

# #KEEPCOUNTING

*a group dedicated to supporting and maintaining humanitarian data collection*

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## **Promoting a healthy humanitarian data ecosystem:**

A position paper from humanitarian data actors to donors and policy makers

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### **Introduction**

Humanitarian action relies on a narrative that shapes how we interpret and respond to crises. This narrative profoundly influences which situations receive attention and where humanitarian actors choose to intervene. It is critical, therefore, that it is based on facts and not political agendas, biases or other factors that conflict with humanitarian principles.

Sense-making in the humanitarian data space requires more than one source of and analysis of data to ensure objectivity and clarity. With the likely consolidation and merging of operational agencies, it becomes even more important to allow for diverse perspectives to avoid a 'closed system' that is self-referential and less able to adapt to external realities." Related and equally important, the data ecosystem must maintain a high level of independence. Its outputs should serve the sector as public goods, free from institutional or political interests.

Over the past 15 years, significant investments were made into expanding and improving the data, information and analysis that feeds the humanitarian narrative. As a result, a number of independent data providers, information managers, and analysts has emerged, who are able to provide complementary and contrasting pictures of the situation which can support better, fairer and more objective decision-making. These actors formed an international ecosystem with local roots, as many of the centralised data streams are fed by data collected by country and local-level actors. This ecosystem has been severely affected by the US funding cuts at all levels, and there is a significant risk of losing most of the progress that was made.

This document contains the collective thinking of a number of sector *enablers* who are involved in humanitarian data collection/analysis and determined not to allow the sector to return to a "data dark ages." It sets forth a strategic vision for creating and maintaining a cost-effective yet healthy ecosystem so that – whatever structural changes occur in the humanitarian sector as a result of the defunding shocks – the humanitarian narrative will be based on a solid foundation of data and analysis. An evidence-based narrative is a prerequisite for principled humanitarian action and for humanitarians being accountable to the populations they serve.

### **Elements of a healthy data ecosystem**

As they are to any ecosystem in nature, connectedness, adaptiveness, and diversity are fundamental to the network of data systems in the humanitarian sector, which must be allowed to function independently of the funding and operational arms.

- **Connectedness:** Members of an ecosystem are inter-connected and are fed by and benefit from each other. Humanitarian databases likewise are improved in quality and comprehensiveness by the benefit of others' information streams through complementarity and cross checking/validation.
- **Adaptiveness:** An ecosystem evolves over time in response to changes in context, with more relevant and useful parts gaining strength while outmoded pieces fall away. As the sector faces a funding crisis that may result in far-reaching structural transformation, this capacity for evolution will be vital.
- **Diversity/complementarity:** Diversity in the data space strengthens resilience by preventing over-centralisation and avoiding a single point of failure, while bringing the multiple, complementary perspectives that prevent one politicised singular version of the "truth." It enables challenge, checks and balances, and works as an in-built accountability mechanism.
- **Independence:** Data and analysis providers must be in large part independent and separate from operational actors and funding decisions. This separation is essential to ensure that data is not shaped by programmatic interests, political pressures, or donor influence, and for data providers to maintain objectivity and credibility.

The above principles are not at odds with the practical constraints of the current funding environment. As data actors, we will seek efficiency gain through collaboration and streamlining of our activities for the system to sustain core capacities, while preserving independence. To this end, in an environment of shrinking resources, it is vital to identify the essential functions of data systems that must be protected and prioritised – the “must-haves,” outlined below – to ensure that even a leaner system remains capable of supporting principled and effective humanitarian action.

## Priority use cases for data

- **Foresight and preparedness:** Enable more lateral thinking, anticipatory action, and agile adaptation of existing programmes, which increases effectiveness while reducing the costs of humanitarian response
  - Horizon scanning and scenario planning
  - Risk identification
  - Health and food insecurity surveillance
- **Assessment and prioritisation:** Allocate scarce resources according to severity of need
  - Using standardised metrics to compare cases and enable allocation of resources to ensure impartiality
- **Programme design:** Designing assistance according to priorities and demands of communities
  - Collecting information on self-identified needs and priorities of affected people
- **Operational planning and coordination**
  - Situational awareness and contextual information
    - Baseline health, nutrition and development indicators

- Population census and movement/displacement tracking
- Security incident data and analysis
- Humanitarian access metrics
- Operational presence and coverage
- Contextual analysis, including conflict indicators
- Geospatial data analysis and mapping
- Feedback from affected communities on the quality and relevance of assistance, including:
  - Data from feedback/complaints mechanisms
  - Affected population surveys
  - Performance evaluations against outcome indicators
- Project cycle data needs
  - Needs assessments
  - MEAL data needs

In each of the above areas, the emphasis should be on supporting systems that can compile the essential datapoints and build on collective knowledge to reliably and objectively inform decisions to guide action, irrespective of institutional interests or legacy systems.

Technology, in particular Artificial Intelligence (AI), will in the coming years be both a great enabler of and a serious challenge to a principled, evidence based humanitarian narrative. The focus of the humanitarian data ecosystem must be on harnessing AI's potential to create a more cost-efficient and open system of public goods while building robust safeguards against the spread of harmful information that could undermine evidence-based decision-making.

## **Sustaining humanitarian data and analysis as a global public good: Proposed steps forward**

**Donors and policymakers**, as they consider options to restructure and resize the humanitarian sector to maximise the impact of limited resources, should commit to and be guided by the following principles:

- An effective and principled humanitarian response requires an independent and heterogenous system of data analytics
- Supporting such a system is a collective responsibility, whether contributions are pooled or bilaterally provided
- Funding support should cover the costs of the priority humanitarian data use cases, and donors should coordinate to fill gaps as and when they appear

**Data actors** should commit to and uphold their responsibility to ensure:

- **Transparency and openness:** Data serving the humanitarian sector must not be proprietary. It should be shared across different actors and to the general public (as

security and confidentiality allow), with clear provenance, free of charge, and aligned with the FAIR data principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable)

- **Accountability:** Services must be evaluated at regular intervals to ensure that irrelevant services are not continued
- **Adaptability:** Discontinuing irrelevant or ineffective services, and merging redundant ones, will leave space for innovation and new offerings to be funded.
- **Inclusiveness:** International data actors have the additional responsibility to ensure the identification and visibility of local and national level data actors and initiatives that feed the ecosystem and require direct support

As the reform processes move forward, the identification and streamlining of the essential data streams for humanitarian policy decisions should be a collective endeavor, based in broad dialogue between users and providers (agencies, donors, enabling organisations) at all levels.

**Endorsed by the following organisational members of #KeepCounting, a group dedicated to maintaining humanitarian data collection:**

