Spotlight on learning series

Learning to change

The case for systemic learning strategies in the humanitarian sector

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ALNAP is a global network of NGOs,
UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/
Crescent Movement, donors, academics
and consultants dedicated to learning how
to improve response to humanitarian crises.

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1   Introduction and overview

Since the 1990s, many working in the international humanitarian sector – practitioners, analysts, experts, evaluators and policy-makers – have placed high hopes in organisational learning as a way to enhance humanitarian effectiveness and improve performance (ALNAP, 2001).

Organisational learning has been proposed at various times as a means of helping humanitarians organisations to (van Brabant, 1997; Beck, 2003):

- better understand crisis situations and contexts
- analyse and interpret the needs and conditions of crisis-affected communities
- gather and make sense of data on what other actors are doing
- design effective projects and programmes targeting specific humanitarian needs and requirements
- improve ongoing programmes on the basis of emerging results and outcomes
- feed back results and impacts to ensure better projects and programmes in the future
- incorporate all of the above into strategic and tactical efforts that to better align humanitarian organisations with the needs and demands of a fast-changing world.

While organisations of all kinds may do all of these things, humanitarian organisational learning aims to do them so as to achieve the ultimate goals of saving lives, reducing human suffering and restoring livelihoods (Berg, 2000; Minear, 2002; Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008).

While it is hard to imagine anyone in the sector having any issue with any of the above, it is interesting to reflect on the reality of how organisational learning as a whole is perceived. Consider this extract from a report from the UK's Bond network:

If you enter a room full of NGO [non-governmental organisation] staff, and ask them, 'hands up, who thinks organisational learning is important?' you are likely to be greeted by a sea of raised hands. But, if you ask for practical examples of organisational learning, the response would be significantly different - you are likely to be met by a sea of blank faces and a sense of

jadedness: 'Does it make any difference anyway; is it just a fad?' There is a lot of discussion about the need for organisational learning in the NGO sector, but this has not necessarily led to improved practice. Indeed, there appears to be a growing sense of weariness about it. (Goold, 2006: 1)

Many readers will recognise and relate to the sense of jadedness described here. What may be rather more surprising, however, is that the above quote is from a report published almost two decades ago, in 2003. The same report also found that over half of the NGOs and donors consulted saw the need for a 'radically different approach' to organisational learning – but such an approach was not evident in any of the solutions that were being implemented in the sector.

This is a rather sobering note on which to begin this report. However, one of the key findings of the research that underpins this report presents even more of a cause for concern: although some things have changed and improved, attitudes and perspectives on organisational learning remain very similar today to what they were 20 years ago. Two decades on, the sense of weariness has not disappeared – and may even be greater – and there remains a distinct lack of new and original approaches.

Taking this as our starting point, for this report our aim was to go back to first principles, to better understand the different forms that humanitarian organisational learning has taken, and how, if at all, such learning contributes to change and improvement in the humanitarian enterprise.

We begin in Section 2 by looking at what organisational learning actually is and set out the common themes and issues that emerge from practice outside the humanitarian sector over the past 30 or so years. We conclude the section with a synthesis of the barriers to organisational learning identified in the key literature from outside the humanitarian sector.

Building on these wider lessons, Section 3 works to explore the same questions in our own sector. It does so by focusing on what we have learned from some three decades of humanitarian organisational learning. Our rather downbeat finding is indeed that not much has changed as a result of *formal* approaches to organisational learning in our sector. We find that, for the most part, organisational learning has reinforced existing humanitarian approaches and ways of working. Taken as a whole, the effort has been largely unable to shift a culture that values action over reflection – even when those actions are widely acknowledged as ineffective. Not only is the humanitarian sector still 'condemned to repeat' its mistakes but we now seem equally condemned to repeat our lessons.

At the same time, we identify that the challenges that confront humanitarians are not unique but rather match up well to the issues faced in endeavouring to learn in any extreme and adverse conditions. At the end of this section, we identify the need to ask a new question about humanitarian learning – namely, 'What have been the most significant changes in the humanitarian sector, and what was the contribution of learning?'

Section 4 of this report seeks to answer this question, with reference to our case study-based exploration of the role of learning in different change efforts. It does so by making use of a systems lens on learning, which enables the generation of a more dynamic and holistic view of how learning actually works in the sector. Using a well-established framework for analysing systemic change processes in different industries and sectors, we find that learning in fact has a critical role in many change efforts, but for the most part this has been 'under the radar' and not part of formal organisational learning efforts. By comparing these learning efforts, we find that there are a number of critical differences between the thinking and practice that underpin formal humanitarian organisational learning work and the kinds of learning processes that have actually contributed to tangible changes.

Our concluding analysis in Section 5 suggests there is considerable value in humanitarian organisational learning as long as we are willing and able to rethink our rationale and approach. We show through identifying the critical lessons from our research that the humanitarian sector is still in need of a 'radically different approach' to organisational learning – and our research and explorations should be seen as providing both the initial principles and the methodology that might underpin such an approach. We argue that this approach has considerable potential explanatory and practical value for the sector, and invite debate and discussion on how to improve it. We close by proposing a number of ways that we might now take this framework forward.

An extended appendix explores how learning has worked in the world of crisis response and adverse incidents outside the international humanitarian endeavour.

2   What is organisational learning?

2.1 Definitions, concepts and ideas

Organisational learning can be defined as the *process of positive change in individual and collective thinking and action, and the means by which this is linked to and becomes embedded within the processes, systems and strategies of an organisation.*[1]

Organisational learning has been seen as critical for organisations that seek to 'continually improve what they do', thereby driving results and success.

Of course, success means different things for different organisations:

- Corporations might target profits.
- Academics want accuracy and impact.
- Governments aim for greater levels of service delivery at minimal costs.
- Campaigning charities want to influence ideas and debates in pursuit of social justice.
- Operational charities try to improve more lives and livelihoods.
- Military organisations aim for advantages over opponents.
- Politicians seek greater influence and power (Argote and Todorova, 2007).

Given the diversity of institutional ambitions, the aims of organisational learning processes will naturally vary considerably from sector to sector. A corporation that sees organisational learning as key to its competitive advantage is likely to take a rather different approach to its work in this area, compared with, say, a public sector body that is seeking greater public approval and political support for its work.

Theories and models of organisational learning abound but some common themes and important concepts are worth highlighting. For example, the actual process of organisational learning is often described along the following lines:

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[1]   Drawn and synthesised from various sources, including Argyris and Schön (1996) and Argote (2012).

> **[Organisational learning is] knowledge or understanding gained by experience. The experience may be positive, as in a successful test or mission, or negative, as in a mishap or failure. [It] must be significant in that it has a real or assumed impact on operations; valid in that is factually and technically correct; and applicable in that it identifies a specific design, process, or decision that reduces or eliminates the potential for failures and mishaps, or reinforces a positive result. (Secchi et al., 1999: 57)**

Almost all of the most widely cited sources on organisational learning describe it as a process that works to generate, share, consolidate and retain knowledge (Nonaka, 1994) across individuals, groups and departments, whole organisations and, in some cases, entire sectors (Aarnoudse and Hill, 2010; Scott, 2011). To be effective, organisational learning should be inclusive, spanning new and established members of staff, different locations, diverse departments and all the levels of seniority within a given organisation (Bass, 1991).

Because culture is one of the primary means by which norms and behaviours can be shared and harmonised across individuals and groups, there are strong linkages between efforts that seek to improve or enhance organisational culture and learning. Cultural factors such as openness, trust and attitude to risk and failure all have a major influence on how well organisations learn or don't (Boud et al., 1993; Boud and Miller, 1996).

A number of approaches describe the different kinds of processes and mechanisms that should be in place in an effective learning organisation. Perhaps most common is the idea of learning cycles, which describe the stages of *generate*, *integrate*, *interpret* and *act* (Kolb, 1984). Different kinds of learning loops have also been identified, which can be linked to the experience curve model (Smith, 2001).

- **Single loop learning** asks the question, 'Are we doing things right?' in line with explicit practices, policies and norms of behaviour. Learning involves detecting and correcting deviations and variances from these standards. This kind of learning happens when there is a focus on improvement to actions based on correcting errors and when the assumptions or values that gave rise to the actions and the intended outcomes are not questioned.

- **Double loop learning** asks the question, 'Are we doing the right things?' This involves reflection on the appropriateness of underlying practices, policies and norms, and addresses the basic aspects of an organisation, such that the same things are not done in response to changing contexts. This learning occurs when the organisation questions the underlying assumptions, beliefs and values and reforms and refines them as a result.

