

HPG report

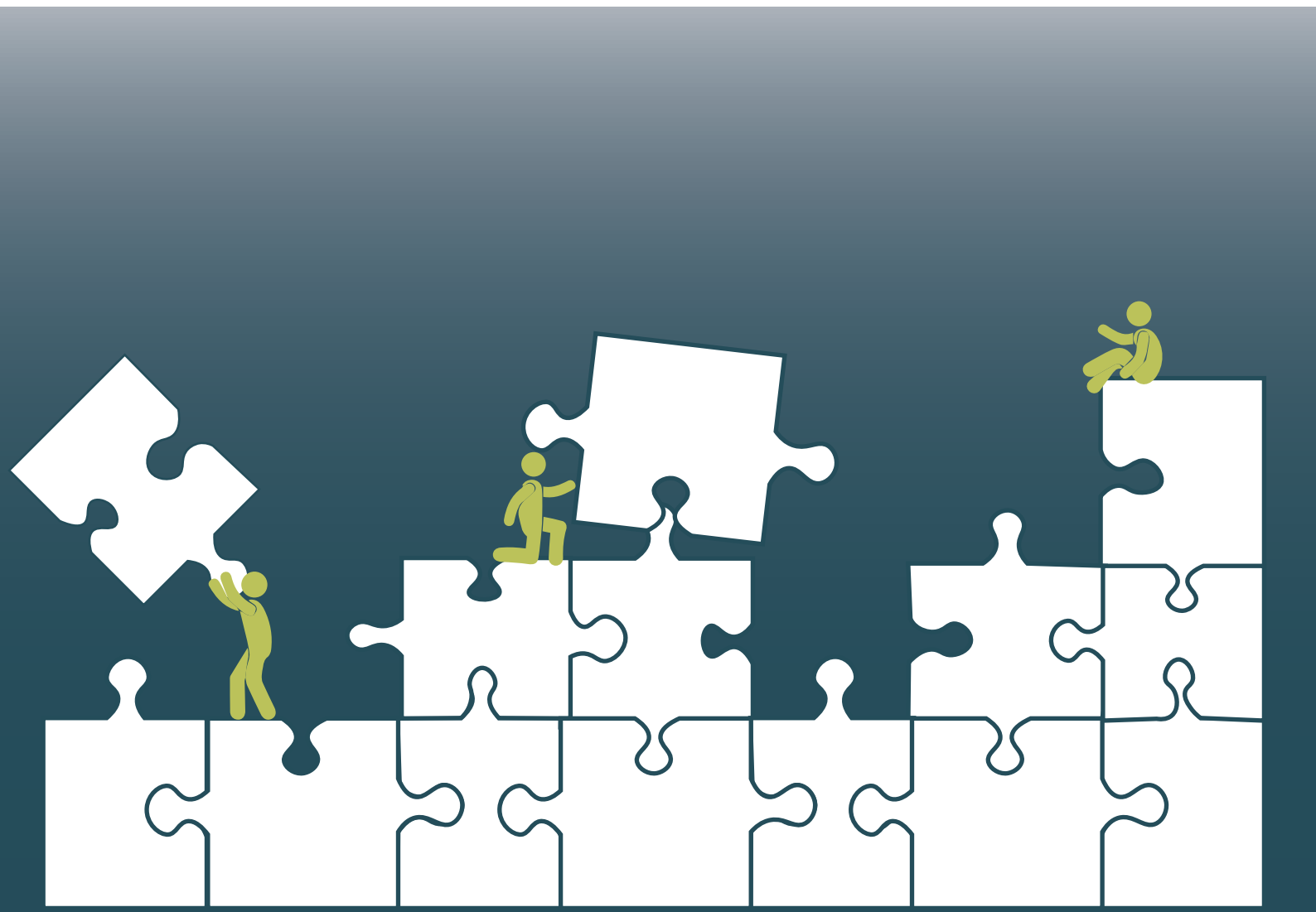
# Revitalising the Good

# Humanitarian Donorship Initiative

## A 20-year review

Sophia Swithern

April 2024



Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI or our partners.

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

**How to cite:** Swithern, S. (2024) *Revitalising the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative: a 20-year review*. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/en/publications/revitalising-the-good-humanitarian-donorship-initiative-a-20-year-review](http://www.odi.org/en/publications/revitalising-the-good-humanitarian-donorship-initiative-a-20-year-review)).

This PDF has been prepared in accordance with good practice on accessibility.

Graphics: Jessica Rennoldson/HPG

# Acknowledgements

---

The author thanks all the peer reviewers who provided important feedback to enhance this report. An additional thanks to Ed Schenkenberg and Karin Wendt at HERE-Geneva for their support during data collection and preliminary analysis, and colleagues from the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG): Zainab Moallin (Research Officer), Jessica Rennoldson (Senior Publications Officer), Sara Hussain (Editor), Sorcha O'Callaghan (Director of HPG) and Dustin Barter (Senior Research Fellow).

## **About this report**

This 20-year independent review was commissioned by the current co-chairs of the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative (GHDI), Estonia and the United Kingdom. The purpose of the study is to inform a process of strategic reflection and recalibration of the efforts of the GHDI. The contents are the sole responsibility of HPG and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of Estonia, the United Kingdom or other GHDI members.

## **About the author**

**Sophia Swithern** is an independent consultant, specialising in research and evidence for international and domestic social impact.

# Contents

---

**Acknowledgements** / 3

---

**List of boxes, tables and figures** / 5

---

**Acronyms** / 6

---

**Executive summary** / 7

Sharpening the purpose of the GHDI / 7

Selecting the focus of the GHDI / 8

Revitalising the GHDI principles / 8

Strengthening the value-add of the GHDI / 8

Improving the GHDI's ways of working / 9

Conclusions / 9

Summary of conclusions and recommendations / 9

---

**1 Introduction** / 12

1.1 A brief history of the GHDI / 12

1.2 A changed context for humanitarian donorship / 13

1.3 Purpose and scope of the 20-year review / 16

---

**2 Review findings** / 17

2.1 Sharpening the purpose of the GHDI / 17

2.2 Selecting the focus of the GHDI's collective efforts / 24

2.3 Revitalising the GHDI principles / 28

2.4 Strengthening the GHDI's added value to other forums / 32

2.5 Improving the effectiveness of the GHDI's ways of working / 37

---

**3 Conclusions** / 43

---

**References** / 45

---

**Appendix 1: Methodology and key informant interviewees** / 47

# List of boxes, tables and figures

---

## Boxes

- Box 1** Conclusions and options on sharpening the purpose of the GHDl / 24
- Box 2** Conclusions and options on the focus areas for the GHDl / 27
- Box 3** Conclusions and options for revitalising the GHDl principles / 32
- Box 4** Conclusions and options on strengthening the value-add of the GHDl / 37
- Box 5** Conclusions and options on improving effectiveness / 42

## Tables

- Table 1** Summary of conclusions and recommendations of the GHDl review / 10

## Figures

- Figure 1** UN coordinated appeals requirements and funding 2003–2023 / 15
- Figure 2** Four possible GHDl purpose areas and levels of change required / 19
- Figure 3** Overlaps between the GHDl principles and other donor commitments / 29
- Figure 4** Options for reinvigorating the GHDl principles / 30
- Figure 5** GHDl members' affiliation to other humanitarian forums / 34

# Acronyms

---

<b>DAC</b>	Development Assistance Committee
<b>ELM</b>	Expert-Level Meeting
<b>ERC</b>	Emergency Relief Coordinator
<b>FCDO</b>	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
<b>GDP</b>	gross domestic product
<b>GHD</b>	Good Humanitarian Donorship
<b>GHDI</b>	Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative
<b>HLM</b>	High-Level Meeting
<b>IASC</b>	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>IHL</b>	international humanitarian law
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisation
<b>OCHA</b>	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>ODA</b>	official development assistance
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>ToR</b>	terms of reference
<b>UN</b>	United Nations

# Executive summary

Since the establishment in 2003 of the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative (GHDI), the world in which humanitarian donors seek to be ‘good’ has altered significantly: the nature of humanitarian challenges has changed; the demands on humanitarian donorship have escalated; the humanitarian coordination landscape has become more crowded; and yet the global respect for humanitarian norms and the geopolitical space for multilateral cooperation has diminished. Arguably, in this context, the work of a group of donors committed to good humanitarian donorship is both more necessary and more difficult than it was 20 years ago. Although the initiative has proved highly successful in attracting a diverse group of members to sign up to the principles, and in establishing an important set of norms for donor behaviour, there is a widespread sense that it requires reinvigoration.

Concerns about the relevance and vitality of the initiative are not new; indeed many were expressed in the 10-year review, commissioned by the GHDI in 2013. Now, as the GHDI marks its 20-year anniversary, the current co-chairs have commissioned this independent review to inform efforts to revitalise the initiative.

The present research revealed widespread demand for the GHDI to continue – but that this went hand-in-hand with demand for improvements to the clarity of its function, and the effectiveness of its working. The review also provided insights into the five interlinked areas below where the GHDI will need to agree its future niche, breadth, and depth of engagement. However, given the group’s diverse membership and wide stakeholder constituencies, there was little consensus on what should be done in any of these five areas. Discussion of our preliminary findings at the GHDI High-Level Meeting (HLM) in December 2023 also highlighted how the breadth of views combined with the informality of the group limit the extent to which the GHDI can achieve the more ambitious expectations of the initiative.

## Sharpening the purpose of the GHDI

Making the GHDI ‘fit for purpose’ demands clarity of purpose – but less than a quarter of GHDI members responding to our survey were clear about its purpose. The foundations and the track record of the group indicate it has both an ‘inward-facing’ reflexive purpose for its members, and an ‘externally facing’ influencing role for the wider system. There is precedent and expectation, to varying degrees, for the GHDI to serve a combination of the following purposes, each of which imply a spectrum of change from the group’s current model:

- facilitating learning and exchange;
- agreeing joined-up positions among members;
- enabling active complementarity between donors;
- ensuring members’ accountability for implementation of the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHDI) principles.

GHDI members tended to locate the group's purpose in the first two of these areas, which represent the least change for the group. There is a positive desire to translate exchange into action and to generate more influential joint positions. This will demand dynamic leadership from the co-chairs and concerted engagement from members. However, the group's accountability purpose remained unresolved, with little appetite in the group for anything more than the 'softest' self-reporting.

### Selecting the focus of the GHDI

The GHDI has discussed a wide range of topics over its 20-year history. As crisis prevention and response become more complex, there is no shortage of challenges that the group could choose to focus its attention on. These include topics connected to diplomatic and geopolitical issues, humanitarian funding, and wider crisis funding. However, the group requires a shared set of selection criteria to avoid 'mission creep'. This means focusing on issues which are donor-specific, sufficiently challenging, and largely unaddressed elsewhere from a donor perspective. Members converged on humanitarian access and international humanitarian law (IHL) as examples that fit these criteria, and agreed that issues of quality and quantity of humanitarian funding remained critical insofar as they complemented other discussions. There was less agreement from members around inclusion of wider crisis financing topics and the group will need to demonstrate how these are within their remit.

### Revitalising the GHDI principles

The GHDI began as a set of principles – with the meetings of the group a means to drive implementation. Twenty years later, the reverse is now true – the initiative is first and foremost a donor forum, and the principles an implicit backdrop. Although they have become successfully mainstreamed as norms, many signatories struggle to remember their content, and there is a call to reassert their centrality. Members can choose to reaffirm, refresh, or revise the principles – although in a context of widespread political roll-back on international norms these options each involve a degree of risk. In this context, there was widespread agreement that a reaffirmation of principles would send an important message at the GHDI's 20th anniversary, but that any refresh would be light and focused on technical clarifications given the risk of roll-back.

### Strengthening the value-add of the GHDI

As the humanitarian landscape has become more crowded, it has become more important to prove the added value of the GHDI. As other forums challenge the relevance of the group and compete for members' time, the GHDI must reconcile its added value to both its highly networked and its less-networked members. To do this, it will need to develop more effective ways of connecting to other forums. Current efforts to re-establish routine connections with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) were widely supported, as was complementarity with the Grand Bargain, but these connections will need to be substantive if the group is to maintain support of its well-networked members.



Widening the group's connections with other multilateral crisis finance institutions and platforms is also important for keeping the group relevant in a changing humanitarian context – and there is a case for pursuing pathways for dialogue.

### **Improving the GHDI's ways of working**

There is a shared sense that the GHDI is less effective than it might be. Members' frustrations centre on practicalities as well as purpose – in particular the group's ability to balance inclusivity with decisiveness; attract a productive level of engagement; maintain continuity of attention; and to better communicate what it does. Investing in updating and maintaining the website, along with an accessible information repository, represents an obvious 'quick fix' to signal reinvigoration and improve institutional memory.

However, fundamentally improving effectiveness involves addressing two key issues: attracting sufficiently senior representation while encouraging engagement from all members, and creating a sufficiently light yet stable governance structure. If the current co-chairs can establish a purposeful agenda and practical protocols, this could go some way to restarting a virtuous circle of engagement and effectiveness.

### **Conclusions**

Rising complex humanitarian needs in a politically fragmented world mean that there is still an important role for the GHDI. In this context, the significance of a diverse group of donors who are – at least nominally – committed to good donorship cannot be underestimated. However, the initiative requires new efforts if it is to realise this potential. The breadth of the group's membership means that compromises are baked in, and it is unsurprising that there is both a lack of consensus about how the group should change and a preference for options in the zone of least change. Decisions to increase shared messaging, reaffirm the principles and invest in information management would significantly improve the workings of the group. However, these measures alone will not result in the group meeting the demands for good donorship that the global humanitarian context requires. The gulf between principled high ambition and possible collective action is not unique to the GHDI as an informal multilateral forum. Faced with a mismatch between external demands and internal possibilities, the GHDI must tread a balance between managing expectations downwards and stepping up to meet them. Ultimately, raising the scale of ambition on what the GHDI can achieve, will depend more on the quality engagement of its membership than the details of its protocols.

