes the concept of ‘publish once, use often’ – that is, generate useful data and make it freely available (‘open’) for use in a variety of ways by different people or platforms (either internally by the publisher or by a range of external stakeholders, as a single data set or combined with other data). Examples of existing platforms driven by IATI data include [Open Aid Search](#), [Open UN-Habitat, d-portal](#), the UK Department for International Development’s [Development Tracker](#), the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ [openaidNL](#), and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency’s [Openaid.se](#).

FTS

Organisations are encouraged to report to FTS regularly and as often as possible through one of several different channels, including online forms, email, spreadsheets and automatic data transfer from systems such as the European Emergency Disaster Response Information System (EDRIS).⁵ As of late 2017, the most important (and preferred) channel will become the IATI format. FTS will pilot IATI-based reporting with specific publishers who already use the version 2.02 of the IATI Standard including the necessary tagging of humanitarian assistance. The pilot is scheduled for the second half of 2017 and will be followed by detailed guidelines based on the experiences gained during the pilot phase. These will be shared with the IASC HFTT, the Grand Bargain signatories and other appropriate forums.

A team of data specialists curates the data by combining information from different publishers and reporters, filling in gaps, cross-checking and triangulating between sources, matching contributions to funding requirements and ensuring the data is consistent and not double-counted. This manual process can take several days. It is then published on the [FTS website](#), which provides a wealth of easy-to-use interactive charts and visualisations to aid decision-makers and comprehensive data search tools for advanced users.

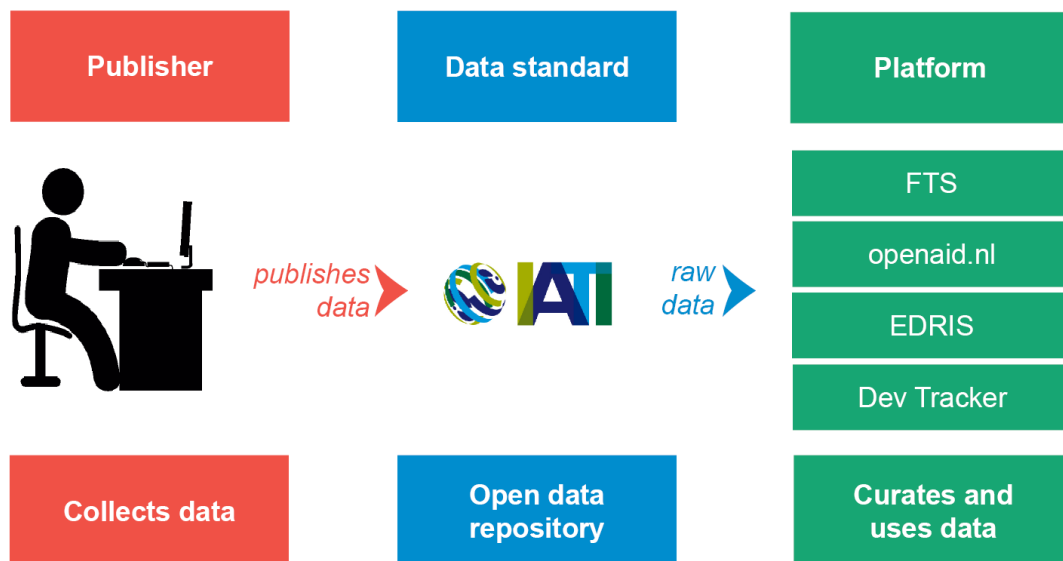
How do IATI and FTS work together?

IATI is a technical *publishing framework*; FTS is a standard *reporting platform and service*. IATI complements platforms such as FTS and [EDRIS](#) by supporting consistent access to structured data for independent use and analysis.

Crucially, when data is published to IATI in a consistent format (see *How can IATI and FTS be used together to strengthen financial reporting?* below for more details), it frees up resources for FTS to focus on data curation, verification and analysis, rather than data collection. Although IATI data from different reporters is easier to align and fit together, building a ‘bigger picture’ of funding flows still requires a team to verify, triangulate and cross-check information, fill in gaps, resolve discrepancies and eliminate double-counting. This is the ‘service’ provided by FTS. To note, FTS also continues to accept data in many other formats in order to compile a comprehensive picture of global humanitarian funding.

Furthermore, data formatted to the IATI Standard can be used in other platforms and products. Internal reports, reports to donors and other stakeholders, websites and accountability dashboards can be driven by IATI data, providing a rich source of information for many audiences, including decision-makers, policymakers, researchers and the media.