- **Triple loop learning** asks the question, 'Are we doing things for the right reasons?' This represents the highest form of organisational

self-examination. It involves questioning the entire rationale of an organisation and can lead to radical transformations in internal structure, culture and practices.

Figure 1: Learning loops
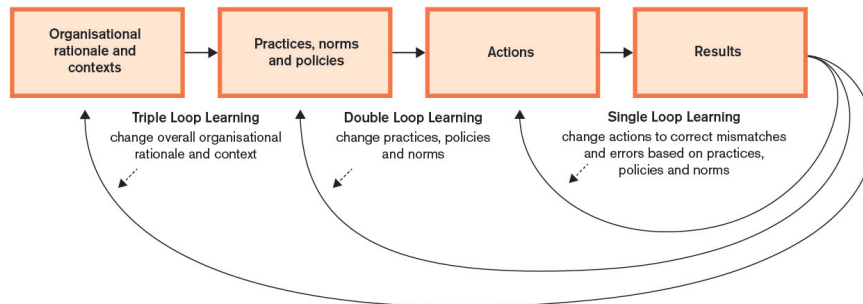
Source: Ramalingam (2008).

While they are interdependent, these types of learning loops can also work against each other, especially in conditions of pressure and adversity. For example, those people in an organisation who are pushing to drive down costs and enhance the performance of a particular product or service (moving down the existing experience curve) will give short shrift to people arguing that new product lines are needed (moving to the top of a new experience curve).

Perhaps the most influential text on organisational learning is *The Fifth Discipline*, by business scholar Peter Senge (1990; 2006), which is widely seen as a watershed for organisational learning, both practically and theoretically. The five disciplines are personal mastery, mental models, team-based learning, shared vision and the eponymous fifth discipline of systems thinking, which brings all of the others together. Senge argues that organisational learning is successful only when it is based on an understanding of how the whole organisational system is connected rather than a focus on individual parts. One of the specific benefits of a systems approach is that it enables understanding of the kinds of tensions and trade-offs that might play out in reality between different types and levels of learning (Smith, 2012).

2.2   Barriers to organisational learning

For all its potential benefits, it is fair to conclude from the literature on the world outside humanitarian efforts that organisational learning as a whole has promised more than it has delivered. Many organisations and sectors have encountered significant challenges in undertaking the collective critical self-analysis necessary to capitalise on their experiences (Caldwell, 2012).

Indeed, so much research and analysis has highlighted the limitations and failures of organisational learning that it is safe to assume that absence of organisational learning is in fact the norm. This is attributable to a number of factors, as the synthesis of the literature reviewed for this study set out in Table 1 indicates.

Table 1: Barriers to organisational learning – a synthesis

Individual factors	Process factors
• Unwillingness to learn from negative events, even when it would be to a person's advantage. • Pride in individual and organisational expertise, which can lead to denial and to a disregard of external sources of warning – particularly if a bearer of bad news lacks legitimacy in the eyes of the individuals, teams or organisations in question. • A sense of loyalty, which can lead people to 'forgive' other team members their mistakes and act defensively against ideas from outside the team. • Difficulties faced in 'making sense' of complex events.	• Rapid turnover of key personnel within organisations and teams. • Ineffective communication and other information difficulties – including failure to disseminate information that is already available. • A tendency towards scapegoating individuals rather than acknowledging and addressing deep-rooted organisational problems.
Cultural factors	**Institutional factors**
• Rigidity of core beliefs, values and assumptions, which may develop over time – learning is resisted if it contradicts these. • An incremental approach to issues of risk: attempting to resolve problems through tinkering rather than tackling more fundamental change. • Latching onto one superficial cause or learning point to the exclusion of more fundamental but sometimes less obvious lessons.	• An undue focus on the immediate event and the easiest issues to address rather than on the fundamental root causes of problems. • Lack of corporate responsibility – it may be difficult, for example, to put into practice solutions that are sufficiently far-reaching. • Contradictory organisational imperatives – for example communication versus confidentiality. • High stress and low job satisfaction, which can have adverse effects on quality. • Inability to recognise the financial costs of failure, thus losing a powerful incentive for organisations to change.

Given this comprehensive set of insights and challenges to organisational learning, the obvious question now is, how does this relate to humanitarian organisational learning over the past few decades? It is to this question that Section 3 turns.

3   What have we learned about humanitarian organisational learning?

3.1 Humanitarian organisational learning: a short history

An ODI paper on the history of the humanitarian sector (Davey, 2013) identifies and describes numerous research and learning initiatives that have emerged since the formation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863. Although they have often been tucked away within areas of technical specialisation, these efforts have been very wide-ranging, addressing everything from natural disasters to refugee responses. The full gamut of learning approaches is apparent across the history of humanitarian work, including journals (the *International Review of the Red Cross* dates back to 1869), international forums, research groups, studies, training programmes, peer support groups and more. All of these efforts have sought in different ways to improve the collective understanding of different kinds of crises, and how best humanitarian organisations might prepare and respond to them.

In a strict historical sense, then, humanitarian learning is not new. That said, the same ODI study argues that:

> **… the 1970s were a crucial period in the galvanisation of a humanitarian system and profession, with key institutions, analytical networks, government departments, forums for dialogue and eventually professional accreditation identifiable from this time onwards. Taken together, these various elements can be considered as marking the *advent of a humanitarian knowledge community, a network of interconnected actors whose objectives and thinking, while never unanimous or uniform, began to coalesce into collective methods for improving humanitarian response.* (Davey, 2013: 29, emphasis added)**

What happened in the 1970s that led to the emergence of this networked knowledge community? A series of challenging responses –

in Biafra, Bangladesh and Peru – resulted in institutional innovations for emergency response (ibid., 31). According to prominent humanitarian leaders cited in the ODI study, it was the inadequacy and failure of aid that led many aid workers to 'call for a reappraisal of the system'. And it was this call that saw the emergence and flowering of the humanitarian learning system that we see today: 'Researchers analysed past experiences; governments and intergovernmental agencies, including UN bodies, created new institutions and departments for humanitarian response; NGOs established new networks to improve their own effectiveness' (Davey, 2013: 31).

If we look forward from that time, it is possible to identify similar processes taking place regularly across much of the past half century (Britton, 2002; 2005). Typically taking place after every large major crisis response, sector-wide reappraisals happened as a result of the Horn of Africa famines in the 1980s, the Rwandan genocide and the Balkan wars of the 1990s (Edwards and Hulme, 1996); the Indian Ocean tsunami in the 2000s; and the Haiti earthquake, the Middle Eastern conflicts and the global refugee crises of the 2010s.

For each major reappraisal, it is also possible to see the concurrent evolution of humanitarian knowledge and learning systems (Pasteur et al., 2006). Since at least the 1990s, numerous organisations, alliances and networks have supported and funded a range of organisational learning initiatives (see Table 2). These have been set up and managed with the expressed intention of enhancing the capabilities of individuals, teams and groups to incorporate learning into the design, planning and delivery of humanitarian relief efforts (Sorgenfrei and Wrigley, 2005; Heres, 2007).

One of the ironies of these 'reappraisals' of the humanitarian sector is their decidedly repetitive ring, with each generation of critiques largely repeating the challenges of the previous ones (Edwards, 1997; Sandison, 2006).

After the Kosovo crises (2000), evaluators referred to many of the failings experienced in Rwanda (1996) as the '*once again*' factor. When repeated again after the Indian Ocean tsunami (2005), some people in the ALNAP network started to question the value of learning, and *'so what?'* was a question often posed in debates about learning. Using different idioms, a new generation of frustrated humanitarians asked the same question after evaluations from the Haiti earthquake (2010) showed similar mistakes had been repeated yet again (ALNAP, 2012).

More recently, this issue is often framed as being a consequence of an international system that is still part of a colonial legacy and that is unwilling or unable to hand over power to local groups. Interestingly, young activists from the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement used this very explanation over half a century ago, in the 1960s, to express their dissatisfaction with the response to the Nigeria/Biafra war (IFRC, 2013).

Table 2: The emergence of performance- and improvement-focused humanitarian initiatives (illustrative)

1990s Post-Rwanda and Balkans	ALNAP Sphere People in Aid Humanitarian Ombudsman Humanitarian Accountability Partnership 'Do No Harm'
2000s Post-Tsunami	Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative Inter-Agency Standing Committee Operational Peer Reviews Humanitarian Futures Programme Emergency Capacity Building Project Cash Learning Partnership Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities
2010s Post-Haiti and Middle East conflicts	Start Network Humanitarian Innovation Fund/Enhanced Learning & Research for Humanitarian Assistance Humanitarian Leadership Academy Near Network Core Humanitarian Standard Grand Bargain Workstreams
2020s Post-COVID-19	Anti-racism/decolonisation of aid Anticipation Hub Global Executive Leadership Initiative

For the most part, the kinds of strategic transformation that have been called for have not taken place (Carlsson and Wohlgemuth, 2000), and the changes that have come about as a result of organisational learning have been largely in the form of corrections and improvements to existing practices (Ramalingam, 2006), rather than new approaches or mindsets of the kinds called for in the reappraisals (Aiken and Britton, 1997).