### **Summary of conclusions and recommendations**

The table below summarises the conclusions and recommendations under each of the five areas of action. It shows: the options for action that emerged from the research and which were presented back to the GHDI membership; the direction of response from GHDI members; and the recommendations proposed by this independent review. Acknowledging that the diversity of views among members

cannot be captured in a summary table, responses are characterised according to where there is: a) a notable degree of **agreement**; b) significant divergence of views between members, or **divergence**; or c) a **lack of discussion** on the topic among members.

**Table 1** Summary of conclusions and recommendations of the GHDl review

Options for action	Response from GHDl members	Recommendation
<b>Sharpening the purpose of the GHDl</b>		
<p>Defining the purpose(s) of the GHDl in advancing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• exchange and learning</li> <li>• joined-up positioning</li> <li>• active complementarity</li> <li>• accountability against the principles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Agreement:</b> on value of exchange and learning – contingent on linking strategically to change-oriented, joined-up positioning.</li> <li>• <b>Divergence:</b> around how to reinvigorate accountability for applying the principles.</li> <li>• <b>Lack of discussion:</b> around promoting active complementarity of members’ priorities and allocations.</li> </ul>	<p>Develop a clear re-articulation of the GHDl’s purpose to direct exchange towards change – including default expectations for outputs from discussions.</p> <p>Revisit the question of finding a light and practicable way to monitor members’ application of the principles.</p>
<b>Selecting the focus of the GHDl</b>		
<p>Focus on issues related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• humanitarian diplomacy;</li> <li>• humanitarian funding;</li> <li>• broader crisis financing.</li> </ul> <p>With selection based on shared criteria of topics which are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• specific to donors;</li> <li>• challenging;</li> <li>• shared among members;</li> <li>• not duplicative.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Agreement:</b> on the centrality of diplomacy and IHL issues for the GHDl, and of quality and quantity of humanitarian funding – insofar as the funding angle complements other discussions.</li> <li>• <b>Divergence:</b> around the extent to which issues related to wider crisis financing, including climate financing, were crucial or peripheral to the GHDl.</li> </ul>	<p>Define the criteria of topic selection to ensure focus and continuity and underpin rationale of workplans.</p> <p>Within these parameters, select topics which are sufficiently weighty for senior engagement and which lend themselves to change-oriented exchange.</p>
<b>Revitalising the GHDl principles</b>		
<p>Reasserting the relevance of the principles through any of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reaffirming members’ commitment;</li> <li>• refreshing the existing GHDl principles;</li> <li>• revising the principles to amend, expand or reduce them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Agreement:</b> on value of reaffirming the principles but given risks of roll-back, any refresh should be light and not involve substantive revisions.</li> <li>• <b>Divergence:</b> around addition of new principles – with suggestions of adding principles on climate facing clear warnings about the risks of re-opening the principles.</li> <li>• <b>Lack of discussion:</b> around the idea of holding a repledging event around the 20th anniversary.</li> </ul>	<p>Use the opportunity of the 20th anniversary for a reaffirmation and light ‘tidy up’ of the principles.</p> <p>Accompany this with a commentary to explain and situate the GHDl principles in relation to other commitments and to current humanitarian challenges.</p>

**Strengthening the value-add of the GHDI**

Enhance complementarity and connections to other forums including:

- IASC;
- Grand Bargain;
- Other multilateral forums engaged in crisis finance.

• **Agreement:** that routine connection with the IASC was necessary, plus support for the current co-chairs’ efforts to establish this connection.

• **Divergence:** around the type and extent of relationships that the group should seek with other regional and multilateral actors which are engaged in crisis finance and response.

Continue to pursue models for regular connection and exchange with the IASC.

Begin a process of mapping other forums and actors with whom the GHDI might establish informal relationships on an ongoing and topic-specific basis and establish a dialogue function within the group.

**Improving the effectiveness of the GHDI**

Ensure that inclusiveness and informality are balanced with effectiveness by:

- practically enabling member engagement;
- elevating the seniority of representation;
- ensuring continuity between cycles of co-chairing;
- improving information management and communication.

• **Agreement:** that investing in information management and communication, would be ‘low-hanging fruit’ to signal GHDI reinvigoration and improve institutional memory.

• **Divergence:** around improving continuity between co-chairs, with a clear rejection of any formalised structure, no appetite for a troika structure, but no alternative suggestions.

• **Lack of discussion:** around ensuring the appropriate level of seniority of member representatives’ engagement in the group, possibly signalling scepticism about the political value of the GHDI.

Invest in improved information management and communication, including better use of the website.

Use the transition to the next round of co-chairs to model and agree the establishment of clear protocols to ensure continuity.

Set a sufficiently ‘weighty’ agenda at the December 2024 HLM to use the 20th anniversary opportunity to re-engage a critical mass of senior engagement.

Undertake a further process of consultation with less engaged members to inform efforts to better include them.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 A brief history of the GHDI

In June 2003, the representatives of 17 donors<sup>1</sup> gathered in Stockholm and formally established the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative (GHDI). A series of humanitarian crises in the 1990s, including in Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo, had shown up fatal flaws in the humanitarian system and highlighted the incoherence, politicisation and opacity of the way it was funded. In the words of one of the architects of the GHDI, donor behaviour was found to be ‘dysfunctional, irrational and sometimes arrogant’ (Schaar, 2007). The 17 donors meeting in Sweden were resolved to play their part in changing this, by committing to a set of principles for good humanitarian donorship. Nothing of its scope had been agreed before – reactions to the Rwanda response had focused on the performance of United Nations (UN) and other humanitarian implementers (Macrae et al., 2004), while nascent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) initiatives on aid effectiveness overlooked the challenges of humanitarian action.<sup>2</sup>

The donors agreed a common definition of humanitarian action together with a set of general principles and intentions for good donor practice (GHDI, 2003). They also set out a five-point implementation plan<sup>3</sup> (Macrae et al., 2004; Schaar, 2007), agreeing to meet in Ottawa in 2004 to reaffirm their commitments and review their progress. What began as a one-year informal ‘initiative’ to advance the implementation then settled into an ongoing pattern of regular group meetings – ‘expert level’ meetings (ELM) held twice a year in Geneva, and High-Level Meetings (HLM) held twice a year in Geneva and New York. In a spirit of shared ownership and light bureaucracy, the GHDI chose a rotating chair system – with two self-selecting member co-chairs sharing the work of driving meetings and workplans for a two-year period.

The initiative proved highly popular, attracting five new donor members in its first year, and quickly increasing to the present membership of 42 (GHDI, n.d.). Its founding aim of inclusivity appeared successful, with donors from inside and outside the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) group committing to the principles, regardless of the size of their humanitarian aid budget or their preferences and modalities for spending it.

---

1 Sixteen countries plus the European Commission.

2 The first of the international forums on aid effectiveness took place in Rome in February 2003 and resulted in the Rome Declaration, which made pledges around recipient country ownership and reduced bureaucratic burdens from donors – its focus was largely on bilateral development cooperation.

3 The five measures specified for implementation were: (1) identifying at least one pilot crisis country; (2) asking the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to include humanitarian action in its peer reviews; (3) harmonising reporting demands on implementing agencies; (4) seeking a common definition of humanitarian assistance for financial tracking purposes; and (5) promoting broad application of the GHD principles among all donors, with different donor countries offering to take the lead on various action points (see Schaar, 2007).

However, this expansion of the group introduced one of the enduring tensions in the group: between inclusivity and accountability. There was a choice between aiming for broad adherence from many donors, or targeted commitment from fewer donors. The GHDI followed the latter path, prompting experts involved in the conception of the initiative to observe that ‘membership in the club seemed on offer at bargain-basement prices.’ (Smillie and Minear, 2005). Attempts were made from the outset to introduce a degree of accountability. As we explore in section 2.1, the principles were integrated into the DAC peer review process. Investments were also made in developing a GHDI indicator framework, and for five years the independent Humanitarian Response Index assessed donor performance against the GHDI principles.<sup>4</sup> Both, however, proved controversial and were discontinued.

Reviews of the GHDI during its history have lauded its creation of important and influential norms, its success in convening a wide group of donors, and its occasional ability to address and influence important humanitarian issues. However, the reviews documented the group’s struggle to live up to its significant potential. At the 2004 Ottawa meeting, experts involved in its founding heralded the group as ‘perhaps one of the most important initiatives in humanitarian action in a decade [...] not least because it came from donors themselves’, noting that the initiative had the potential to make major differences in reaching ‘more people in need, more quickly, more effectively, and more equitably’ (Smillie and Minear, 2005). But they also noted that only 15 months in, the nascent GHDI was already in need of reinvigoration due to a ‘loss of momentum’ (ibid.).

At the 10-year anniversary of the GHDI, the co-chairs commissioned a formal review of the initiative’s future relevance. This found a continued demand for collective donor action on humanitarian response, but it also concluded that if it were to effectively meet this demand, the initiative needed to be clearer about its purpose and more decisive in its actions (Jespersen et al., 2013). However, as our present review shows, the recommendations from that 10-year review remain largely unaddressed and there has, until now, been little follow-up.

Indeed, the past decade of the GHDI’s history has seen less momentum than its first decade in terms of the group’s development and position as a primary donor forum. Expansion has slowed, with only one new member joining, monitoring and indicator initiatives being abandoned, and external scrutiny and commentary quietened. The different pairings of co-chairs over the past 10 years have brought different areas and levels of activity, and the Covid-19 pandemic temporarily altered meeting models, but the status quo of the group has been largely unaltered.

### 1.2 A changed context for humanitarian donorship

Twenty years after the establishment of the GHDI, the world in which humanitarian donors seek to be good has transformed. The nature and scale of humanitarian challenges continues to shift at pace, with

---

4 The Humanitarian Response Index was led by the independent organisation DARA from 2007 to 2011. However, its methodology was criticised by many GHDI members who also questioned the independence of the reports, which were subsequently discontinued.

the increasingly protracted effects of complex ‘poly-crises’ happening in a context of rising fragility, and shrinking civil society and humanitarian space (Obrecht and Swithern, 2022; Cliffe et al, 2023). In this context of high and cascading risks (WEF, 2024a), the demands on and context of humanitarian donorship have changed significantly.

Financial demands on humanitarian donors have escalated with rising needs and with the expansion of the humanitarian system.<sup>5</sup> From the time of the GHDI’s founding to its 20th anniversary, funding requirements under the UN-coordinated appeals alone increased more than eleven-fold – from \$5 billion in 2003, to \$57 billion in 2023. But the funding shortfall grew faster – at \$37 billion, the gap in 2023 was 15 times larger than it was in 2003 (Figure 1). In response to this shortfall, the 2024 appeal shrank its requirements to \$46 billion, representing an ‘ultra-prioritisation of the most urgent needs’ (OCHA, 2023).

While the donor landscape may have widened somewhat since 2003, it remains dependent on a small group of donors to meet these growing demands. Gulf donors now feature among the 20 largest donors, multilateral development banks are a more integral part of crisis response, and other sources of support, such as remittances, are increasingly recognised – but funding to the international humanitarian system is still concentrated from the budgets of a few. As calls to diversify funding sources went unanswered, by 2021 almost half of all funds came from just five donors, and a third from the United States (US) alone (Obrecht and Swithern, 2022).<sup>6</sup>