Reporting to FTS is the responsibility of individual humanitarian organisations. Doing so using the IATI Standard simplifies the work of FTS and allows data to be used simultaneously for many other purposes. The availability of a wealth of financial and activity data improves evidence-based decision-making and, thus, can enhance operational effectiveness both in the field and at headquarters level.



Who uses IATI and FTS?

IATI

As of January 2017 over 500 organisations (both humanitarian and development-focused) publish data to the IATI Standard. These include bilateral and multilateral donors, foundations, CSOs and private sector consultancies. Key humanitarian donors and agencies that publish funding to the IATI Standard include the governments of Japan, Sweden, the UK and the US, the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO), Oxfam, Save the Children, UN CERF, UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP). However, only a small number of organisations are using version 2.02 of the IATI Standard to publish their data, and very few are using the humanitarian-related elements introduced in the latest version of the IATI Standard.⁶ A full list of publishers can be found on the [IATI Registry](#).⁷

There are also examples of actors using IATI data to make information about their development contributions more accessible to external stakeholders. This is normally done through information portals set up by donors and development partners.⁸ One widely used information portal driven by IATI data is [d-portal](#),⁹ an open-source platform that allows users to explore information by country or publisher.

FTS

During 2016, 350 humanitarian organisations reported financial information to FTS, including all major government donors, all UN humanitarian agencies, Red Cross organisations, UN CERF and 250 NGOs and private organisations.

How do IATI and FTS meet the needs of humanitarian actors?

IATI

While the IATI Standard was originally developed with development flows in mind, it continues to evolve to better meet the needs of other actors in line with the changing external environment. The last upgrade to the IATI Standard, version 2.02 released in December 2015, was specifically designed to improve IATI's usability by the humanitarian community and its interoperability with FTS¹⁰ by enabling the automatic import of publishers' IATI data into the FTS platform. Organisations can publish data on humanitarian activities using version 2.02 of the IATI Standard, which includes new fields specifically developed for humanitarian assistance. New features in version 2.02 include the ability to mark activities as 'humanitarian' and to tag them in relation to specific crises and sectors.

The process to consider the next IATI Standard upgrade started at the annual IATI Technical Advisory Group (TAG) meeting in March 2017, which provided an opportunity for all members of the IATI community, including humanitarian actors, to put forward suggestions. Between January and June 2017 the DI project, '[Monitoring the Grand Bargain commitment to transparency](#)',¹¹ carried out an awareness-raising and consultation process to enable Grand Bargain signatories and other humanitarian organisations to propose further improvements to the Standard to make it more applicable to humanitarian work. The next upgrade to the IATI Standard (to v2.03) will be rolled out in October 2017.

FTS

Although FTS has always had an exclusively humanitarian focus since its establishment in 1992, it is continuously updated to meet changing user needs. In February 2017, the website, technical platform and database were renewed to allow FTS to more effectively track elements that are key to the Grand Bargain commitments, for example funding to local actors, multi-year funding, use of cash transfer programming and levels of earmarking. The new platform also automatically reads IATI data and can gradually substitute existing reporting channels with IATI data as appropriate.

How can IATI and FTS be used together to strengthen financial reporting?

The IASC HFTT is developing technical guidelines to support stakeholders to report to FTS using the IATI Standard. The guidelines will help ensure that an organisation's IATI data is not only correctly formatted and complete but also fully meets all FTS requirements around timeliness, comprehensiveness, accuracy and level of detail.

The FTS requirements are more stringent than the minimum requirements for publishing to the IATI Standard. Therefore, FTS can make use of IATI data, but may require additional detail in order to be fully compliant with the '3Ts' of transparency: traceability, totality and timeliness. For this reason, most organisations already publishing to the IATI Standard (e.g. to meet commitments made at the Second High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (HLF2) or to comply with donor requirements) may need to adapt, modify or extend their existing reporting to ensure that the humanitarian requirements specified by FTS are met.

How do small organisations, including CSOs, publish to the IATI Standard?

Many existing IATI publishers are CSOs, ranging in scale from local and national groups to large international NGOs. In many respects it is easier for small or medium CSOs to publish to IATI because they have comparatively less data than governments, multilaterals and large international NGOs; they don't have complex internal systems that need to be aligned with the IATI Standard; there are free publishing tools specifically designed for their needs (e.g. AidStream¹² and IATI Studio¹³); and internal sign-off processes are less likely to involve multiple levels.

Large NGOs (in particular those that are part of a global federation) may need to invest more time in aligning systems and producing data feeds. However, this has not prevented branches of some of the largest international NGO federations and families from publishing to the IATI Standard. Doing so can ultimately lead to better internal data management, which has a number of potential benefits including streamlined systems and better data collection and use across the organisation.