Although this may seem an underwhelming conclusion to have reached about the contribution of a decades-long movement, it is in part attributable to how humanitarian organisations have utilised organisational learning. We discuss this next.

3.2 How has humanitarian organisational learning worked in practice?

Learning is considered vital in the aftermath of humanitarian failures. Over time, it has come to be seen as having a crucial role to play in improving humanitarian aid at the operational and the policy levels (DEC, 2013). Effective learning in operational responses can help improve all aspects of the quality of humanitarian assistance, from needs assessments and community engagement, through ensuring relevance and coverage, to delivering outcomes and impacts (Ramalingam, 2011). And at a policy level better learning can help ensure relevant experience and expertise shape the agenda in a rapidly changing world and can underpin much-needed system-wide reforms. Ultimately, better learning and knowledge have been

seen as critical to delivering better humanitarian and developmental results (Ellerman, 2000).

As with the wider application of organisational learning, efforts in the aid sector can be seen to span individual, process, cultural and organisational aspects (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The spectrum of humanitarian organisational learning approaches

Individual	**Process**	**Cultural**	**Organisational**
How do we ensure humanitarian workers acquire, share and use the right knowledge in appropriate and relevant ways?	How do we ensure the appropriate methods and tools are used to ensure learning happens in predictable and repeatable ways around different crises?	How do we ensure different kinds and sources of humanitarian knowledge & learning styles are valued; foster productive dialogue and debate?	How do we ensure our organisations continually test assumptions mental models and root causes, & rethink strategies and operations at a fundamental level?

Source: Authors.

Across some 25 studies looked at for this report, we have been able to distinguish a number of different instruments used for humanitarian learning, which we define as 'any systematic attempt to reflect on humanitarian endeavours to improve subsequent efforts'. These include:
- individual training courses and programmes, for example on technical, leadership and management skills
- crisis-specific processes that seek to generate evidence, learning and insights within and across responses, for example real-time evaluations, ex-post evaluations, joint evaluations
- group- and team-based processes of collective reflection and lesson generation, for example after action reviews, retrospects
- operational and policy research focused on specific endeavours and efforts (drawing on Britton, 1998).

The available evidence on this body of work is that, as a whole, it is not delivering as might be hoped (Hovland, 2003; Ramalingam, 2005).

Individually, humanitarians definitely have more knowledge and experience than in days gone by. The idea of someone with almost no experience being sent out to lead a crisis response would be almost farcical today. On a fundamental technical level, then, the typical humanitarian aid manager is almost certainly more knowledgeable than her equivalent a few decades ago.

At the same time, there is a clear sense that, while individual learning processes have been established, these have not necessarily been extrapolated to better group or organisational learning. This has two possible explanations. First, the widespread assumption seems to have been that organisational learning can be equated to the sum of individual learning. But even the best-trained individuals in the world will not learn collectively in crisis contexts without a supporting cultural and

organisational context. Second, the focus on individual learning may have turned into something of a fig leaf for a sector that has repeatedly proved both unwilling and unable to fundamentally rethink its strategic and cultural approach to humanitarian crises.

Training courses, although valuable, are unlikely to lead to new and better policies and practices. Instead, an emphasis on individual learning means that the inertia of existing practices still tends to dominate operational work.

The other feature that is worth noting at an individual level is the level of fatigue and overload that is experienced across the sector. Many people appear tired and worn out, and the learning endeavour, rather than helping achieve humanitarian effectiveness, has become another source of disillusionment.

On the **process side**, there has been a concerted effort to bureaucratise knowledge-sharing and learning – so that they are expected to happen in predictable ways at predefined points within established processes, for example within specific points of the programme cycle. The emphasis on processes and tools has not led to a commensurate investment in exploring potential lessons from failure, or even an environment where the topic of failure can be raised openly. As a result, in the worst cases, the bureaucratisation of learning processes has happened in ways that make them routine, predictable and tokenistic.

The exceptions to this are the numerous learning processes that happen within specific sectors such as water and sanitation or shelter. However, the reality is that these are often not seen as part of the 'formal' organisational learning world – technical specialisation meaning that few outsiders can actually understand what is being discussed, with the most valuable lessons also often the most arcane for the outsider. Technical learning typically happens at the behest and in the interest of sub-groups that are seldom part of the broader organisational learning conversation in humanitarian organisations.

As a result, organisational learning has tended to focus on generalists rather than specialists. Investment in new learning initiatives at an organisational level tends to follow this pattern, leading to a disconnect from operational realities.

On the **cultural side**, in general there is no learning culture in humanitarian organisations, with a much greater emphasis on action than on reflection in core operations. Where organisational learning has happened, it has tended to reinforce and support the status quo of the organisation, with 'official truths' shaping what can be learned, when and by whom. There is a lack of support or incentives for learning approaches that might conflict with prevailing business models.

Organisationally, it is fair to say that there is little leadership or managerial buy-in for learning. Many humanitarian organisations work on the basis of 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it.' This means that institutional inertia constrains what can be learned – and it is only in the extremes that existing practices are definitely shown to be broken. Moreover, this dynamic also

means a greater burden of evidence is placed on new practices than is the case for established approaches.

Because there are often many learning initiatives being implemented at any one time, there is also competition between different kinds of learning for the attention and space of operational staff. These investments are seldom made in a joined-up or integrated fashion, but instead try to carve out organisational space and attention wherever possible. This leads to silos in the learning effort but also means that the overall contribution to the organisation is suboptimal. This competition can add to the sense of overload for humanitarian responders and may present a handy rationale for ignoring learning efforts altogether.

In summary, then, much of the work in humanitarian learning in the past few decades has focused on the left-hand side of the spectrum – on the individual and process levels. As a result, we have seen far more training and professional development programmes, as well as after action reviews, evaluations, assessments and analyses. Relatively less attention and fewer resources have been dedicated to the cultural and organisational dimensions that might lead to the more transformational and radical changes called for by Bond in its 2006 report (Goold, 2006).

This focus on the individual and process levels, at the expense of the cultural and organisational dimensions, is a clear factor in the limited contribution of humanitarian learning described in the previous section. The fact that humanitarians have been unable or unwilling to move beyond individual and process approaches to the deeper cultural and organisational approaches provides a precise articulation of why learning has been 'stuck' for the past two decades.

To be blunt: while some individuals and groups in the humanitarian sector have put organisational learning forward as a solution to a number of the problems facing the sector, in reality much of the work that has followed has not been designed, implemented or supported in ways that could actually contribute to meaningful change.

It is possible to see in the humanitarian sector the same manifestation of 'blaming learning for failures' that is seen in other sectors. But it is not in fact the learning that should be blamed but rather the underlying priorities of humanitarian action that do not place a value on significant learning.

It is the *inadequate nature of investment in learning* in the humanitarian sector, not the failures of the learning effort itself, that has led to the sense of learning being a broken promise. The way in which learning is structured and supported means that the humanitarian sector as a whole is failing to spot and capitalise on the opportunities to drive action to improve results. There is continued underinvestment in potential solutions, all while the humanitarian endeavour is becoming more complex and more challenging, and arguably more in need of transformative learning.

3.3 The vicious cycle of underinvesting in learning

This begs the question: why is there this mismatch between the ambition and the investment? Considerable problems emerge from the lack of learning in the humanitarian sector, including the following:

▪ Reduced or inappropriate outputs in humanitarian delivery
▪ Diminished outcomes, such as lower levels of service provision and fewer lives saved
▪ Weaker recovery in physical, social and economic conditions of crisis-affected people
▪ Lower levels of staff satisfaction and motivation
▪ Weaker professional and institutional development
▪ Diminished reputation and trust levels among donors and aid recipients.

Despite the potential contribution of organisational learning in addressing these problems, the implicit argument *against* such learning is that it carries considerable costs in terms of money and time. The financial costs of learning are related to both direct investments in learning processes (evaluations, reviews, data, evidence, individual training) and indirect investments (opportunity costs, impacts of these processes on the delivery of aid). The time costs include the direct costs on staff and consultants and the indirect costs based on the idea that learning takes time and places limits and brakes on humanitarian action.