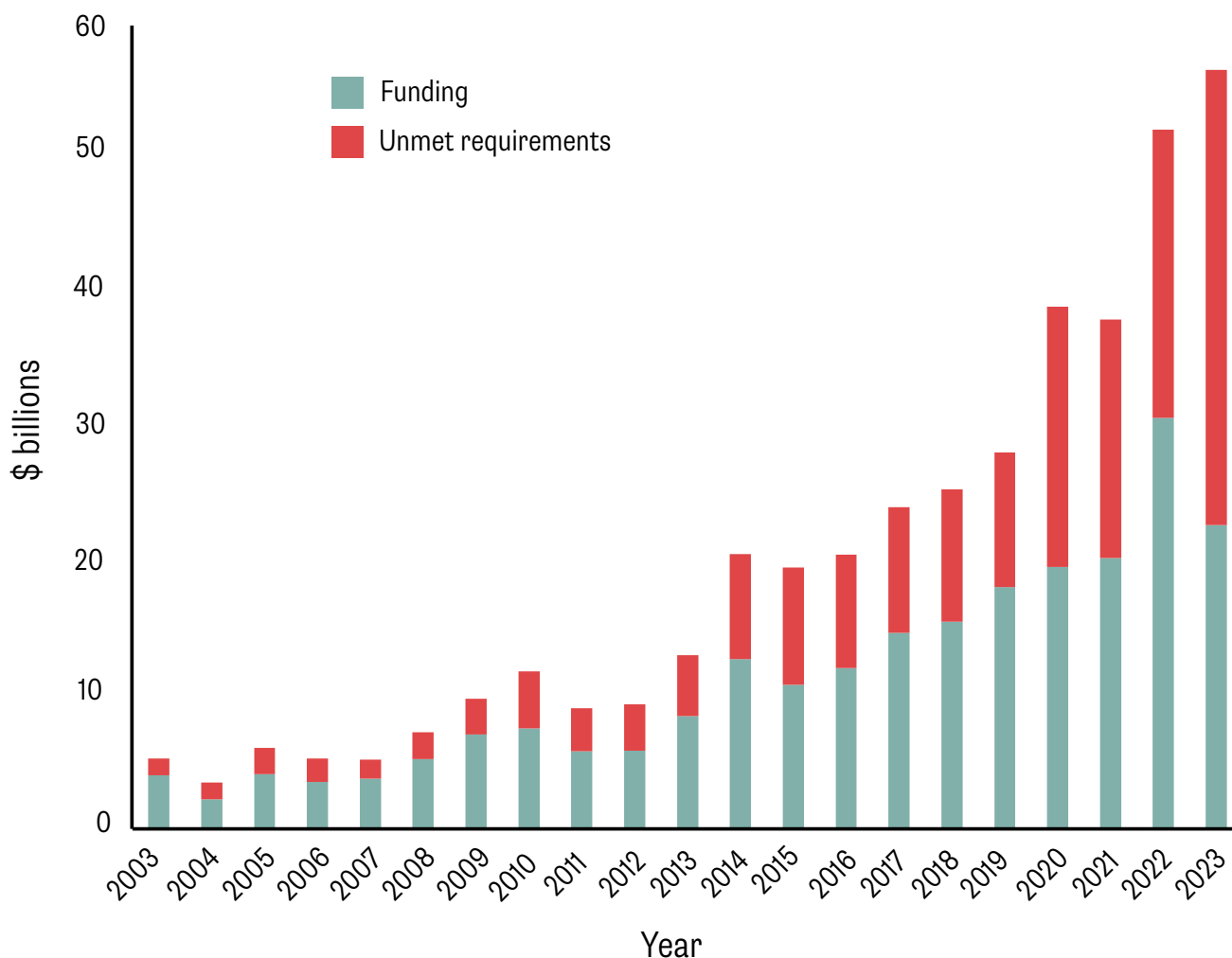
The degree of humanitarian coordination has, however, been reconfigured in the lifetime of the GHDI. The 2003 Stockholm meeting came at a time of ‘genuine sense of purpose’ about coherence and coordination (Jespersen et al., 2013: 3) and less than two years later, the Humanitarian Reform Agenda heralded the creation of the cluster system and was followed by multiple further reforms and reviews. In turn, the GHDI’s second decade witnessed a new level of concerted attention to humanitarian funding, including the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit process whose High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing paved the way for the Grand Bargain between donors and humanitarian agencies. As we explore in section 2.4, many of these initiatives owe much to the foundations created by the GHDI – but they can also be overwhelming and create fatigue around the proliferation of processes, and so prompt a rethink of the position of the GHDI.

---

5 The 2022 edition of the *State of the Humanitarian System* found that the number of humanitarian agencies had increased by 10% over a decade, driven by growth in national and local NGOs. There were also more humanitarian staff working in crisis contexts – an estimated 40% rise since 2013.

6 Volumes of funding are not necessarily reflective of the proportion of a country’s gross domestic product (GDP) spent on official development assistance (ODA). For example, ODA from the US was equivalent to 0.24% of its GDP in 2022, compared to the benchmark for rich countries to contribute 0.7%.

**Figure 1** UN coordinated appeals requirements and funding 2003-2023



Source: OCHA FTS data downloaded 09/02/2024

While the last 20 years have seen the creation of more humanitarian *operational structures*, there has also been a diminution of *political space* for multilateral cooperation (Global Nation, 2023; WEF, 2024b). Globally, trends towards democratic regression and hardening geopolitical fault-lines not only inflame humanitarian crises but also challenge the fundamental norms of humanitarian law and action. In 2003, in the aftermath of the era of ‘humanitarian interventions’ of the 1990s and in the wake of 9/11, geopolitical and economic conditions were ripe for shows of collective action among major donors. Twenty years later, in the shadow of Covid-19 and the conflicts in Ukraine and in the Middle East, the challenges of politicised donorship are equally salient. However, the interplay between fiscal pressures on donor economies and political insularity means a less favourable environment for improving principled cooperation on overseas aid. Arguably, in this context, the work of a group of donors committed to good humanitarian donorship is both more necessary and more difficult than it was 20 years ago.

### 1.3 Purpose and scope of the 20-year review

Given the scale of the challenges for humanitarian donorship, and the persistent questions about the role and effectiveness of the GHDI in meeting these – the 20th anniversary presents a clear opportunity to reassess the direction of the initiative. In 2023, the United Kingdom (UK) Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Estonia together assumed the co-chairing of the GHDI and commissioned this light touch-review to inform a revitalisation of the initiative.

This assessment builds on the 10-year review conducted in 2013, seeking to understand which issues persist and why, and examining what new lessons have emerged. It explores the strategic relevance of the GHDI to the challenges of good donorship, and its effectiveness as a donor forum.

The purpose of the study is to inform a process of strategic reflection and recalibration of the efforts of the GHDI. As such, it is a light-touch review rather than an in-depth evaluation. It is not designed to measure members' performance against the principles, nor to comprehensively assess progress over the past decade, but rather to provide options for plotting the way forward for the GHDI. It is based on interviews with a focused sample of GHDI members and external stakeholders (see Appendix 1), a survey sent to all GHDI members, and a discussion of initial findings at the GHDI HLM in December 2023.

Our consultations confirmed that there is no clear consensus on the future of the GHDI. This is perhaps unsurprising given the compromises and contradictions baked into the initiative from the start. Indeed, the lack of action on many of the recommendations of the 10-year review suggest that the established modus operandi of the GHDI makes change difficult: the informality of the group, the diversity of membership, and the two-year chairing model – all of these mean that it is not predisposed to making decisions to transform or reform itself.

The broad membership and wide constituency of stakeholders make for very different views on the function and value of the group. Several members concurred on some points, but there were also diverging and dissenting voices. Some members suggested that the initiative was redundant, and others argued that it was essential. Some issues generated many ideas and opinions, while other critical questions went relatively unanswered. We also encountered a mismatch in expectations of the GHDI group between members and external stakeholders (see section 2.1.1). And although we were able to hear the views of a range of vocal members, it proved difficult to elicit the views of less active members. Cognisant of this diversity of views, this report presents a series of options in each of the five areas, setting out the implications of each, to support the current co-chairs to facilitate an action plan.

Whichever option(s) the GHDI chooses to pursue, there is a limited window of opportunity to initiate an agenda for action. As this review comes early in the UK and Estonian co-chairing, there is an intention in 2024–2025 to lead a process of decisive change in the group that can be purposefully passed on to future co-chairing cycles. Missing the current window to initiate a clear process of change would risk once again losing the opportunity to reinvigorate the GHDI, and would put its continued relevance further into question.



## 2 Review findings

From two overarching areas of enquiry for this review – how the GHDI can be more strategically relevant to humanitarian challenges and how it can work more effectively as a donor forum – five areas for action emerged:

- Sharpening the purpose of the initiative.
- Selecting the focus of the GHDI's collective efforts.
- Revitalising the GHDI principles.
- Strengthening the GHDI's added value to other forums.
- Improving the effectiveness of the GHDI's ways of working.

These five areas are of different degrees of strategic and practical magnitude and are clearly connected to each other. While it is possible to make some practical improvements to its way of working and engaging without strategic discussion, most areas of action connect back to the first area: sharpening the purpose of the initiative must be the foundation for decisions about its areas of focus, about its relationship to the principles, and about its positioning in relation to other forums. Indeed, even efforts to better engage the breadth of members, and to attract senior leadership will be determined by choices around the purpose of the group. However, as our findings below show, it is – as is the case with most multilateral groups – somewhat easier for the group to agree on practical than strategic questions.

Under each of the five areas below, the findings are followed by a summary of the conclusions emerging from consultation with stakeholders and members, including at the December High Level Meeting. Given the diversity of views, these are grouped under actions where there was: a) a notable degree of **agreement**; b) significant divergence of views between members, or **divergence**; c) a **lack of discussion** on the topic among members.

### 2.1 Sharpening the purpose of the GHDI

The GHDI was born from a clear shared vision. Reflecting on the creation of the initiative, one of its Swedish instigators framed it like this:

What did we want to achieve? What was our vision? Put simply: aid should be given according to need, when and where it was required, in sufficient amounts and with appropriate quality, and it should include measures to prevent and prepare for emergencies, while also helping people rebuild their lives and livelihoods after a crisis. (Schaar, 2007)

But having a clear *vision for the principles*, does not automatically dictate the *purpose of the initiative* – it does not spell out what the members of the group should be aiming to achieve as they meet under the broad banner of advancing the principles. Indeed, a decade ago, the 10-year review of the GHDI noted that the initiative was missing a clearly articulated purpose. Beyond the initial five-point

implementation plan, there appeared to be no explicit mandate setting out what the group is for.<sup>7</sup> This lack of shared purpose, the reviewers observed, thwarted any attempts to make it ‘fit for purpose’ (Jespersen et al., 2013).

This problem persists: only 5 of the 22 respondents to our 2023 survey of members felt that the purpose of the initiative was clear to them.<sup>8</sup> In interviews, members and external stakeholders expressed uncertainties about the purpose of the GHDI, questions about its continued relevance in a changed humanitarian landscape, and concerns that this has diminished. In the words of one member representative, interviewed for this research: ‘what started as a way to advocate for key principles is now becoming a platform for general donor engagement without a clear purpose or strategy for concrete outcomes’. While there were suggestions (as there had been a decade ago) that the GHDI had outlived its purpose, there was broad acknowledgment of the need for a renewed sense of purpose to ensure future relevance.

The bedrock purpose of the GHDI – to implement and promote the principles of good humanitarian donorship – and the track record of the group’s work of the past 20 years, suggest that the group has both an ‘inward-facing’ reflexive purpose for its members, and an ‘externally facing’ influencing role for the wider system. In other words, it exists to support donors to individually and collectively become better humanitarian donors, and as a forum to promote improvements in the wider humanitarian system. There is precedent and expectation, to varying degrees, for the GHDI to serve a combination of the following purposes, which are elaborated in the sections 2.1.1 to 2.1.4 below:

- Facilitating learning and exchange
- Agreeing joined-up positions among members
- Enabling active complementarity between donors
- Ensuring members’ accountability for implementation of the GHDI principles.

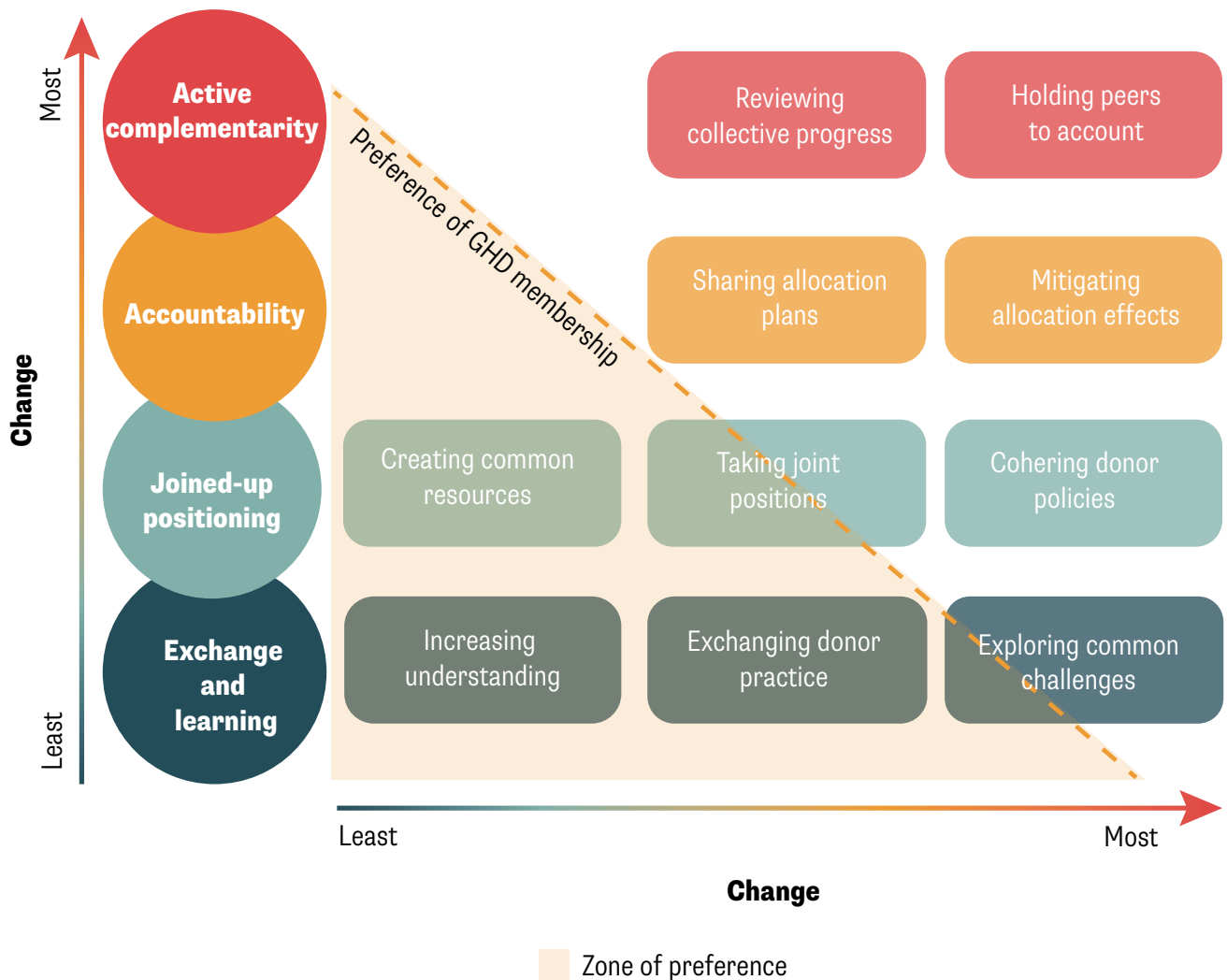
Pursuing each of these purposes implies a spectrum of effort and ambition to change the GHDI (see Figure 2). For example, exchange and learning can simply aim to increase the level of common understanding of critical humanitarian issues, which requires little change from the current operation of the GHDI. However, moving towards frank and in-depth exploration of common challenges would require some change in the level and nature of engagement in the meetings. Our research found little appetite for the GHDI to move towards the functions demanding significant change in the ambitions of the GHDI – limiting the scope for radical reinvigoration.