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

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

Both the IATI format and the FTS platform are set up to facilitate the traceability of financial flows through the implementation chain, as money passes from one organisation to another. However, the extent to which this is possible is entirely dependent on the quality and level of detail of the data provided by organisations. Grand Bargain signatories are currently exploring options to improve the visibility of funding flows to local and national responders, including through better use of the IATI Standard and FTS platform.

Systematic traceability of funds through the delivery chain depends on all actors – including donors, UN agencies, international and national NGOs, and other local implementing partners – providing accurate, timely data on their humanitarian activities with corresponding information such as identification or reference numbers from other parties to any transaction. The IATI Standard enables this through the ‘activity ID’ and ‘provider activity ID’ fields, which need to be completed accurately.

Where local organisations are not in a position to publish such data themselves to the IATI Standard, the data on funding provided to them can be published by another actor as a ‘secondary publisher’.¹⁴ International agencies can offer technical support to local organisations to help them adopt IATI and, in exceptional circumstances, can even publish to the IATI Standard on their behalf as a secondary publisher – though this requires systematic access to the relevant data.

How do IATI and FTS support transparency, including for monitoring and reporting on results?

IATI

Publishers can report structured results data as well as outputs, outcomes, impact and ‘other’ information using free text. Currently, all data published and shared through the IATI data registry is open access and available for public use, interpretation and analysis. Measuring results is often considered to be one of the most challenging exercises for both humanitarian and development communities. In the absence of an internationally agreed results framework for the sectors, publishing fully comparable results data is not yet possible. A shared international approach to this will help inform the next upgrade of the IATI Standard. Discussions on this will also be a key part of follow-up on the Grand Bargain commitments on ‘transparency’ and ‘harmonising and simplifying reporting requirements’.

FTS

FTS is an integrated part of a larger suite of tools and services currently under development that will support the entire Humanitarian Programme Cycle, including the Online Planning System (OPS) and the Response Planning & Monitoring Module (under development). This aims to 'join the dots' between data on humanitarian needs, response plans, implementation tracking, strategic monitoring and funding flows. Data for these services is provided by humanitarian agencies in the field through their participation in inter-agency coordinated responses such as Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) or Flash Appeals. As with financial information, the work of this entire suite of services is facilitated using reporting standards, and this may in the future include the IATI Standard as a format for results reporting.

Where can I find more information and resources?

More information on **IATI** can be found online at:

- [Aid Transparency](#) – information on the initiative, news, governance, how to join.
- [IATI Standard](#) – detailed technical information, code lists, schema and more.
- [Dashboard](#) – statistics to assess the quality of existing IATI data, and a wealth of other information.
- [d-portal](#) – search IATI data by recipient country, publisher or sector, or use the new free text search facility.
- DI's [project to support and monitor the Grand Bargain commitment on transparency](#).

and by contacting:

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

More information on **FTS** can be found at:

- fts.unocha.org – where all data reported to and curated by the FTS is published, where funding flows can be directly reported to the FTS, and where tutorials and guidelines are published both on how to submit and how to use financial data.
- fts@un.org – where the FTS team can be contacted to directly report data, to request assistance and support with submitting reports, or to use the data published by the service.

Notes

¹Development Initiatives, 2016. *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2016*.

²Development Initiatives, 2016. *Better information for a better response: The basics of humanitarian transparency*.

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

⁴UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 "Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations outlines a framework for humanitarian assistance and a set of guiding principles. It can be accessed here: <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/46/a46r182.htm>

⁵ The EDRIS database contains real time information on humanitarian contributions from ECHO and its Member States: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/hac/>

⁶ Development Initiatives, 2017. *Baseline report: Implementing and monitoring the Grand Bargain commitment on transparency*. Available at: <http://devinit.org/post/baseline-report-implementing-and-monitoring-the-grand-bargain-commitment-on-transparency/#>

⁷<http://www.iatiregistry.org/publisher>

⁸Development Initiatives, 2017. *Reaching the potential of IATI data*. Available at: <http://devinit.org/post/reaching-the-potential-a-review-of-iati-data-use-and-ways-to-increase-it/>

⁹ <http://d-portal.org/about.html>

¹⁰ See: <https://fts.unocha.org>

¹¹ <http://devinit.org/post/projects/monitoring-grand-bargain-commitment-transparency/>

¹² Aidstream can be accessed here: <https://aidstream.org/>

¹³ IATI Studio can be accessed here: <https://www.iatistudio.com/>

¹⁴In general, the quality of aggregation and verification of data from different reporters by the FTS is significantly improved if each flow is reported twice (i.e. by both the provider and the recipient).

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

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