Lord Paddy Ashdown, who led the Humanitarian Emergency Response Review (HERR), was fond of sharing the following thought: 'In the military, we spend 95% of our time in preparation, training and learning and 5% in action. In humanitarian settings, it is the exact opposite.' [2]

(As an aside, even the 95:5 split that Lord Ashdown alluded to is probably nowhere near the mark. With a global humanitarian budget of some $31 billion in 2021, 5% would mean $1.45 billion was spent on learning.)

Although this is anecdotal, there is an element of truth to it. In the military, and indeed in some of the other crisis response sectors described in the appendix, organisational learning is seen as central to operational effectiveness. This is why such a large share of time and resources can be invested in it. By contrast, the relatively sparse and partial investments in humanitarian organisational learning reveal a basic truth – that, for most humanitarian organisations, learning is seen as a *trade-off* against humanitarian delivery rather than as something that *enhances* it.

Work by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on humanitarian learning has shown that, given the pressure to provide rapid relief after crises, learning has been under-prioritised relative to action (Gonçalves, 2011). Because resources are limited, more effort is allocated to relief and less to learning.

The lack of resources available for learning is likely to result in some specific decisions. For example, at the individual level, personnel deployed

2 This was shared informally with the various stakeholders involved in the HERR, one of whom was one of the authors of this report.

to a disaster setting may forego opportunities for training and personal improvement. At the organisational level, more resources may be allocated towards additional relief rather than towards developing new reflective processes and institutionalising lessons learned.

However, this lack of investment means that, over time, the quality and performance of relief fall. Significant criticisms – for example those that trigger generational 'reappraisals' – lead to more investments in learning. Humanitarian organisations start to allocate resources to developing learning processes (e.g. evaluations, debriefs, gathering lessons learned, case studies, improving practices, etc.) to capture, accumulate, make sense of and disseminate the learning from past disasters.

But despite this channelling of resources, the incentives are still geared towards delivery and frontline efforts. Learning efforts are still seen as disconnected from field realities and, overall, humanitarian managers will prefer to allocate more effort to relief. This dynamic is reinforced by the kinds of results that the two endeavours achieve: while relief is immediate, tangible and unambiguous – more people get more aid – the benefits of learning are indirect, long term and hard to quantify. All other things being equal, it is better for humanitarian organisations to prioritise relief delivery over relief learning.

And, in the face of criticism, the incentives are not to learn more but to deliver more. The more pressure there is to address relief performance, the more managers are likely to put resources into relief rather than learning. This solidifies the initial trajectory of the system, creating a self-reinforcing vicious circle. Without adequate investment in learning, core organisational capabilities will erode over time, reducing the effectiveness of relief efforts. Humanitarian organisations need to break this cycle for long enough to be able to allocate more resources to capability improvement, thereby allowing them to become more effective.

3.4 Breaking the cycle: insights from leaders and parallel crisis management sectors

In addition to reviewing the literature on humanitarian organisational learning, we conducted a light-touch review of the annual reports of the largest humanitarian organisations and undertook confidential and informal interviews with senior leaders to find out what they thought about the contribution of learning to their business, and what they were doing to address it[3].

The main message from the leaders consulted was paradoxical: while many were rather dismissive about learning, alluding to the issues above, they also saw learning as playing a significant role in change efforts in the humanitarian sector.

3 These were undertaken on a confidential basis and involved heads or deputy heads of humanitarian departments and teams in major humanitarian organisations across the ALNAP membership.

The dismissiveness resonated with our long experience with learning in the sector: from colleagues being disparaged for doing research on community needs during food security crises, to deep mistrust of learning processes at the outset of new crisis responses, there is a belief that learning in crisis somehow represents tilting at windmills. Learning is seen at best as engaging in indulgence while the world burns and at worst as wasting resources that could be better spent saving lives.

At the same time, the leaders consulted did name a number of significant change processes, and alluded to the important role that collective learning had played in these efforts. Interestingly, however, they did not see these processes as akin to the kinds of efforts that were usually associated with organisational learning: they were distinct and different in a number of ways, as spelled out below.

The majority of senior leaders did not consider collective organisational learning to be a high priority issue for their agency. Most saw learning as related most closely to individual skills and capabilities. Evaluations were largely believed to be about accountability and for the most part leaders felt they had to 'deflect and defend' their staff against these processes and potentially negative and harmful findings.

By contrast, research was seen positively as helping them look at the 'bigger picture' of the humanitarian sector, as were mechanisms such as foresight and big data innovations. Although most saw the post-COVID-19 world as posing significant problems for their organisation, they did not see that greater investment in organisational learning would necessarily help support the kinds of changes that were needed.

When asked to point to change processes that had successfully influenced their organisation and how it operated, respondents cited the same few examples time and again: cash, social protection, resilience, new digital technologies and greater engagement in reproductive health. These change processes were seen as not only influencing specific organisations and operational responses but also shaping the way the sector as a whole operated.

In all of these changes, the learning processes at the heart were not part of the institutionalised approaches outlined above: rather, they generally were instigated, motivated, undertaken and utilised outside of the formal organisational learning effort, and in ways that were clearly linked to taking an experimental approach within particular crises.

These experimental efforts were integrated into relief operations and fed directly into operational decisions. As a result, the emphasis of the learning process was less on justifying itself and more on reporting on the direct tangible benefits of new humanitarian approaches in specific crisis contexts.

All of the respondents suggested that a central feature of these experimental efforts was that the dialogue and learning that happened as a result was not within single institutions but rather across emergent networks that were pushing for change.

Interestingly, in these contexts, although learning was clearly central to the story, the processes were described in more social terms, alluding to the entrepreneurial individuals and groups involved and their pivotal roles in changing how the sector thought and acted.

All of this suggests that the assumption about the minimal value of learning is somewhat misplaced: in fact, learning of different kinds played significant catalytic and enabling roles in all of the significant changes identified by senior leaders.

This account is somewhat at odds with the story of formal humanitarian learning, which has led to processes that are somewhat disconnected from operational realities. It is, however, very much in keeping with what we found in our exploration of crisis-driven learning in sectors that can be seen as parallels to the humanitarian sector. These include:

- National disaster response and civil protection
- Emergency management – ambulance, fire service, police work
- Security and counterterrorism
- Safety regulation for industries such as nuclear power
- Corporate crisis management
- Military planning during conflicts
- Political crisis management

To summarise briefly what is set out in detail in the appendix: crises are events for which one cannot plan. However, for many organisations and sectors, crises are not a one-off but a routine occurrence. These crises are many and diverse – from natural disasters and conflicts to terrorist attacks, product defects and corruption. While the literature on learning from crisis is relatively small, some common themes and issues emerged from our scan.

Experiences of crises have a profound influence on how organisations operate and behave. Fundamental beliefs and values might be challenged, as might perceptions about the social and physical world and how it works. Crises can result in a profound sense of loss, devastation and bereavement – but eventually can also be seen as turning points toward hope, renewal and change. However, for organisations that deal with crises as part of their core mission, each event generates moments and opportunities for learning, meaning that learning happens 'in leaps … rather than smoothly over time' (Simmons, 2009: 2).

The literature suggests formal crisis-based organisational learning approaches have three important contributions to crisis response efforts:

1. To limit the effects of crises as they unfold: For those working in the midst of crises, making effective decisions and leading means being open to the emerging situation and 'constantly learning from and assessing the present state, determining the future state, and planning ways to reach the desired state through implementation of well-developed plans' (Wang, 2008).

2. To ensure that lessons are learned for other similar crisis responses: Because by definition crises are out of the ordinary, in many contexts

they can represent a 'focusing event' that brings attention to particular economic, social and political issues that the crisis illuminates or magnifies. This phenomenon of 'crisis spotlights' means that, in many crisis contexts, there is a window of opportunity for bringing about changes in policy and practice.

3. To step back and reflect on the need for systemic change: Learning processes need to be able to move from individual crises as the unit of analysis to the overall system, to better understand how the dynamics across a range of crises have evolved over time.

Drawing on the different studies we reviewed, it is possible to set out a number of steps apparent in the crisis response system that make it more likely that learning systems or processes will make a significant contribution (these steps are spelled out in more detail in the appendix with specific reference to how Covid-19 triggered learning in the global food retail sector).

Step 1. A crisis becomes a focusing 'spotlight' event, generating policy and operational attention and creating both pressure and resources for learning at individual, organisational and cross-organisational levels.

Step 2. Social groups and networks mobilise around the challenges generated, both to find solutions in the specific crisis response and to reflect on the adequacy of existing approaches.

Step 3. Alignment occurs between the individual, processual, cultural and organisational factors to create an enabling environment for learning – most typically on a temporary basis but sometimes in a sustained way. This does not simply emerge perfectly formed – greater alignment results from debate, discussion, dialogue and negotiation.