---

7 The 10-year review refers to a Terms of Reference (ToR) for the GHDI group but the co-chairs and current member representatives were not aware of the existence of such a ToR and it was not available on the GHDI website or via other repositories.

8 Twelve of the 22 respondents who answered the question said the purpose of the GHDI is ‘somewhat’ clear/well articulated to all members; and four that it is not. Five find it clear, and one said they do not know. Presented in our survey with a list of possible purposes for the Initiative, members most frequently selected being ‘a forum for like-minded donors’ – but this still raises the questions of what constitutes ‘like-mindedness’, and what the forum is for.

**Figure 2** Four possible GHDI purpose areas and levels of change required



It is notable that GHDI members appear to have a lower level of expectations of, or ambition for, the group than external stakeholders do. The fact that it convenes some of the most powerful financial players in the humanitarian system fosters belief among external parties that the initiative is more influential than it actually is. As one GHDI member observed:

as it is a donors’ only discussion, it lends itself to speculation that more concrete decisions are taken than are in practice. There is a vague, maybe idealised, perception of how donors are working together and aligning their positions within the GHDI. From conversations with outsiders, the GHDI is seen as much more purposeful and powerful than it is.

Faced with this mismatch, there is a choice between decreasing expectations, or stepping up to meet them. Some GHDI members suggested that outsiders needed a ‘reality check’, and outsiders suggested that the group needed to raise its game on delivering against the principles.

### 2.1.1 Exchange and learning

Exchange and learning have been the dominant de facto purpose of the GHDI over the past decade. This includes two types of information-sharing and discussion: between members on ‘best practices’, and with external experts on selected topics.

Presentations by external experts are a regular part of the ELMs and HLMs. Under the co-chairship of Belgium and Finland (2021–2023), the group held a series of webinars on current humanitarian topics including protection, disability inclusion, and the impact of sanctions and counter-terrorism measures. Such opportunities for tailored briefings on key topics are particularly appreciated by smaller donors, whose staff are stretched to cover multiple topic portfolios and who have fewer opportunities to engage with policy and practice developments. However, the benefit is more limited for larger, better-connected members who can find the content repetitious. Thus, while there is value in bringing members to a common level of understanding, doing so in a way that caters to members’ different levels of baseline knowledge is challenging. For the external experts, addressing the GHDI is a rare opportunity to reach a group of donors; however, as we have noted above, their expectations of influence through the forum may be misaligned with those of the GHDI members.

A persistent critique of the GHDI is that without a plan for systematic follow-up from external presentations, the group runs the risk of being what one member characterised as ‘another talking shop’ with tenuous links to implementing the principles. The same is true for briefings shared between GHDI members in the meetings. While the GHDI is valued as a unique donor-only ‘safe space for conversations’ where members can frankly share their experience and challenges around putting principles into best practice, exchanges tend to stop short of dynamic and change-oriented discussion. The level of authority of meeting participants, the size of the group, and the expectations of what the GHDI can achieve, all mean that exchanges can default to what one member called a ‘routine tour or pre-prepared statements’ or a ‘formalised affair while there are no formal decisions taken’. This is not unique to the GHDI and is a phenomenon common to many multilateral forums, but nonetheless one member fundamentally questioned the value of the group if it were ‘just about having interesting conversations about best practice, without seeking to have any influence on the sector.’

It is largely dependent on the tenacity of the co-chairs and the appetite of self-selecting members to translate exchanges into influence and action. As such, outputs – let alone outcomes – from briefings have been highly variable. The workplans set out by the co-chairs at the start of their two-year tenures provide the opportunity to situate briefings and exchanges as part of a thought-out process of learning and influence. Combined with skilled facilitation of sessions, and adequate space for preparation and follow-up, this could go some way towards making the group’s discussions more focused and productive.

### 2.1.2 Joined-up positioning

Arriving at – and sharing – collective positions is an important way that the GHDI can promote principled action among both its members and the external stakeholders that they fund. Joined-up messaging on support for cash-based modalities, for example, showed the power of a common donor position.

At the ‘easier’ end of the spectrum of joined-up messaging is the option of commissioning shared resources for its members and the wider sector. Over its 20-year history, the GHDI has produced several of these, including a best practice ‘playbook’ on innovative financing under the Swiss–European Union co-chairing (GHDI, 2020). While this demands effort and financial outlay, it arguably requires less cooperation among the membership than coming to agreement on joint positions.

Yet there was a widespread call from both members and non-members for the group to go further and do more, and better, on generating common messages and positions from its membership. Indeed, in recent Chatham House discussions, donors called for the GHDI to make use of its unique donor-only forum to agree common positions on boundaries for principled funding in challenging contexts (Chatham House, 2022). There is also significant appetite within the group to make common messaging a more routine and central function of the group, and there is a clear signal of intent from the current co-chairs to facilitate this, starting with common positioning on climate finance informed by recent expert briefings.

This demands a pragmatic approach – the co-chairs are not expecting to achieve consensus or full sign-up, but they have achieved agreement on the climate finance statement as a GHDI branded ‘common good’ for members to use and share with stakeholders. This is in line with the 10-year review’s recommendation to reconcile membership diversity with collective positioning – allowing room for donors’ policy differences but being a “rapprochement” on practical matters’ (Jespersen et al., 2013).

A further step towards aligned positioning would be for the GHDI group to promote policy coherence among its members. Recognising the realpolitik that donors will have different priorities and approaches, the GHDI might at least attempt to avoid donors working at cross purposes and open the space for finding joined-up positions on important but divisive issues, including around financing in contested and politicised spaces – rather than just on more technical issues where consensus was readily available. However, this would have to be predicated on frank discussion and negotiation of members’ different stances and practices – something that doesn’t fit well with the current participation in GHDI meetings, which centres more on information-sharing than influential decision-making. As such, while there was some external hope that the GHDI might play such a role, there was no evident appetite among members to extend the ambition this far.

### 2.1.3 Active complementarity

Humanitarian funding is characterised by imbalances in coverage. There is a persistent funding gap between high profile and neglected crises,<sup>9</sup> and between the best and worst funded appeals (DI, 2023). The drafters of the GHDI principles recognised this problem, reaffirming that funding should be based on proportionality to needs, and on the basis of burden-sharing. And although they stopped short of promising to meet all needs everywhere (Schaar, 2007), GHDI members have committed to ‘strive to ensure that funding of humanitarian action in new crises does not adversely affect the meeting of needs in ongoing crises’ (GHDI, 2003).

In the conception of the GHDI, it was recognised that collective behaviour was necessary to create a net effect of needs-based coverage – in the words of the then deputy UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC): ‘Most donor behaviour is rational from a donor point of view. However the sum total of all donor behaviour doesn’t produce a rational whole’ (Smillie and Minear, 2003). There was a case, therefore, for the GHDI to play a role in negotiating a rational division of financial labour between donors (Scott, 2015). In interviews, some external stakeholders repeated the hope that the GHDI, as the only global-level donor-only forum,<sup>10</sup> could be the place where donors addressed the net effect of their bilateral contributions, in order to improve their collective coverage of humanitarian needs. With anticipated reductions in humanitarian budgets, the GHDI might, at the very least, provide a safe space for frank and transparent conversations among donors about the implications of their projected allocation plans. This could inform members’ decision-making to anticipate neglected crises and mitigate severe under-funding of needs.

However, this is not a function that the GHDI has embraced in its 20-year history, and current member representatives did not raise or engage with the idea. Although it stops short of formal coordination of allocations, even regular discussion of active complementarity was felt by several members to be an unrealistic expectation of this informal group of sovereign donors.

### 2.1.4 Accountability

As the history of the GHDI shows (see section 1.1) members have had an ambivalent relationship with being held accountable for implementation of the principles. Hardwired into the initiative from the start was a trade-off between embracing inclusivity and ensuring accountability. The logic of the founders was that ‘more inclusive membership represents a means to improve behaviour over time across a

---

9 According to analysis by Development Initiatives, the largest recipient of humanitarian funding in 2022 was Ukraine – receiving the highest volume of contributions ever recorded in one year (\$4.4 billion). As in previous years, a small number of large long-term crises absorbed the majority of funding – in 2022, the 10 largest recipients of humanitarian assistance received 63% of total country-allocable funding (DI, 2023).

10 And one which is importantly not tied to a specific agency, like the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) donor support groups are.

wider group. A non-binding GHDI process, the reasoning goes, enables broader engagement and buy-in' (Smillie and Minnear 2005). For this theory of change to work, argued experts after the Ottawa meeting, there would need to be ongoing monitoring and pressure on donors' application of the principles.

GHDI members did agree in Ottawa to initiate a process of annual 'self-assessment' of collective performance against the principles, an intention that was reaffirmed at the 2012 HLM. However, after many proposals and much discussion, efforts to create a light-touch self-assessment process were discontinued – partly due to lack of agreement on indicators. It appeared that this lightly self-governed donor grouping could generate neither the mechanisms nor, more importantly, the disposition to consistently hold its members accountable.

Although attempts at creating an accountability function within the group found little traction, external mechanisms were created with varying degrees of success and longevity. There was early progress as the GHDI managed to persuade – and support – the OECD DAC to include humanitarian action in the scope of its peer review process. Although this does not cover all GHDI members, it was welcomed for enabling scrutiny of those who do belong to the DAC group of donors, and for mainstreaming codified expectations of good donorship (OECD, 2012). At the same time, GHDI also actively encouraged independent scrutiny from independent bodies including the Humanitarian Practice Network, which generated a related series of papers and entire edition of the *Humanitarian Exchange* magazine in 2005 (HPN, 2005). However, this attention soon dissipated, and as we saw in section 1.1, the external independent review, in the form of the Humanitarian Response Index report, was also discontinued.

Research for this study revealed mixed views from current GHDI member representatives about whether and how the present gap in accountability should be filled. Enabling accountability against the GHDI principles was the least popular function selected by respondents to our survey of members, and at the HLM discussion in December 2023 there was some clear opposition to reopening efforts in this direction. However, in interviews, others expressed concern that the accountability gap undermined the purpose of the group. In the words of one member, 'the potential strength of the GHD lies particularly in the fact that it is a set of commitments by donors to which we as donors should be held more accountable'.

However, among supporters of greater accountability, there were different views about what form this should take. Some called for a 'harder' form of combined self- and independent reporting and others suggested a 'softer' approach of more regular discussions about how members were applying the principles. This would focus more on sharing best practice, but not seek to address gaps in implementation. Others pointed to the Grand Bargain reporting process, which involves self-reporting by signatories against the commitments, which is reflected and augmented in an annual independent review.<sup>11</sup>

---

11 This independent reporting has to date been compiled by ODI (see <https://odi.org/en/publications/the-grand-bargain-at-five-years-an-independent-review/>).

### Box 1 Conclusions and options on sharpening the purpose of the GHDI

The GHDI needs to articulate its core purposes if it is to address internal and external criticisms that it has outlived its *raison d'être*, and if it is to effectively direct the work of the group. It also needs to reconcile different purposes for its different constituencies of members.

From members' discussion of the four potential purpose areas, emerged:

**Agreement:** that *exchange and learning* continued to be valuable, but only if strategically linked to generating *joined-up positioning* in order to influence and inform humanitarian policy and practice.

**Divergence:** surrounding demand for the group to reinvigorate its purpose of promoting *accountability* for applying the principles, but no agreement about what this entails. Echoing previous failed attempts to pursue accountability, there was little appetite for anything more than the 'softest' self-reporting.

**Lack of discussion:** of suggestions that the group might serve the purpose of promoting *active complementarity* of members' priorities and allocations.

*Core questions and choices:* GHDI members appear to prefer minimal change to the group's purpose (see Figure 2), seeing its role as a safe space for exchange and learning, although with some ambition to translate 'talking' into action. This shift towards focusing more on joined-up positioning will demand consistent leadership from the co-chairs as well as more dynamic engagement from participants. This is certainly a pragmatic approach that considers the diverse and informal configuration of the group. However, it may fall short of meeting the originally envisaged potential of the group: the question remains whether it is a sufficiently ambitious purpose for the group, to ensure relevance in the face of global humanitarian challenges.

## 2.2 Selecting the focus of the GHDI's collective efforts

### 2.2.1 Preferences for topics

Throughout its history the GHDI has discussed a wide range of topics. The breadth of the principles and the workplans that arise out of the two-year charring system have enabled the group to address the pressing humanitarian issues of the time. A review of available GHDI meeting minutes and workplans shows that, for example, funding cash-based modalities was high on the agenda as this grew as a humanitarian priority,<sup>12</sup> leading to and following on from the 2018 adoption of a new 24th GHDI

---

<sup>12</sup> This found high-level expression in the High-Level Panel on Cash that convened in 2016, and which informed the commitment to cash in the Grand Bargain agreement.



principle on the use of cash transfers. The group has also turned its attention periodically to time-bound issues such as UN reform and the impacts of Covid-19, as well as ongoing challenges including accountability to affected populations, sanctions, and – more recently – concerns around climate.

When asked what topics the group should focus on in the future,<sup>13</sup> GHDI members and external stakeholders suggested a similarly wide-ranging list of potential priorities, which can broadly be grouped into the three areas below:

### Diplomatic and geopolitical

- Implications for humanitarian action of violations of IHL and impediments to humanitarian access.
- Humanitarian diplomacy and funding for humanitarian protection.
- Changed and changing geopolitical challenges affecting humanitarian operations, including the risks and technicalities of principled funding in constrained environments.

### Humanitarian funding

- Prioritisation of needs and coverage implications of donor allocations (see also sub-section 2.1.3).
- Enhancing the quality of funding and its use, including advancing localisation and harmonising reporting requirements, risk sharing, and promoting accountability to affected populations.
- Diversifying the funding base, including frank exploration of potential for engaging other sources of donorship to address shortfalls.

### Broader crisis financing

- Operationalising the humanitarian–development–peace nexus: addressing approaches in fragile places and learning from members’ institutional approaches.
- Connecting to climate finance and making the connections between climate change and humanitarian needs and financing.

## 2.2.2 Basis for selection

Given the breadth of the list above, and the potential for it to be expanded as new crises and humanitarian preoccupations arise, the GHDI risks spreading its attention too thinly and too inconsistently between topics. The flipside of informality and flexibility is a lack of focus. Some interviewees also expressed concern about the group straying beyond its sphere of influence: in the words of one external stakeholder:

The GHDI is suffering from mission creep where they are trying to look at operational issues that they don’t have a hand in. There are donor-specific challenges in the system. They need to face those in depth and leverage their power there.

---

<sup>13</sup> In our interviews and member survey as well as in a survey undertaken by the FCDO and Estonia as they began their co-chairing role.

As most crisis-related issues can be justified as having at least tangential relevance to humanitarian donors, the GHDI requires an explicit basis for intentionally selecting topics, and this must be closely linked to its understanding of the group's purpose. Four criteria for selecting topics emerged from our research – namely that the co-chairs should build their workplans around issues that are:

- **Specific to donors:** demanding a clear-eyed focus on addressing only those issues that are within the ambit of donor behaviour and direct influence. This raises questions around how far this humanitarian-focused group should go in addressing 'nexus' issues including connections to climate, with some members arguing that this is essential to good humanitarian donorship,<sup>14</sup> and others concerned that too much focus on the non-humanitarian pillars is outside the groups' collective expertise and mandate.
- **Challenging:** members and external stakeholders suggested that the group make best use of the 'safe space', focus on uncomfortable issues, rather than ones where the terms of the discussion have already been established and well rehearsed – and it should focus on the issues where members are known to have divergent views. This reflects previous calls for the GHDI to deal with sufficiently politically 'heavy' policy issues in order to secure engagement and maintain relevance. As the 10-year review noted, 'if the issues are too light, there will be no political interest, and if there is no political interest, then there will not be any heavy issues brought to the table' (Jespersen et al., 2013).
- **Shared:** driven by common issues faced by a large proportion of members, rather than driven by the co-chairs' interests. The survey of members' interests conducted by current and previous co-chairs at the start of their tenure represents good practice in this regard.
- **Unaddressed:** this relates to the question of added value (see section 2.4). Members were keen to avoid unproductive duplication with the agendas of other forums. It was particularly noted that the GHDI should focus on the important issues that are not covered by the Grand Bargain – such as access and IHL. However, some members called for latitude in this criterion, noting that there is some value in bringing multi-stakeholder discussions from elsewhere into the GHDI's donor-only space.

---

14 Nexus approaches are implicit in GHDI Principle 9, even though the GHDI pre-dated nexus language and agreements: 'Provide humanitarian assistance in ways that are supportive of recovery and long-term development, striving to ensure support, where appropriate, to the maintenance and return of sustainable livelihoods and transitions from humanitarian relief to recovery and development activities.'

## Box 2 Conclusions and options on the focus areas for the GHDI

There is no shortage of humanitarian challenges that the GHDI could choose to focus its attention on, and which can be justified as being of interest to the group. Issues that the group has, and could, focus on can be grouped under: diplomatic and geopolitical issues; humanitarian funding; and wider crisis funding. However, to enable sustained, productive, and relevant focus – and to avoid ‘mission creep’ – the group must have working criteria to select issues. Among members there was:

**Agreement:** that addressing humanitarian access, diplomacy and IHL issues should be a focus for the group as these are central to the principles, challenging, and lack other forums for discussion. There was also broad agreement that issues around quality and quantity of humanitarian funding are critical insofar as they complement other discussions.

**Divergence:** around the extent to which issues related to wider crisis financing, including climate financing, should be a focus for the group – whether this was crucial or peripheral to good humanitarian donorship.

*Core questions and choices:* As part of rearticulating its purpose, the GHDI must also spell out the parameters of topic selection. This won't make decision-making automatic, but it would serve as an anchor point for co-chairs' work planning. The question of how 'heavy' to make the topics touches on the configuration of the group: whether it can muster the appropriate level of member engagement in order to have a productive focus on the most challenging issues.

## 2.3 Revitalising the GHDI principles

### 2.3.1 Prominence and relevance of the principles

When the GHDI was created, it was first and foremost a set of principles – with the meetings of the group a means to drive implementation. Twenty years later, the reverse is now true – the initiative is first and foremost a donor forum, and the principles an implicit backdrop. One member noted, ‘we currently perceive the GHDI as a forum that has shifted away from a focus on its key principles’. Some argue that this is a sign of success: the principles have become so widely assumed and well integrated into other commitments including the Grand Bargain, that they no longer require the spotlight.<sup>15</sup> As Figure 3 shows, at least half of the 24 GHDI principles are clearly reflected elsewhere.

However, the group’s faded focus on the principles may be less a signal of success than a symptom of accountability aversion (see sub-section 2.1.5) and a gradual institutional amnesia among donors about what they had committed to. Indeed, it was notable that even among many of the most GHDI-engaged donors, representatives had only a cursory familiarity with the 24 principles, and struggled to recall what they encompassed. While over half of GHDI members responding to our survey<sup>16</sup> reported that the principles are in active use in their institutions, interviews suggest that this is largely not explicitly done. Instead, they tend to be referred to in general terms, mainstreamed into other institutional values, or implicit in reference to the Grand Bargain commitments which are felt to be far more ‘live’. Only occasionally are they selectively used as project evaluation criteria, or as headline values – often interchangeably with the ‘core’ humanitarian principles of humanity, independence, impartiality and neutrality – to defend or promote a course of action.

Within the work of the GHDI group, overt references to the principles appear infrequent – with the exceptions of discussions around adding new principles – the successful proposal to add a cash principle in 2018, and the unsuccessful proposal to add one on addressing gender-based violence in 2022. Less than a third of members surveyed felt that the GHDI principles were actively used to guide the work of the group.<sup>17</sup>

Whether it is seen as ‘mission accomplished’, or ‘mission forgotten’ – the drift away from principles feeds into existential questions for the GHDI. If the founding principles’ *raison d’être* has been overtaken or lost, what then is the relevance of the group? And could a reinvigoration of the principles be part of a revitalising of a purpose-driven group?

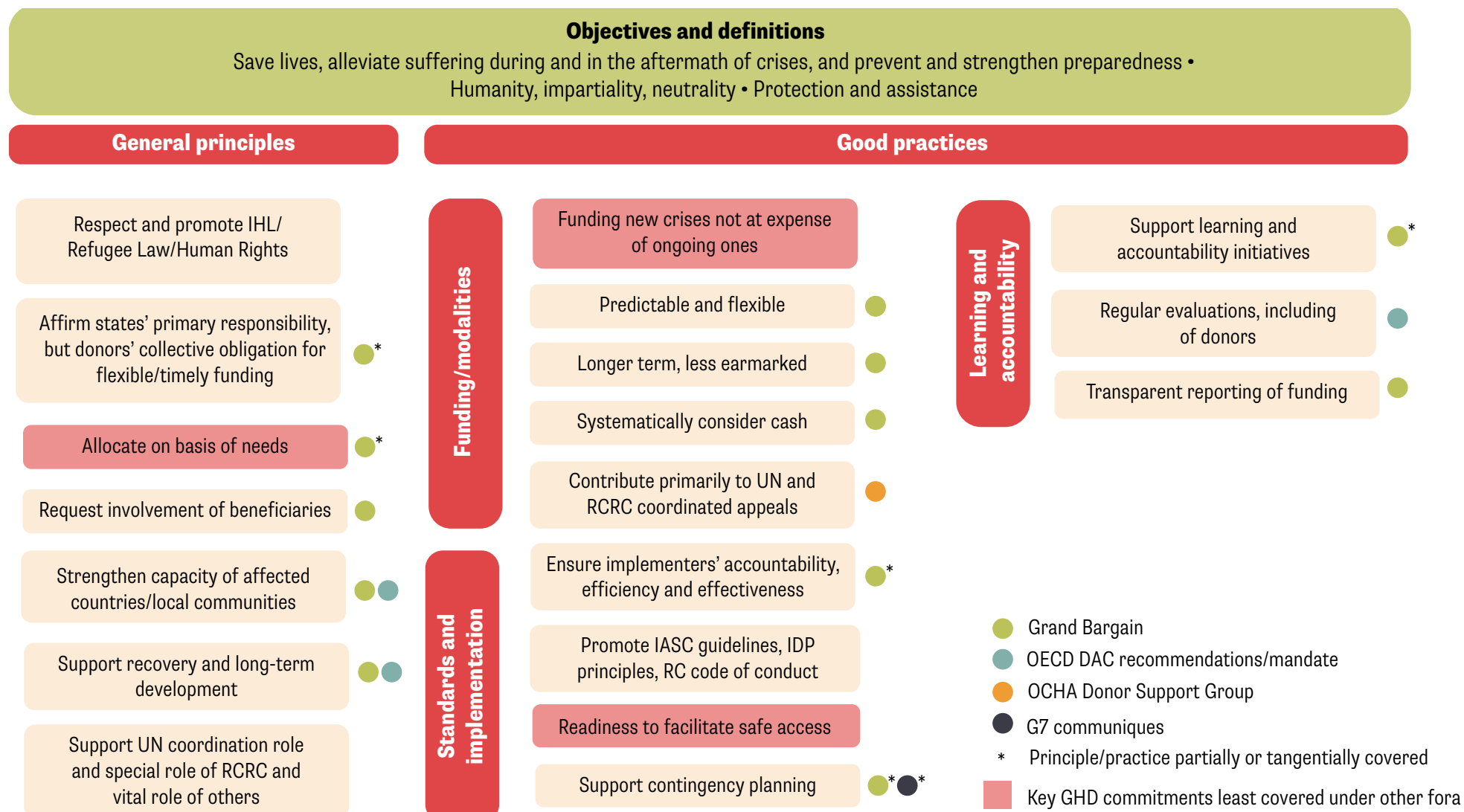
---

15 Other sources suggest that the integration of many GHDI principles into the Grand Bargain was a sign of failure – that despite a decade of GHDI, they still had not been implemented (High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, 2016).

16 Twelve of 22 respondents answered that the GHDI principles were being actively used within their own institution, and seven answered ‘somewhat’. One answered ‘not at all’ and two ‘don’t know’.

17 Twelve of 22 respondents say they think the GHDI principles are ‘somewhat’ actively used to guide the work of the GHDI, and seven say they are actively used. No one says the GHDI principles are not actively used at all, though three ‘don’t know’.

**Figure 3** Overlaps between the GHDI principles and other donor commitments



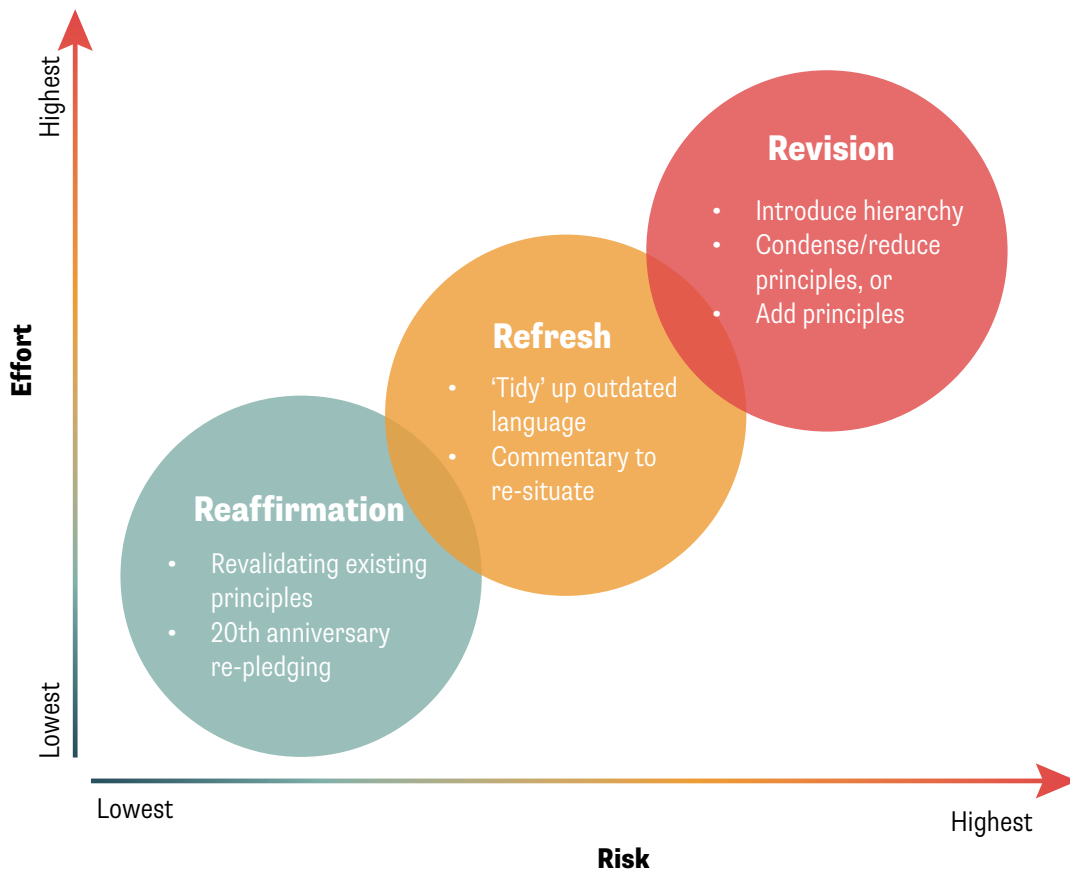
Note: As Figure 5 illustrates, not all GHDI members are signatories to all of the commitments shown in this graphic.