Step 4. New practices and policies are designed and tested both in the ongoing crisis response and in preparation for subsequent ones.

Step 5. The application and adoption of new practices leads to new experience curves, and virtuous circles of change that play out within the current crisis and for future crises.

By drawing on these five steps, it is possible to obtain more of an insight into one of the examples of change most widely cited by senior leaders. Specifically, how learning contributed to change after the 2004 tsunami response, in the context of both cash transfers and localisation (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3: The five steps of crisis learning applied to the tsunami

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5
Huge resources and public attention	Many groups and networks mobilise	Some issue-based and technical alignment emerges	New cash practices designed and proposed	New cash-based practices tested and applied

2004 Tsunami → Y → Y → Y → Y

N → Localisation seen as central but no alignment means little progress seen - superficial

Y → Significant learning results in cash transfers

Source: Authors.

For cash responses, each of the five steps was fulfilled in a variety of ways, leading to significant learning. There was a sense of a focusing event; cash-based technical networks mobilised within and across the five affected countries; there was broad alignment on the value of and need for cash; new practices were designed, tested and disseminated.

By contrast, the same did not happen for localisation efforts; even the most significant criticism of the overall response centred on the need for a fundamental reorientation of the system towards national and local actors. While there was attention to this issue and some groups did emerge around it, there was no significant alignment on how the 'fundamental reorientation' would work – leading to at best superficial changes in the way the sector dealt with national and local actors.

4   Exploring the role of learning in humanitarian change

Section 2 and Section 3 of this report looked at both organisational learning in general and humanitarian organisational learning from a historical perspective, and identified that the endeavour was lacking in some critical areas.

Section 3 also looked at how senior humanitarian leaders viewed change, and identified a paradox – that, even though formal organisational learning does not often lead to change, change processes have often been anchored in systematic processes of learning and knowledge acquisition.

This implies a rather different narrative about humanitarian learning than we have heard while examining formal learning efforts. It also suggests that, if we are to understand the true value of organisational learning, we need to be asking a different question. Instead of asking

What has resulted from humanitarian organisational learning efforts?

we should instead ask

What have been the most significant changes in the humanitarian sector, and what was the contribution of learning?

This question is the focus of this section of the report.

4.1 Applying a systems lens on humanitarian organisational learning?

As Section 2 noted, one of the most significant texts in organisational learning is Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*, which puts systems thinking approaches at the heart of organisational learning endeavours.

Although there have been numerous efforts to bring such approaches into humanitarian and development work (including by one of the present authors), it is interesting to note that little of this has been in the context of humanitarian organisational learning practices.

In setting out to better understand what role learning has played in significant change processes in the humanitarian sector, we started by

reviewing a range of different systems models and frameworks. The aim of this was to understand which might be most appropriate for providing a wide-angle lens on the humanitarian sector and how it changes and to make it possible to locate, analyse and understand learning in the context of these changes.

The systemic frameworks we examined fell into the following categories:

1. Rich pictures and systems 'maps' – for example causal loop diagrams that can help in understanding the different factors and issues influencing a particular problem, such as malnutrition and undernutrition (Baker et al., 2019)

2. Dynamic modelling tools – for example stock and flow modelling that can help in tracking resources and how they are allocated and used, such as in humanitarian supply chains (Bessant et al., 2015)

3. Frameworks that help in understanding how different systems undergo transition and change and the role of different actors and factors within this – for example using diffusion of innovations theory to understand how cash emerged thanks to innovators and early adopters (ibid.).

Having explored a number of these, we identified the multi-level perspective developed by Frank Geels of Sussex University as having a great deal of potential for the humanitarian sector (Geels, 2002; 2006; 2011). The relevance of this comes in part because it combines aspects of all three of the systems frameworks set out above. Geels developed the model to understand socio-technical transitions in a wide range of different industries, and it has become widely used to understand sustainability transitions.

We found the framework to have not only considerable explanatory power regarding specific humanitarian change efforts but also valuable predictive power in terms of helping understand when and why historical learning processes led to change – or not.

The approach sees change as happening as the result of interactions between three levels.

1. **Niches** are where novel new practices happen. These spaces serve as 'incubation rooms' away from the normal dynamics and forces of a sector, and give time and space for research and learning through experience. Supporting networks are also established.

2. **Regimes** are the established sets of practices, processes, skills, technologies, organisational cultures and associated rules and values. These are embedded in a variety of institutions and organisations, and are diverse and dynamic, leading to a patchwork or mosaic of regimes that make up any given sector or industry.

3. **Landscapes** are the wider contexts of a given industry or sector. These are the macro factors that shape the sector and the interactions of actors within it. In the humanitarian sector, these are both particular crises and also the wider socioeconomic and political contexts that shape how crises play out – for example how disaster responses are shaped by the need for richer countries to dispose of food surpluses.

These are represented visually in Table 3 and Figure 4.

Table 3: The multi-level perspective on humanitarian change
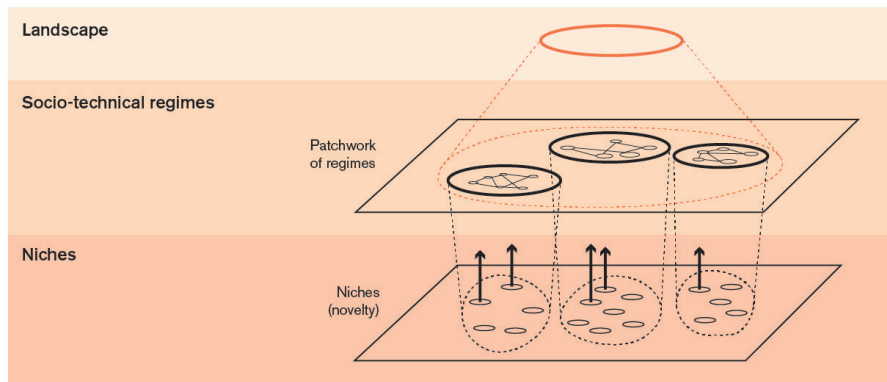
As well as identifying these levels within industries and sectors, the approach also usefully spells out how change happens across complex multi-stakeholder systems. By examining a wide range of sectors over long time periods, Geels and colleagues have shown that change follows certain recognisable stages, as follows:

- Stage 1: Changes at the landscape level lead to pressures on existing regimes, creating windows of opportunity for learning.
- Stage 2: Niche ideas that had been building up internal momentum – through learning processes, performance improvements and support from grassroots networks – coalesce thanks to engagement from frontline workers and interest groups.
- Stage 3: The alignment of these stakeholders and processes enables the breakthrough of learning around novel practices into the 'mainstream' system.
- Stage 4: These are tested and developed within the mainstream of the sector.
- Stage 5: Over time, they become part of the reformed regime, and have an influence on the landscape.

Readers will already have noted that these stages correspond closely to those identified in the crisis-driven learning presented earlier. What the multi-level framework usefully adds is a set of ideas about how overall industries change as a result of crises (or landscape changes), the behaviours of social actors during such change processes and the dynamics of learning that arise that contribute to change. These are articulated in adapted form in Figure 4.

Figure 4: The multi-level perspective applied to humanitarian organisational learning – the humanitarian systemic learning framework

Socio-technical landscape (exogenous context)

The humanitarian sector 'regime' is dynamically stable, with changes happening continuously and incrementally

Crises and other landscape changes put pressure on the sector, creating windows of opportunity for learning

Learning within the new emerging regime has an influence on the landscape, shaping future crisis responses

Socio-technical regime

Donor dynamics
Technology
Policies
Skills   Processes
Culture

Existing regimes influence niche activities through shared learning networks, events and dialogue

Specific crises see new approaches 'break through' using targeted learning to take advantage of windows of opportunity

Niche learning becomes aligned and accumulates as new crises arise, creating momentum and wider interest

Niche-innovations

Small groups and networks experiment with novel approaches, and undertake learning processes to assess their effectiveness and communicate emerging lessons

Time

Source: Adapted from Geels (various).

4.2 Applying the humanitarian systemic learning framework

Change in the humanitarian sector can take many forms. It can involve developing new policies and frameworks; improving programmes and projects; supporting greater involvement or coverage of specific groups or communities; mobilising new investments and resources; or expanding the scope of humanitarian work to new kinds of vulnerabilities, crises, thematic issues or geographic regions.

This section of the report draws on our investigation – based on research, retrospective reflections and synthesis of published material – of four different change initiatives and the role that learning has played in enabling them at different points. All of these are long-term processes – spanning several decades. One has seen significant changes happen based on learning (cash), one has seen changes that have not necessarily been underpinned by learning (mobile technology) and two have seen only relatively superficial changes (participation and localisation).