### 2.3.2 Reinvigorating the principles

There is an evident demand for the GHDI to reconnect its work more clearly to the principles. This was the majority view among the GHDI members surveyed – with 13 out of 22 respondents believing that the group should focus on them more strongly.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, being principles-based was the added value identified by most members in our survey.<sup>19</sup> There was, however, less clarity on what a strengthened focus on the principles was intended to achieve, other than to reassert the mission of the group. Interviewees suggested that the principles should be brought to the fore for different reasons: as general values to broadly cohere donors; as an anchoring framework for the workplan of the group; or as terms of entry to the group, to which members should be held accountable.

To serve any of these purposes, three options to ‘wake up’ the principles emerged: reaffirmation, refresh and revision (see Figure 4). These each involve a degree of risk and effort for the group, and all must be viewed in a context of widespread political roll-back on international norms, which make some members cautious about any proposal to revisit them at all.

**Figure 4** Options for reinvigorating the GHDI principles



18 However, 6 say no and 3 that they don’t know.

19 For the 21 member representatives who answered the question of what added value the GHDI brought relative to other initiatives for aid cooperation, collaboration, or coordination. The fact that it is based on common agreement on the GHDI principles was the highest ranked of 12 options.

Any efforts to reinvigorate the principles also have to be considered in the context of renewed scrutiny of the ‘core’ humanitarian principles of humanity, independence, impartiality, and neutrality (see, for example, Barber and Bowden, 2023) in the wake of problematic responses in Myanmar, Ethiopia, Ukraine and Gaza. These ‘core principles’ are at the heart of the GHDI principles but there is both a need and an opportunity to clarify the relationship between them. Interviewees observed that the ‘core’ principles were often referred to interchangeably with the GHDI principles – a confusion which was exacerbated by the general lack of familiarity with the latter. If the GHDI principles are to be ‘refreshed’, this could be usefully clarified in an accompanying commentary.

### Reaffirmation

A popular least-effort and least-risk option would be for the GHDI to revalidate the existing principles. This would serve to remind members and stakeholders of what has been agreed. It would provide a collective moment to reassert the active presence of the group, and potentially serve as a starting point to promote greater adherence. This might take the opportunity presented by the 20th anniversary to hold a repledging event. While some cautioned that this would come with the political risk of losing current members, and some political effort to mobilise a repledge, others noted the benefit seen as a means of maintaining only committed and engaged members.

### Refresh

Given the change in the humanitarian as well as the geopolitical landscape in the past 20 years, there is also a need to slightly rearticulate or ‘tidy up’ the principles in order to remain relevant. This would involve a cosmetic (rather than content) review of the 24 principles and could go hand-in-hand with the re-affirmation suggested above. In some cases, there is a need for minor editorial amendments – for example, there are outdated references to the old UN Consolidated Appeals Process which has since been replaced by the Humanitarian Needs Overview and Humanitarian Response Plan process. There is also a case for adding an explanatory commentary to explain each of the principles and how they relate to other commitments and processes – from the Grand Bargain to the DAC recommendations to the various climate financing agreements. Members and stakeholders alike were clear that any such refresh should have clear parameters of technical amendments and contextual narrative – seeking to build on the substance rather than to dilute it.

### Revision

The GHDI principles reflect the era in which they were written. The 2003 Stockholm conference took place shortly after the invasion of Iraq and so concerns about military instrumentalism<sup>20</sup> were at the front of the drafters’ minds. Climate change, however, was still a fringe issue in humanitarian debate. Several other priorities for humanitarian donors have emerged in the last 20 years, which are not explicitly referenced in the GHDI principles and there were several suggestions from external stakeholders and members that these be added. These include references to the humanitarian–peace–development nexus and to aid localisation.

---

20 Many of the signatories had active troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and as reflected in Colin Powell’s controversial comments about NGOs being ‘force multipliers’ in Iraq, followed military doctrine which saw civil–military cooperation as an integral tactic for ‘winning hearts and minds’ (see Schaar, 2007:7)

However, many members registered strong reservations about adding new principles. These concerns centred on the risk of a roll-back on standards in a political climate that little favours multilateral agreements and norms. Some also cited the experience of failed attempts to add a principle on gender-based violence in 2022, attributed to difficulties in agreeing scope. Without the headwinds of political leadership and system-wide momentum that enabled the adoption of the cash principle in 2018, attempts to add to the principles would be a fruitless diversion of efforts, according to some members. Others raised the risk of dilution – especially as existing principles were far from fulfilled.

### Box 3 Conclusions and options for revitalising the GHDI principles

The 24 GHDI principles have experienced a common mainstreaming fate: becoming both widely ingrained and largely forgotten. There is an appetite now to somehow re-establish them as the ‘north star’ of the GHDI and reassert their validity. Discussion with members generated:

**Agreement:** that it would be helpful to reaffirm the principles, but that as it is a risky political environment in which to revisit them, any efforts should focus on a light re-presentation and ‘cosmetic’ edit of the principles – and not on attempting any substantive revisions.

**Divergence:** to a small degree, around the addition of new principles – with suggestions of adding principles on climate facing clear warnings about the risks of re-opening the principles.

**Lack of discussion:** of the idea of holding a replighting event around the 20th anniversary.

*Core questions and choices:* Given that there is a broad agreement that any reinvigoration needs to be light-touch, the questions now are largely about what process the co-chairs might lead, including who should ‘hold the pen’ on the light refresh and any framing statements. However, it also poses the wider question around consensus – where all members agree to reaffirming the principles, and whether the group is prepared to maintain this as a minimum bar for continued membership.

## 2.4 Strengthening the GHDI’s added value to other forums

### 2.4.1 Identifying the GHDI’s added value to other forums

From the outset, the GHDI has co-existed with other groups including those under the OECD DAC, and donor-support groups for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). And as noted in section 1.2, there has been a proliferation of forums in which donors can engage. The GHDI has been positioned as having a distinct value by virtue of its inclusivity and breadth. Its membership is not bound by the size of a donor’s economy or contributions, and its scope is not limited to the workings of a single institution.



Even a decade ago, however, this added value was in question. The 10-year review cited arguments that:

the added value of the forum had become minimal, and that participation in alternative forums now could cover what was left as the core functions of GHDI. There was therefore a risk, that the continuation of the GHDI might prevent the development of more timely and relevant initiatives (Jespersen et al., 2023).

The subsequent advent of the Grand Bargain process in 2016 reawakened concerns about the redundancy of the GHDI. Through various iterations of workstreams and caucuses,<sup>21</sup> the Grand Bargain is directly engaging many of the 25 GHDI members, who are Grand Bargain signatories. With more formalised processes and oversight mechanisms, the Grand Bargain is generating common resources, negotiating action, and reporting progress on critical dimensions of good humanitarian donorship – from joint needs assessments to flexible funding and supporting localisation. So, despite critiques about the efficacy of the Grand Bargain (Alexander, 2023), some members and stakeholders suggested that it was the primary forum for improving humanitarian donorship.

At the same time, when major donors seek a donor-only space for information-sharing and collaboration, they are likely to bypass the GHDI in favour of smaller informal groupings. Members suggested that these are both felt to be more trusted and effective, with one noting that ‘the [GHDI] group has also become increasingly less effective in fostering an environment for constructive dialogue on key issues due to its size’. These groups include the G12+ group of donors which convenes on an ad hoc basis in Geneva and New York and, according to one commentator, evolved as a direct alternative to the GHDI, ‘because the GHD wasn’t delivering and the major donors wanted to get stuff done’.<sup>22</sup> For the GHDI, such alternative donor spaces pose a double challenge to its relevance: diverting discussions to closed-door forums, and increasing competition for donor representatives’ limited time.

The larger humanitarian donors engage in many more humanitarian forums than the smaller donors do – as Figure 5 illustrates. Within this crowded landscape, the GHDI faces the challenge of justifying its added value to each of these constituencies. For the members that are engaging with a large number of forums, the GHDI has to both prove that it is worth the additional time and effort, and ensure that there are efficient ways to connect to and complement these other agendas. For the GHDI members that are less highly networked, the GHDI will need to remain a key entry point into global humanitarian discussions – and will therefore need to remain accessible and informative. Striking an appropriate balance between these two agendas is at the heart of keeping the GHDI relevant to all its members – and speaks directly to questions of purpose (see section 2.1) and membership (see section 2.4).

---

21 Ten commitment areas originally – which then became a set of workstreams and now are framed under caucuses of shared priorities.

22 There is also the ‘Stockholm Group’ of six major donors that meets at a senior level on an ad hoc basis.

**Figure 5** GHDI members' affiliation to other humanitarian forums



Note: this overview is illustrative rather than comprehensive, highlighting the key relevant forums that GHD members are also engaged in.

## 2.4.2 Enhancing complementarity and connections

If the GHDI is to add value to the wider humanitarian landscape – as well as to its own constituencies of highly and less-networked members – it will need to develop more effective ways of connecting to other forums. It has the opportunity to reduce duplication, and to be a hub from which joint donor positions are fed into other processes, and in which updates from these other processes are constructively addressed. Such connections are already being made, albeit in an ad hoc fashion. Experts and representatives who participate in other groups are regularly invited to address GHDI meetings – the ERC has attended HLMs on multiple occasions,<sup>23</sup> as have other representatives of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and experts engaged with Grand Bargain workstreams. However, this is largely at the discretion of the co-chairs and is subject-specific rather than part of a routine cycle of engagement.

### Complementing the Grand Bargain

Given that the current iteration of the Grand Bargain has an ‘expiry date’ of 2026 – the 10-year anniversary of its creation<sup>24</sup> – its relationship with the GHDI is a particularly live question. As the signatories are under pressure to deliver on their Grand Bargain commitments, some have suggested that the GHDI could play a complementary role by providing a donor-only space to unpack specific implementation challenges. Grand Bargain signatory donors do already informally convene for such discussions in the margins of the Grand Bargain meetings and processes, but some noted that there may be benefits to bringing these under the auspices of the GHDI, alongside ongoing informal dialogue with Grand Bargain ambassadors, to discuss how the GHDI might ensure continued progress on the elements that overlap with its principles.

### Connecting to the IASC

The GHDI can be seen as the necessary counterpart to the IASC: the GHDI convening donors for better financing, while the IASC coordinates agencies for better implementation. Connection between the two forums was built into the conception of the GHDI, signaling an expectation that the GHDI would be the default platform for donor dialogue with the IASC. The original ToR for the GHDI apparently stipulated that one representative of the IASC may participate in GHDI meetings – a role typically historically occupied by OCHA (Jespersen et al., 2013). An IASC Contact Group on Humanitarian Donorship was also established (IASC, 2007) and although this has been discontinued,<sup>25</sup> working connections between

---

23 A review of HLM documents shows that the ERC addressed meetings in 2018, 2021 and 2022 – and it is likely that the ERC has participated in many more meetings for which documentation is not readily available.

24 The signatories have committed to a high-level event in 2026 at which they would review progress and decide whether to continue (IASC, 2023).

25 Again, there is a lack of documentation and institutional memory of the reasons for this.

the IASC and GHDI have continued. There were periodic interactions between the former IASC task teams on humanitarian financing and on accountability to affected populations, and the Secretariat has shared its plans and presented at GHDI meetings.<sup>26</sup>

However, GHDI connection with the IASC has been neither routine nor sufficient. There appears to have been little change in this regard in the decade since the ten-year review. Donor dialogue with the IASC has tended to be bilateral or in self-selecting smaller groups, with members attributing this to the GHDI being too big for meaningful, detailed strategic discussion. Previous attempts to address this by establishing a liaison function – either held by the co-chairs or a sub-group – encountered objections from the GHDI group about whether it would be representative of all members. If it had been a priority, however, practical solutions for a preparatory/debrief process for feeding into IASC discussions might have been found.

There is widespread desire among members to activate a stronger and more consistent relationship between the GHDI and IASC. This was, some argued, central to translating GHDI discussions into meaningful action – concerted connection to the IASC ‘would bring the practical angle for GHD where we’re not just talking about issues but seeing how we can put them into action at the response level’. There has been recent progress – the current chairs are actively working on this and at the time of writing were in the process of soliciting views from the membership to inform an options paper on the configuration and scope of the relationship.

### Wider outreach

Members and external stakeholders alike suggested that the GHDI needs to widen its external engagement beyond the humanitarian ‘establishment’ and its Geneva and New York representatives. As the importance of other entities in funding and coordinating humanitarian action is increasingly recognised, experts suggested that the GHDI risks myopia and thus irrelevance if it fails to connect. As multilateral development banks play a growing role in crisis prevention, response and recovery, one member asked, ‘Why isn’t the World Bank at the table?’. Other stakeholders noted the crisis-financing power and expertise of regional platforms such as the Intergovernmental Agency for Development (IGAD) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), observing the geopolitical reality that bodies from the ‘Global South’ could no longer be ignored. While the GHDI has been somewhat successful in expanding its membership to include a wide range of important humanitarian donors, its active engagement remains limited (see section 2.5) and could be well complemented by strategic outreach to important regional and multilateral actors.

Suggestions that such actors have a permanent seat at the GHDI table proved controversial among current members – there were advocates, opponents and sceptics about whether the World Bank or others would even want to join. But controversy about expanding membership does not preclude action on dialogue. Ten years ago, the GHDI had a ‘SHARE’ workstream dedicated specifically to

---

<sup>26</sup> A review of available documentation from GHDI meetings between 2017 and 2021 showed that IASC representatives had participated in at least one ELM or HLM in each of those years.

outreach and dialogue with governments that are not GHDI members (Jespersen et al., 2013). Although this was at the time positively viewed as a unique informal channel for reciprocal learning and testing common interests, the workstream was discontinued.<sup>27</sup> Re-establishing such a dialogue function, based on a clear mapping of relevant multilateral, as well as bilateral, counterparts would be an obvious pathway for the group – particularly as extending full GHDI membership beyond bilateral donors was felt by some members to be problematic.

### Box 4 Conclusions and options on strengthening the value-add of the GHDI

The GHDI has to do more to prove its worth in a crowded landscape of meetings and initiatives – and to reconcile the very different added value that its highly networked and less-networked members each seek. This will come in part from tightening the purpose and focus, but also from more intentionally complementing and connecting to other forums. In discussion with members we heard:

**Agreement:** that routine connection with the IASC was necessary, plus support for the current co-chairs' efforts to establish this connection.

**Divergence:** of views around the type and extent of relationships that the group should seek with other regional and multilateral actors that are engaged in crisis finance and response.

*Core questions and choices:* With some members suggesting that the GHDI has been overtaken by other forums, it faces a choice of either defining its complementary offer – or face becoming redundant. Establishing a routine connection with the IASC will help to position the GHDI in a way that adds value both to its diverse membership and to the wider landscape. These connections will need to be substantive if the group is to maintain the support of its well-networked members.

## 2.5 Improving the effectiveness of the GHDI's ways of working

The impetus for this review comes from a shared sense among members that the group is less effective than it could be. This is partly rooted in the confusion about the purpose and function of the GHDI (see section 2.1), which makes effectiveness both hard to achieve and hard to measure. But members' frustrations around effectiveness also centre on the routine modus operandi of the group, with four critical issues emerging, namely the group's ability to: balance inclusivity with decisiveness; attract a productive level of engagement; maintain continuity of attention; and better communicate what it does.

---

<sup>27</sup> As with much of the history of the GHDI, there is no documentation of the decision to discontinue this, and no remaining institutional memory among members to explain it – see section 2.4.

### 2.5.1 Enabling inclusiveness

The breadth of the membership of the GHDI – now a diverse group of 42 members – is seen as both a virtue and a hindrance to effectiveness. Ten years ago, the widened membership (from 17 to 41 in its first decade) was presented as an effectiveness success – the ‘single most telling indicator of the value of the GHD’ (Jespersen et al., 2013).

However, only one additional donor has joined in the past decade, the expansion of the group is less of a priority and mission, and indeed managing the size and diversity of the existing group has become the greater current priority. If action rather than inclusion is the implicit metric of success, there is an apparent trade-off between participation and effectiveness. At its most effective, the group is able to both optimise members’ diverse experience and meet their different needs for action and for information. The GHDI’s work on counter-terrorism and sanctions under the EU–Switzerland co-chairship (2019–2021) was cited as a positive example in this regard: it was felt to have introduced new perspectives, provided a learning opportunity for members, and resulted in common messaging and dialogue with the IASC. Yet this appears to be the exception rather than the norm.

In order to harness the potential of the GHDI, one external commentator suggested a pragmatic acceptance of ‘leadership’ and ‘followership’ among the membership. This has indeed been the de facto pattern of engagement in the group – periodically formalised in the subject-specific working groups that have accompanied the workplans of previous co-chairs. Some members suggested forming smaller expert-level conversations to build on the ‘workstream’ model, or even forming a core GHDI group. This would reduce inclusion but increase the ability to take discussions forward. The experience of the Grand Bargain caucuses was suggested as an example from which the GHDI might learn: these would recognise decision-making ceilings in the wider group and so create smaller groups to address bottlenecks and foster in-depth discussions.

That said, members were concerned about the current imbalances in participation and engagement, which made for a ‘western-centric’ dialogue within the group and a failure to draw on the potentially diverse expertise and perspectives of the membership.<sup>28</sup> The lack of consistent and detailed records of meetings (see sub-section 2.5.5) prevents analysis of members’ attendance at the GHDI meetings, but our survey and interviews suggested that levels were low: 15 of the 22 survey respondents thought that the level of engagement was medium, two thought it low and three thought it high. Only seven

---

<sup>28</sup> This was evident in the research for this study – it proved difficult to reach and elicit the views of the smaller, less engaged GHDI members during interviews. During the discussion of our emerging findings at the December 2023 HLM, only 15 members shared their views, and these were largely those from the Global North who were highly networked in humanitarian forums.

reported that their countries always attended GHDI meetings.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the lack of response from a number of members to both our request for interviews and to the survey is also indicative of a wider lack of capacity or interest to substantively engage with the GHDI.

Several practical measures were suggested which could support a greater level of participation involving a wider cohort of members. In addition to intentionally striking a balance between ‘learning’ and ‘doing’ in GHDI workplans and meeting agendas, members proposed:

- **Buddying support** from larger donors to the smaller members who have very limited capacity in their Geneva missions (sometimes a single staff member for whom the humanitarian brief is only one of several), to actively reach out to them and brief them on background prior to meetings.
- **Proactive chairing** to make the meetings more dynamic and engaging, and to bridge technical expertise of some with views of others. This would require active and interactive facilitation to engage all members and encourage views from smaller donors. One suggestion was to include a standing item to invite a briefing/practice sharing from members.
- **Using webinars effectively**, as a tool for capacity-building and education, ensuring they serve specific purposes and cater to the needs of a diverse group of donors. These were a welcome initiative under the Belgian and Finnish co-chairship – and have been cited by some respondents as a helpful way to introduce a base level of understanding of issues prior to GHDI meetings. Making recordings of these available would be helpful for capital representatives based in other time zones.

### 2.5.2 Elevating engagement

The quality and outcomes of discussions in GHDI meetings depend not just on which member countries attend, but also the position and level of authority of the staff who represent them. The ELMs are usually attended by representatives from the donors’ missions to the UN in Geneva, whose capacity to engage and connections to decision-makers in their capitals vary significantly between donors. The HLMs in New York and Geneva attract a mix of mission representatives and ‘visitors’ from capital level. Several members suggested the mixed profiles of representatives in both sets of meetings was hindering its ability to have frank, well-informed and decisive discussions. Holding the meetings at New York and Geneva levels meant that there was neither sufficient buy-in from senior leaders at capital level, nor sufficient grounding in the operational country mission level.

---

<sup>29</sup> Fifteen out of 22 survey respondents found the level of engagement in GHDI meetings to be medium (i.e. around half the members regularly attend and participate in meetings); two found it to be low (i.e. less than half of members regularly attend and participate in meetings); and three found it to be high (i.e. nearly all members regularly attend and participate in meetings). Of the 22 respondents, seven said that their country always attended GHDI meetings; 12 that their country attended often; and three that their country attended sometimes. Of the three who replied that their countries sometimes attended, two stated that it was due to a lack of time/resources to attend.

Over its 20-year history, the GHDI has trialled various models to promote engagement with and uptake of the principles beyond donor representatives in Geneva and New York. For several years, meetings were also held in Rome, and pilots were devised to apply the GHDI principles to donor coordination in Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (Jespersen et al., 2013). The Rome meetings were discontinued due to lack of clear purpose and appetite. The pilots were discontinued at different points in each of the countries and had mixed success (HPN, 2005). Learning from this experience, there was little appetite among members to repeat in-country pilots but instead to find ways to bring in country-level experts, including from local and national organisations to the Geneva and New York meetings.

More pressing for the effectiveness of the group was the problem of ensuring leadership engagement from capitals. The connections between Geneva representations and capital-level decision-makers are often weak, leading to a self-fulfilling perception that the GHDI is Geneva-centric. This is a persistent problem that was also noted a decade ago in the previous review, which observed a visible loss in capital-level GHDI champions and a ‘shift from what was intended to be an informal but vigorous platform for inter-governmental policy dialogue to essentially a Geneva-based information exchange mechanism with a very limited strategic role’ (Jespersen et al., 2013). In our interviews, members noted that the GHDI needed to raise its profile and purpose so that capital-level leaders would both support the work of their delegates in the group, and participate directly in HLMs, which are intended to be director level. In order to attract such high-level participation, the group would need to position itself as a valuable forum for purposeful discussion of weighty topics (see sub-section 2.2.2). Positioning the GHDI as a more senior forum at least twice a year would demand a combination of reinvigorating the reputation of the group, offering an attractive agenda, strategic piggy-backing onto other international meetings, and a collective decision by a critical majority of members to send high-level representation.

### 2.5.3 Ensuring continuity

The nature of humanitarian challenges demands a combination of agility and continuity from the GHDI. The twin problems of repositioning the GHDI as an effective forum and nurturing engagement within and beyond its membership also demand sustained effort. However, the informality of the group and the two-year rotation of the co-chairs result in relatively short-term and inconsistent attention-spans.

Without a secretariat, continuity and momentum are contingent on the quality of hand-over between co-chairs. This is part of an ongoing question for the GHDI, highlighted in the 10-year review, of whether it should explore options for a more formalised structure. Members appreciate the ‘lightness’ of the current structure and remain keen to avoid the formality and financial demands of establishing a secretariat. The founding suggestion of a ‘troika’ system, reiterated 10 years later, was not taken up by the group, with some members noting that it was already challenging enough to attract voluntary co-chairs for the two-year period. However, without this or an alternative protocol to guarantee continuity between chairships – guided by a clear articulation of purpose and focus (see sections 2.1



and 2.2), a multi-annual strategic vision for the group will not be possible. If the group is to become more ambitious in its outreach and influence, there is an evident tension with maintaining the present informal structure and model of leadership.

Even within the co-chairing periods, continuity can be erratic. Although co-chairs are responsible for setting out and implementing a two-year workplan, the quality of focus was variable. Some members felt that the connection between one meeting and the next could be unpredictable, perceived to be largely reactive to events or reflective of individual interests rather than ensuring sustained follow-through. At the same time, members face issues of lacking consistent expertise and engagement in their missions as governments change and civil servants rotate or move. This is challenging for the continuity of engagement in any forum but is exacerbated by the lack of mechanisms and repositories for the GHDI's institutional memory (see sub-section 2.5.5). Indeed, lack of historical insight may be in part behind the failure of the GHDI to learn from past experiences and reviews. Even in the absence of structural changes to governance, it should be possible for the GHDI to put in place protocols and systems for connecting workplans and accessibly documenting outputs. Ensuring greater retention and accessibility of institutional knowledge is relatively non-contentious and easily achieved, as detailed below.

### 2.5.4 Improving communication

Members raised concerns about the availability of basic information for and about the group on the website. This compromised the external image and influence of the group as well as its institutional working memory. Minutes and outcome documents were only patchily available and there was no comprehensive repository of information or routine means of communication. This review found that although documentation appeared to have become more detailed and regular in recent years, there were still notable gaps in what had been uploaded and there was inconsistency between co-chairships in the depth and formats of workplans, reports and minutes.

Updating and systematising use of the GHDI website is apparent low-hanging fruit to support the group's effectiveness. This could involve an internal confidential repository for members and could go hand-in-hand with ensuring that meeting agendas and notes are shared in a timely manner, to support high-level engagement and maintain momentum. Better use of the public-facing website is also important for improving the external visibility and outward communication of the GHDI. This would play the important part – possibly alongside some social media presence – of maintaining the relevance of the initiative in the wider humanitarian community. Again, the 20th-anniversary moment – with whatever reaffirmation of principles and increase in joined-up positions follow – provides an opportune moment for such reinvestment.

### Box 5 Conclusions and options on improving effectiveness

Improving the effectiveness of the group involves both practical investments and political will. To address members' frustrations about the GHDI's productivity, there are clear immediate fixes to undertake, and underlying issues to tackle. Members expressed:

**Agreement:** that investing in improving and maintaining the information management would be 'low hanging fruit' to signal reinvigoration of the GHDI and improve institutional memory.

**Divergence:** around improving continuity between co-chairs, with a clear rejection of any formalised structure, no appetite for a troika structure, but also no alternative suggestions on the table.

**Lack of discussion:** around ensuring the appropriate level of seniority of member representatives' engagement in the group, possibly signalling scepticism about the political value of the GHDI.