The humanitarian systemic learning framework helps provide an overall understanding of the conditions that created or inhibited *learning that was significant* in the four cases.

Cash case study

In this case study, the growing credibility of and evidence base on cash led to a sense of momentum and common identity for a dispersed set of niche learners (Bailey and Pongracz, 2015). The Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 created a number of pressures and opportunities that allowed this niche to become mainstream (Doocy et al., 2006): a highly publicised crisis that garnered massive resources from governments and the public alike; a lack of surge capacity, meaning humanitarian agencies needed to find alternatives ways to deliver assistance; a simultaneous response in five countries (Harvey, 2007)). Learning played a crucial enabling role, with the creation of a multi-country learning platform that enabled real-time exchange and reflection on critical operational issues around designing and delivering cash. The next major crisis to affect the whole system was the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, the response to which gave many of those with cash experience an immediate conduit for continuing their efforts and learning in the same region (Bailey and Harvey, 2015).

Mobile technologies case study

In the mobile technologies case study, the crucial tipping point was the sudden explosion of violence following the elections in Kenya in 2007. Interestingly, while there had been interest in humanitarian use of mobiles before this point (Mesmar et al., 2016), the rise of insecurity across the country enabled two niche innovations in particular – mobile-based crowdsourced mapping and mobile money transfers (Datta et al., 2008) – one as a direct means of tracking and monitoring human rights abuses and violence and the other as a means of delivering assistance to populations in need despite security concerns hindering either physical aid or the provision of physical cash transfers. While both made use of external resources, the innovations themselves emerged from Kenyan innovators: Ushahidi was a mashup of Google Maps developed by Kenyan blogger Oro Okollah (Meier, 2012); and MPesa emerged from a microfinance programme funded by the then-UK Department for International Development but implemented by Kenyan mobile operator Safaricom. The success of the two approaches led to their use within the Kenyan humanitarian response and also provided opportunities for a new wave of mobile innovators to enter into the humanitarian sector (Ramalingam et al., 2009). However, for the most part this has not been shaped or influenced by learning regarding the value-added for humanitarian responses. Rather, it has been driven by both dominant regimes within the sector and industry interests outside the sector.

Participation case study

In the participation case study, while lack of participation and ownership of crisis-affected communities has long been an overall criticism levelled at humanitarian responders, no single focusing event has placed prominence on or created a need for participation as a general rule. This is arguably because the dominant humanitarian regime has fiercely resisted the power shifts that are needed here. That said, participation has seen a breakthrough for two approaches – community-based approaches to acute malnutrition (Collins, 2001; 2004; ENN, 2004) and community-led sanitation to tackle open defecation (Bastable and Lamb, 2012; Balfour et al., 2015; Mlenga and Baraki, 2016) – that are now widely used in humanitarian settings. Both of these can be seen as supported by considerable amounts of niche-level learning – one as an alternative to the established regime of in-patient malnutrition approaches that were proving increasingly costly and ineffective and the other as a development approach that was extensively documented and that made the shift to humanitarian practices thanks to the experimental approaches of water and sanitation experts. Both had specific crises – Ethiopian food insecurity in 2002-2003 and the Haiti earthquake in 2010 – where the breakthroughs happened. And both were the focus of sustained multi-year research and learning endeavours. However, although participation has been central to the dramatic effectiveness of both approaches, no broader learning effort has aligned the experiences to coalesce in a movement for change. In fact, despite the successes of these approaches, many generalist humanitarian practitioners are still unaware of their impact on the sector.

Localisation case study

In the localisation case study, as with that on participation, there is no clear sense that the dominant regime has given way to niches and breakthroughs in any significant way (Barbelet et al., 2021). Major crisis evaluations – on Rwanda, the Indian Ocean tsunami and Haiti – have argued for localisation as one of the most important changes needed in the sector to prevent future failures (Ayobi et al., 2017). At a macro policy level, this led to the so-called Grand Bargain at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, to localise 25% of humanitarian spend by 2020. However, there has been more rhetoric than change in this area, with the dominant regimes and related agencies adapting to meet the target while missing the point. Today, this is the focus of much active debate and considerable ire among national and local humanitarian actors, who see the repeated failures of international actors to live up to their commitments as a signal of an enduring colonial and racist legacy (Accelerating Partnerships through Localisation, 2019). From a purely technical

standpoint, it is also interesting to note what is seen as a permitted 'niche': international humanitarians frequently complain that local and national partners do not have the capacity to operate at scale while at the same time failing to engage with those actors who do in fact have the necessary capacity – be they large international NGOs from southern countries, such as BRAC, or local and national government bodies. The pressure of crises has not yet aligned with the emergence of clear niche approaches that can break through to the mainstream – in large part because it is not in the interests of dominant regimes for this to happen. This ongoing inflexibility and unwillingness to reformulate the dominant regime to play new kinds of roles in humanitarian response has led a number of governments of crisis-affected countries – notably Indonesia and the Philippines – to reject humanitarian responses. At the time of writing, the Ukraine crisis seems to have all the hallmarks of a crisis that could put significant pressure on the sector to localise in new and innovative ways. Time will tell if it will capitalise on this opportunity to learn and adapt across a number of crisis-affected countries simultaneously, and whether the learning will be seen as transferrable to other non-European contexts.

As well as clarifying the initial conditions, the systemic learning framework helps us understand the different points at which learning was significant for change to happen in our four case studies. We found the framework to have explanatory power regarding specific humanitarian change efforts but also predictive power in terms of enabling an understanding of when and why learning processes led to change – or not (see Table 4).

4.2.1 Crises as 'focusing events' creating pressure on existing regimes

As already outlined, major failures have led to a series of reappraisals of aid delivery, and calls for changes in both policies and practices across the sector. There is compelling long-term evidence that different crises put catalytic pressure on the humanitarian sector to strengthen learning.

The extent to which different crises actually create such pressure is determined by the scale and nature of the crisis. As a general rule of thumb, the bigger the crisis and the resulting response, the greater the spotlight on the sector, and the greater the pressure. The tsunami, Rwanda, Kenya and Haiti all come up time and again as key moments of change in the sector (James, 2016).

Table 4: Overview of the four case studies, with selected examples for different kinds of learning

Case study	Focus crisis event	Niche development	Breakthrough	Operational mainstream	Future crisis readiness
Cash transfers	2004 Indian Ocean tsunami	Red Cross work (1999) ODI research (2003)	The cross-country cash learning group	Extensive research supported by different donors and evaluations	Establishment of the Cash Learning Partnership/the CALP Network
Mobile technologies	2007 Kenyan electoral violence, 2010 Haiti earthquake	Pre-existing work on mapping technologies, on use of mobiles and on humanitarian innovation	Ushahidi MPesa Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF)	HIF research and case studies GSMA initiatives on mobile phones for humanitarian action Evaluations	Research on risks and opportunities of digital technologies HIF research on humanitarian innovation
Participation of affected communities	No specific crisis where participation has been front and centre	Robert Chambers' work on participation in refugee camps Mitchell and Slim on community-led responses ALNAP case studies (2002–2004)	No general breakthrough discernible at a significant scale, although some specific technical areas have successfully utilised participatory and community-based approaches	Repeated evaluations and studies highlight lack of learning and change Nutrition and to a lesser extent sanitation have significant successes but participatory elements are not at the forefront of the narrative	Formation of CDAC (on communication with crisis-affected populations)
Localisation	Mozambique floods 2000s/2010s Philippines typhoon responses 2010s Indonesia earthquake and volcanoes 2010s	Missed Opportunities series	Few practical documented case studies available Some examples of good practice in localised responses that have worked in parallel to dominant humanitarian regime (e.g. Paung Ku Nargis response in Myanmar)	Repeated evaluations and studies highlight lack of learning and change	2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and Tsunami Evaluation Coalition for articulating the need for localisation Grand Bargain and 25% target Ongoing debates and issues including anti-racism and decolonising aid

Source: Authors.

In the context of mobile technologies, two different regimes were being challenged in Kenya: the dominant humanitarian regime around use of resources and technologies, which saw both as being firmly in the control of aid agencies, and the dominant digital technological regime, which saw new tools and approaches as things that were developed in high-income settings and exported into less wealthy countries. Both mobile money and mobile mapping would go on to challenge these regimes. For example, the use of mobile money would become fused with the cash movement to create greater space and scope for change. At the same time, the breakthroughs were also used to reinforce dominant regimes: aid agencies have used considerably more resources to strengthen their own use of technologies than to empower communities; and, despite the strongly homegrown nature of both Ushahidi and MPesa, they have inspired successive generations of Western technology entrepreneurs to see developing countries as market opportunities for their 'brainchild' apps.

In the ALNAP *State of the Humanitarian System* report series, one of the key lessons is that incremental learning happens relatively smoothly over time, through a process of gradual improvements and adjustments. This reinforces the idea that dominant humanitarian regimes are neither monolithic nor static. That said, there is a limit to how much these regimes can change: flexibility exists but within relatively well-established policy and operational boundaries. By contrast, major policy developments are more episodic in nature, centred around specific moments of change, where change may happen in bounds rather than increments.

The systemic learning framework as applied here gives us a clear explanation for these two dynamics: incremental learning happens continuously within the dominant regime, while crisis-driven breakthrough learning happens more episodically thanks to the alignment of niches, networks and external events that focus attention and resources.

That said, it is worth noting that few specific crises – even mega-disasters such as the tsunami – are decisive in terms of whether learning leads to change. It is not only the triggering crisis itself that matters but also the sequence of crises that then follows. After the tsunami, the Pakistan earthquake enabled cash practitioners to move on and apply their learning in the same region, albeit under very different operational conditions. The experiences in Kenya in 2007 were documented and led to the further development of both mobile money systems and a global crisis mappers community, which were well placed to mobilise when the Haiti earthquake struck in January 2010. These sequential crises not only exerted sustained pressure on dominant regimes to make space for alternative and novel learning generated by niche practices but also gave a sense of momentum and new operational possibilities to the learning networks that had formed around said practices.

But the channelling of this pressure into the sector and its use as a force for learning-based change is a dynamic and non-linear process, underpinned by power and politics, organisational/donor interests and the nature of the dominant regimes.

It is also worth noting in this context that it is not crises alone that create focusing events: the interests of powerful players and ongoing reforms also create conditions under which learning can influence change. In the cash example, long-standing resistance among food aid agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) started to change in the mid-2000s, when WFP redefined itself from a food aid agency to a food assistance agency, thus opening the door to making more use of cash in its programmes (WFP, 2008). This change came about in part because of the learning about cash from the tsunami but also thanks to the lobbying influence of donors and academics.

The evolving influence of mobile operators also created conditions for greater use of mobile technologies in Haiti than in any crisis beforehand, and this was reinforced by the highly urban nature of the crisis context, putting a premium on quick efficient communications.

With both localisation and participation, while there is clear evidence that dominant regime actors were dissatisfied with the *status quo*, the overall argument hinged not on the creation of new technologies and processes but on new business models and relationships with external actors, including crisis-affected populations. In both of the participation examples that have been successful (malnutrition and sanitation) and in the localisation effort (post-Nargis), the novel learning came about because there were few viable alternatives for responding to the crises in question.

While these examples suggest dominant regimes can in fact 'see off' the pressure that new crises create, it is also clear – as seen in cash and mobiles – that certain sequences of disasters can exert a kind of continuous landscape pressure, leading to cracks in the dominant regime. When these cracks arise in tandem with learning processes for relevant niches, this can influence powerful actors towards more open policies and lobbying stances vis-à-vis change.

4.2.2 Networks and groups mobilising and learning around niche ideas and approaches

As noted with crisis learning more generally, one crucial common factor in all of the examples where learning proved significant was related to whether the critical juncture of the crisis was met by a coalition of niche actors open to learning together about alternatives to the dominant regime. In the cash case, this community was already emerging pre-Indian Ocean tsunami. So too with the digital innovation community in Kenya prior to the electoral violence in 2007, and this was then accelerated by the growing interest of mobile businesses. In the two participatory examples, between three and five years of learning preceded the crisis that facilitated their breakthrough. By contrast, there has been a sustained lack of resources for genuine learning about localisation: as noted in the HPG 2019 study, the burden of evidence has been placed on the stakeholders with the fewest resources to do anything about it.

Based on our analysis of these different niche networks and groups, a number of factors seem to be significant as to whether they do in fact become 'coalitions for change'.

- **Operational relevance**: the ideas being tested and developed are not purely theoretical; they have considerable on-the-ground relevance. This is clearly demonstrated in the cases of cash, mobile innovations and the participatory approaches to malnutrition and sanitation. With participation generally, and localisation, the arguments have been based more on principles than on practice; where there are tangible practices, such as with large Southern INGOs or government actors, they do not for some reason pass the humanitarian relevance test.

- **Pre-existing investment in learning**: the ideas that mobilise networks and groups are generally not completely new but have some history in the sector. Usually, this means some level of investment in learning – through the pooling of resources among niche actors, voluntary efforts or, in some cases, dedicated if limited resources from within the dominant regime.

- **Demonstration of value-added**: the alignment of groups and networks is based initially on dialogue and debate about the approach in question, and its viability in terms of contributing to a more effective or efficient humanitarian response. Typically, the most successful niches will be those that are able to use the language and terminology of the dominant regime to argue for alternatives. In some cases – as with cash and participation – this has meant couching the more radical aspects of the approach in more palatable and less confrontational ways to facilitate their acceptance by the mainstream. In other cases, as with the earliest iteration of cash, and with localisation, the arguments are made not purely on a technical level but also on the level of moral and humanitarian rhetoric, backed by evidence.

- **Symbolic support from the dominant regime**: support from donor governments, political players, operational responders, credible research institutions and emerging actors can be seen as a signal of the maturity of a given approach but also demonstrates its acceptability among and compatibility with mainstream perspectives and systems.

Of course, it is not simply learning that underpins the development of new niches. In the mobile phone case study, the interests of business – a coherent mobile phone sector voice in the form of GSMA, many different actors entering the sector – gave niche experimenters greater levels of resources and more voice. Moreover, it was not alternatives to the dominant regime that actually ended up being most widely utilised. Both MPesa and Ushahidi are based on the agency of communities – to access and use money in new forms, to signal the conditions and situations they face to a wider world. These empowering elements have not been front and centre of the take-up of mobile technologies by humanitarian responders. Instead of harnessing these 'horizontal' applications, for the most part humanitarians

have made use of technologies that have reinforced the 'vertical' nature of the dominant regime, using innovation to reinforce and shore up its status.

This gives a sobering reality check for localisation and general (as opposed to technically focused) participation efforts in terms of the enabling conditions that might lead to change:

- Crisis-related pressures have generally not aligned with mobilisation of niche networks.
- The networks that have formed around participation and localisation are fragmented and have not coalesced around some specific practices.
- There has not been sustained investment in comparative and operational learning (with a few exceptions).
- Powerful actors' pressure for change in these areas has not grown stronger and clearer over time.

4.2.3 Alignment and breakthrough of niche learning into the mainstream

The points at which niche learning 'breaks through' into the mainstream are the subject of some debate and contention, in the humanitarian sector and in the wider world. Different communities and groups may place the breakthrough moment at different points in time and have highly personal perspectives on the factors that enable change. One of the best examples of this distinction is the discovery of penicillin. Popular understanding is that the messiness of Alexander Fleming's lab in the early 1920s created the conditions for the mould to grow in a petri dish. In reality, Fleming thought little of his discovery at the time, and it was not until the wartime effort of Oxford biochemists Howard Florey and Ernst Chain to isolate and synthesise penicillin that it saw a tangible breakthrough into medicine. Similarly, albeit on a different scale, the first documented uses of cash transfers in emergencies date back to American Red Cross international relief efforts in the late 19th century, and there were certainly many applications of the tool, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. But it was arguably the first Red Cross learning study, published in 1999, that created the conditions for the breakthrough of cash into the humanitarian mainstream (Peppiatt et al., 1999).

It is interesting in this context to observe the different styles that crisis-driven learning needs to take to break through into the mainstream. The kinds of learning necessary for niches to develop and mobilise are evaluative learning on alternative approaches to the dominant regime and social learning to enable debate and dialogue on the implications. We can see these learning types in the cash and mobile cases; indeed, the two cases become intertwined at a certain point around 2009-2010, when mobile phones became a critical enabling technology for cash transfers. By contrast, the kinds of learning that facilitate mainstream breakthroughs are more around a small 'c' campaigning mentality: understanding which stakeholders and actors are interested in the niche learning and might be convinced to operationalise it in practical ways within a new response.

In reality, the two kinds of learning do feed into each other – one cannot advocate for new approaches without some evaluative and social basis on which to do so, and successful advocacy then creates a context for further evaluative and social learning. But the learning that needs to take place to facilitate breakthroughs is more about how best to advocate and lobby for space, operational resources and support to pilots within specific humanitarian responses. The nature of the advocacy is often both principled in the humanitarian sense ('this is the right thing to do') and technical ('this is how we will go about doing it'). With cash transfers, this meant the development of principles and guidance on what changes would be needed to aid programmes, how they would be operationalised, with what partners and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

An important consideration here is around the risks and costs of novel practices. The focus of learning processes on these practicalities can be something of a double-edged sword. In the humanitarian sector, responsibility for the burden of proof is disproportionately on new ideas and practices, which are often expected to jump through evidence hoops that would never be expected of approaches that fit within the dominant regime. At the same time, provision of this evidence can – at the early stages of learning – simply demonstrate that the novel approaches are potentially too costly and not worthy of consideration.