*Core questions and choices:* the GHDI can relatively easily improve its information management and communications, but fundamentally improving effectiveness comes back to choices between having broad engagement or senior engagement, and between light or stable structures. If the current co-chairs are able to establish a purposeful agenda and practical protocols – and clearly hand these over to the next co-chairs – this could restart a virtuous circle of engagement and effectiveness in the short- to medium-term.

## 3 Conclusions

Rising complex humanitarian needs in a politically fragmented world mean that there is still a role for the GHDI. In this context, the significance of a diverse group of donors who are – at least nominally – committed to good donorship cannot be underestimated. In the words of one external stakeholder, ‘collective action is crucial for achieving system-wide gains’, and the majority view among members appears to be that there is still value in the group continuing to convene to pursue some degree of collective activity.

Twenty years on from its founding, the work of the GHDI remains important, yet incomplete. It has achieved much in the past two decades: it has succeeded in establishing a set of principles that have become mainstream norms in the humanitarian system, and it has helped to set the stage for many of the improvements which its founding members hoped to see – better needs assessments, increased pooled funds, more avenues for cooperation and vastly improved common financial tracking. It has been less successful, however, in ensuring those mainstreamed norms of good donorship are respected, and its vision of a world in which needs are met ‘equitably and sufficiently’ has arguably become more of a distant possibility, albeit owing to many factors beyond the control of the GHDI.

There is therefore agreement that the GHDI requires renewed efforts if it is to continue and better realise its potential. Even those members who are most supportive of the present workings of the GHDI express the need for some change – as do the several influential members who have expressed profound misgivings about the value of continuing the group under its current status quo. There is, however, far less agreement on how, and to what extent, it should change.

This lack of consensus is symptomatic of the innate compromises and contradictions of the group. As we have seen, these are compromises between breadth of membership and depth of engagement; between informal governance and strategic continuity; and between securing signatories to the GHDI principles, and ensuring they put them into practice. These compromises were there from the start: as one of the founders noted, ‘the agreed principles were less ambitious than the original draft, the usual price to be paid for a consensus document. The task before us was to bring the feasible, politically, and practically, as close as possible to the desirable’ (Schaar, 2007).<sup>30</sup> Twenty years later, as they seek to reinvigorate the group, the co-chairs must navigate the ‘art of the possible’, as they steer the group between addressing fundamental differences and finding pragmatic workarounds. Stakeholders voiced exhortations and frustrations about the limits to the group’s ambition. One external stakeholder called for the GHDI to:

Be ambitious! If the GHD is not ambitious in the world we are living in, it is meaningless. If we are discussing principles for the sake of it, then that’s not relevant ... but if we really want to face massive

<sup>30</sup> Compared to the original draft, wording about ‘meeting basic humanitarian needs in their entirety’ was watered down to ‘striving to meet humanitarian needs’.

changes in the world then we have to discuss where we disagree and what's difficult – then find what binds us.

But in the words of one member:

Our big frustration is seeing the big potential but not knowing how to translate it into action that adds value. Because when we want to drive on the big issues, not everyone in the GHD is happy with being ambitious.

Given how deeply rooted the lack of consensus is across members, it is unsurprising that the majority of the group prefers options that are in the zone of least change and least ambition. This research, including discussions at the HLM, found broad support for efforts to be focused towards making the group more productive and influential. Members were in wide agreement that the group should increase its work on producing and sharing common messaging; invest in re-establishing routine and meaningful engagement with the IASC; and take the opportunity of the 20th anniversary to reinvigorate commitment to the principles as a reminder of their importance. However, other important areas were met with controversy or evasion. The question of accountability remains unresolved; the idea of more active complementarity was met with silence; and there were very different views about the scope of engagement – whether membership or dialogue should be extended beyond bilateral humanitarian donors. There was also little appetite for finding solutions to the problem of ensuring continuity under the present co-chair rotation arrangement. Most of the more difficult issues have been unresolved for at least the last decade – they were clearly flagged in the 10-year review and are likely to stay with the GHDI into any future reviews unless directly addressed by the group.

The current co-chairs of the GHDI have a busy agenda ahead for the rest of their term, even if the group decides to stay in the zone of agreed – and least – change. This includes steering the group through investing in more joint messaging, strengthening relations with the IASC, reaffirming principles, and reviving the website, all of which will require significant leadership and collective effort. But the co-chairs will also have to decide whether they wish to reopen the more difficult questions and push for more extensive change. As they do so, they might return to the question posed by one of its founders (Schaar, 2007): ‘What did we want to achieve? What was our vision? Put simply: aid should be given according to need, when and where it was required, in sufficient amounts and with appropriate quality.’

# References

- Alexander, J.** (2023) 'As the Grand Bargain gets a reboot, the limits of aid reform come into focus'. *The New Humanitarian*, 15 June ([www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2023/06/15/grand-bargain-3-reboot-limits-aid-reform](http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2023/06/15/grand-bargain-3-reboot-limits-aid-reform)).
- Barber, M. and Bowden, M.** (2023) *Rethinking the role of humanitarian principles in armed conflict: a challenge for humanitarian action*. London: Chatham House ([www.chathamhouse.org/2023/12/rethinking-role-humanitarian-principles-armed-conflict](http://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/12/rethinking-role-humanitarian-principles-armed-conflict)).
- Chatham House** (2022) 'Donor perspectives on operating in accordance with humanitarian principles: contexts and dilemmas'. Workshop summary. London: Chatham House (<https://chathamhouse.soutron.net/Portal/Public/en-GB/RecordView/Index/202190>).
- Cliffe, S., Dwan, R., Wainaina, B., and Zamore, L.** (2023) *Aid strategies in 'politically estranged' settings: how donors can stay and deliver in fragile and conflict-affected states*. London: Chatham House (<https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135485>).
- DI – Development Initiatives** (2023) *Global humanitarian assistance report 2023*. London: Development Initiatives (<https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2023/>).
- GHDI – Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative** (2003) '24 principles and good practice of humanitarian donorship'. Webpage ([www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/principles-good-practice-of-ghd/principles-good-practice-ghd.html](http://www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/principles-good-practice-of-ghd/principles-good-practice-ghd.html)).
- GHDI** (2020) 'Organizational readiness and enabling private capital for innovative financing in humanitarian contexts: good practices playbook'. Boston: Boston Consulting Group ([www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/resource/humanitarian-financing.html](http://www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/resource/humanitarian-financing.html)).
- GHDI** (n.d.) 'Our members'. Webpage ([www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/about-us/our-members.html](http://www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/about-us/our-members.html)).
- Global Nation** (2023) *Global Solidarity Report*. Global Nation (<https://globalnation.world/global-solidarity-report/>).
- High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing** (2016) *Report to the Secretary-General: too important to fail—addressing the humanitarian financing gap*. World Humanitarian Summit (<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/high-level-panel-humanitarian-financing-report-secretary-general-too-important-fail>).
- HPN – Humanitarian Practice Network** (2005) 'Good Humanitarian Donorship'. *Humanitarian Exchange* 29, March 2005. London: ODI (<https://odihpn.org/magazine/editors-introduction-good-humanitarian-donorship/>).
- IASC – Inter-Agency Standing Committee** (2007) *IASC Subsidiary Bodies—IASC Contact Group on Good Humanitarian Donorship Progress So Far and Way Forward (with Progress Report 2007)*. Geneva: IASC (<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/good-humanitarian-donorship/documents-public/iasc-contact-group-good-humanitarian-donorship-progress>).
- IASC** (2023) *Grand Bargain beyond 2023*. Geneva: IASC (<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-official-website/grand-bargain-beyond-2023>).

- Jespersen, H., Simonsen, J., and Kent, R.** (2013) *Review of the GHD Initiative: challenges and perspectives of remaining relevant in a changing humanitarian landscape*. GHD ([www.ghdinitiative.org/assets/files/01a-GHD-Report-Final-29-01-13-1.pdf](http://www.ghdinitiative.org/assets/files/01a-GHD-Report-Final-29-01-13-1.pdf)).
- Obrecht, A. and Swithern, S.** (2022) *State of the Humanitarian System*. Fifth edition. London: ALNAP/OD (<https://sohs.alnap.org/sohs-2022-report/a-reader%E2%80%99s-guide-to-this-report>).
- OCHA – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs** (2023) *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024*. New York: OCHA ([www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2024-enarfrsp](http://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2024-enarfrsp)).
- OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development** (2012) *Towards better humanitarian donorship: twelve lessons from DAC peer reviews*. Paris: OECD ([https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/towards-better-humanitarian-donorship\\_9789264174276-en](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/towards-better-humanitarian-donorship_9789264174276-en)).
- Macrae, J., Shepherd, A., Morrissey, O. et al.** (2004) *Aid to ‘poorly performing’ countries: a critical review of debates and issues*. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/aid-to-poorly-performing-countries-a-critical-review-of-debates-and-issues/>).
- Schaar, J.** (2007) ‘The birth of the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative’ in S. Hidalgo and A. López-Claros (eds) *Humanitarian Response Index: measuring commitment to best practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scott, R.** (2015) *Financing in crisis? Making humanitarian finance fit for the future*. Paris: OECD (<https://doi.org/10.1787/22220518>).
- Smillie, I. and Minear, L.** (2003) *The quality of money: donor behaviour in humanitarian financing*. Boston: Tufts University (<https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/the-quality-of-money-donor-behavior-in-humanitarian-financing/>).
- Smillie, I. and Minear, L.** (2005) ‘Welcome to the Good Humanitarian Donorship club’. *Humanitarian Exchange*, 29: 2–4. London: ODI (<https://odihpn.org/publication/welcome-to-the-good-humanitarian-donorship-club/>).
- WEF – World Economic Forum** (2024a) *The global risks report 2024: insight report*. Davos: WEF ([www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/](http://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/)).
- WEF** (2024b) *The global cooperation barometer 2024*. Davos: WEF ([www.weforum.org/publications/the-global-cooperation-barometer-2024/](http://www.weforum.org/publications/the-global-cooperation-barometer-2024/)).

# Appendix 1: Methodology and key informant interviewees

## Key informant interviews

The sample of GHDI members contacted for interviews by the author and by HERE-Geneva was based on a set of criteria in order to reflect a diverse spread of geographic location; size of humanitarian expenditure; and engagement with other global humanitarian forums; as well as those holding co-chair positions in the past decade. All efforts were made to consult with this sample; however, it was not possible to secure interviews in all cases. All members were also invited to input views via the survey, and in a session to discuss preliminary findings at the HLM in December 2023.

The sample of external stakeholders was selected to capture a range of UN and non-governmental organisation (NGO; local, national and international) stakeholders which had engaged, or sought to engage, with the GHDI. Representatives from other humanitarian and development aid effectiveness forums were also consulted.

Aino Aaskgaard	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark
Amanda Oeggerli	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canada
Andi van Mens	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands
Anita Khattakhuzy	NEAR
Barbara Daetwyler	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland
Camille Pabalan	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canada
Catherine Gill	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia
Cecilia Rosselli	NRC
Charles Boutet	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canada
Cyprien Fabre	OECD
Dennis Nehb	Foreign Office, Germany
Dylan Winder	FCDO, United Kingdom
Elizabeth Bellardo	Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, USA
Gareth Price-Jones	SCHR
Greg de Pappé	GPEDC
Hannah Widstam	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sweden

Helen Kaljulata	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Estonia
Hilde Salvesen	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway
Ingrid Schøyen	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway
Jean Verheyden	UN OCHA
Julien Schopp	Interaction
Kit Clausen	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark
Kristina Dmitrova	DG ECHO
Lauratuulia Lehtinen	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Finland
Lena Lambert	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Luxembourg
Lisa Doughten	UN OCHA
Matthieu Kimmell	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canada
Mihaela Zupancic Magovac	DG ECHO
Nalinee Napita	UNICEF
Pascal Richard	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland
Pieter Vermaerke	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Belgium
Predrag Avramovic	DG ECHO
Rachel Scott	OECD
Samantha Newport	IASC
Samar Al-Attar	ICRC
Sofia Karlsson	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sweden
Stephanie Fox	DG ECHO
Susan Fraser	Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland
Sweta Kannan	Foreign Office, Germany
Tamara Kajtazovic	Grand Bargain Secretariat
Tasneem Mowjee	Independent Consultant
Wouter Coussement	GPEDC
Yasuo Kitano	Mission to Geneva, Japan

### Survey

A short survey was devised by HERE-Geneva and circulated to all GHDI members via the co-chairs. This comprised a series of questions regarding perceptions and experience of: the purpose of the group; the use of the principles; complementarity to other forums; and effectiveness of ways of working. Of the 48 responses, 22 answered all questions, and 26 gave only partial responses. In the interest of confidentiality, respondents were not required to state which member country they belonged to, so it is not possible to analyse the geographic distribution of responses.



The researchers also drew on summary results of a short survey conducted by the present co-chairs prior to this research, regarding members' views on priority topics for the two-year workplan.

### **Literature review**

All available documentation produced by the GHDI was analysed to discern patterns in participation, priorities and follow-up on discussions. This includes the workplans produced by co-chairs, minutes, and conclusions from ELMs and HLMs, and tools and reports commissioned or produced by the initiative. In addition, formal reviews and published commentaries of the GHDI were reviewed to trace the evolution of the GHDI and the recurrent areas of challenge and discussion. Other literature relevant to specific themes of the review is documented in the References section.



---

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) is one of the world's leading teams of independent researchers and communications professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.

---

---

**Humanitarian Policy Group**

ODI  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0300  
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7922 0399  
Email: [hpgadmin@odi.org](mailto:hpgadmin@odi.org)  
Website: [odi.org/hpg](http://odi.org/hpg)

---