Over time, as niche learning becomes stronger and more comprehensive, and experience curves are flattened, there is less need for such learning: the case for novel learning becomes self-evident and actors within the dominant regime make the case of their own accord. The level of formality of the breakthrough learning process varies considerably depending on the different sectors. For example, community-based approaches to malnutrition needed to be approved by a World Health Organization (WHO) evidence panel, who then validated it for worldwide use.

In cash, the breakthrough learning was informal and social, based on a growing movement of passionate and committed actors who spread lessons and ideas to the next crisis response they worked on. In general, in the absence of a formal learning arbitration body such as WHO in the selected sectors of health and nutrition, the strength of breakthrough learning comes down to numbers: how many people and organisations support it and what resources they are able to claim directly (in terms of research and other grants) or influence indirectly (in terms of reallocation of existing response budgets to new approaches).

4.2.4 New approaches developed and iterated within the mainstream system

Once new approaches reach the mainstream, the form of learning needs to evolve again. When ideas are in niche state, the learning can be relatively open-ended and exploratory. At the breakthrough stage, it is more about stakeholder interests and engagement. The challenge shifts to become one about how to operationalise the novel learning – be it about a new process,

method or approach – in meaningful ways within mainstream humanitarian delivery.

More generally, this kind of operational learning needs to address both the viability of the new learning, in terms of how best to operationalise it, and its feasibility, in terms of how it can fit within and align with existing procedures and processes. Done well, it generates strategic and tactical insights into the challenges that might emerge when new ideas are tested at scale, from a humanitarian response and an institutional perspective.

This process is by necessity multifaceted and involves some or all of the following considerations:

- What needs to change practically as a result of the novel learning? Does it necessitate new strategies, programmes, methods or delivery mechanisms?
- In what ways do existing organisational policies and guidance need to be adapted or adjusted?
- What does the new learning mean for existing and new partnerships?
- What are the implications for monitoring, learning and evaluation?

In some cases, such as cash, a body of expertise and experience predated the focusing event, which meant that new technical insights were readily available. At the same time, there was a need for ongoing real-time learning. This was addressed through the creation of a cash learning group, an electronic community of practice that brought together practitioners in each of the affected countries and gave them a means by which to exchange ideas, insights, documents, templates, evaluations and more.

One of the most interesting aspects of this kind of learning is that, if the change is going to be meaningful for the sector at large, it is best undertaken as an inter-organisational effort. When new learning comes into any sector, the tendency is to make it fit with what is already in place, so as to insulate dominant regimes from unwanted change. During operationalisation, advocates of new learning continually confront conservative forces and ideas that reinforce – directly or indirectly – the existing regime. In the extreme, this can drain away the value – the actual rationale – of the learning.

At the point of operationalisation, then, successful learning processes have been those that have maintained a coalition for change and created a peer network within which the original ideas can be sustained and lessons can be learned and shared in open and honest fashion. It is through cross-organisational and collective learning that humanitarian learners have been best able to see off pressures to 'fit and conform' to existing regimes, instead successfully working to 'stretch and transform' those regimes. In all of the successful case studies, interacting, sharing and learning across organisational boundaries built the cross-fertilisation of ideas and the internal momentum that subsequently led to adaptive reconfiguration of the system.

Of the most potential value during this stage is that actors within the dominant regime – humanitarian leaders and policy-makers – can become

convinced of the value of the new learning as a result of direct utilisation in responses. Sometimes, the most vocal opponents of a new idea can be turned into sympathisers or even champions for change. These individuals and groups can then greatly amplify the influence of the learning process. These actors end up having a foot both in the niches and in the dominant regime and become important brokers and enablers of change, as was seen in the cash case study.

However, actors representing the dominant regime may appear sympathetic while actually holding radically different views on how change may play out. This can be observed in localisation debates, where national and local actors calling for change often have completely different ideas about the vision for localisation to leaders within international organisations. In the worst case, actors working within the dominant regime may work either to co-opt novel learning processes for their own purposes or to subtly undermine them, to make changes less radical than might have been hoped.

It would be easy here to wish for a world where dominant regimes did not exist and limit necessary learning. However, not only does this run the risk of being unrealistic about change but also it may in fact be counterproductive. One of the interesting findings from the broader literature on multi-level perspectives in different industries is that new learning niches realise their transformative potential precisely because they are in tension with dominant regimes and competing visions about how a sector could and should operate. To paraphrase, crisis-driven learning by necessity is a two-way process, whereby niche learning and dominant regimes mutually influence and evolve together.

4.2.5 New approaches gradually becoming incorporated into a reformed regime

The operationalisation of new learning within the mainstream, even if successful, is not enough to ensure sustained change in the humanitarian sector. The adaptive operational learning that happens when new ideas come into the mainstream needs to shift again to ensure that learning *within* crises becomes learning *between* crises.

As already noted, whether or not onward learning happens as a result of a particular focusing crisis event depends largely on the types and sequences of crises that follow that demand international humanitarian action. Specific contextual factors shape how likely it is that learning will be passed on, which relate both to the sector itself and to the nature of the crises that follow. Some of these are structural and involve the policies and institutions that work to legitimise new ideas, thereby creating conditions and expectations that more efforts will follow.

Having sufficient resources and supporting infrastructure to enable the movement of relevant personnel between crisis responses is also an important enabler. Other factors are more human and social in nature, relating to individual preferences about deployments, social networks, skills and capabilities. Finally, the nature of the crises will have a bearing on the

transferability of lessons: all other things being equal, common aspects of crises – whether they are natural disasters or conflicts, how geographically close they are, whether similar constraints are faced in aid analysis and delivery – are likely to lead to a greater chance of learning in the period between them.

At a minimum, this requires the crisis learners to emerge with a shared belief that the dominant humanitarian regime can and should be reconfigured and adapted as a result of what is now understood thanks to the work that has been undertaken. This new system-wide vision for the humanitarian endeavour becomes embedded in three kinds of processes that serve as 'learning batons' to be passed onto the next crisis response:

- Articulation of new system-wide frameworks, institutions and rules to carry the new ideas forward
- Development of necessary technical processes and systems (practices, processes, technologies)
- Development of new networks, communities and social interest groups

The passing of the 'batons' does not in any context looked at in this study lead to radical changes to the dominant regimes. Instead of obsolescence and replacement, as is often seen in other sectors, in the humanitarian sector what can be observed is an ongoing process of regime adaptation to accommodate new practices. While one can find examples of practices that have been phased out over time, for the most part established and new practices run alongside each other. So while learning can lead to transformative change in terms of what is acceptable and viable in humanitarian response, at the level of the overall system, what can one observe is a gradual diversification of operational strategies and tactics, from singular approaches to a more multi-pronged and distributed set of aid channels.

This once again demonstrates the challenges of localisation and participation: that a generalised shift toward either would be hard to do in a partial way alongside existing practices. Once participation has gained widespread buy-in and legitimacy, it would be hard to envisage going back to a response that was top-down and deliberately insensitive to communities' views and interests. Similarly, a genuinely localised response is hard to run alongside one which is owned and controlled by the international community. In some ways, one could argue that the two more successful case studies (cash and mobiles) have this status precisely because they enable regime adaptation, rather than wholesale regime change.

Moreover, there is seldom a singular pathway for change. The mobile technologies case study highlights that different actors can pursue multiple visions within a specific domain of learning, spanning the full gamut from reinforcing the dominant aid regime with technology, to seeking to use technology to revolutionise the very idea of aid.

5 Reflections on the lessons and on the future of humanitarian learning

5.1 Lessons on humanitarian learning

Having covered a considerable amount of ground, we want to conclude this report by spelling out the key findings from the above analysis to help answer our guiding question: how does learning contribute to significant processes of change?

Finding 1: Despite considerable inertia within the system, it is possible to put in place conscious learning processes to effect positive change in the humanitarian sector.

Learning can be seen as central to the most successful change processes looked at here (cash, participation in malnutrition treatments and sanitation) because of how it enables building of knowledge, expertise, credibility and influence. Learning can be a signal of buy-in from key stakeholders; it indicates a diversity of interests and support; and it demonstrates expertise, credibility and respectability.

Our findings highlight the vital contribution that conscious and collaborative learning processes have played in a number of significant change processes in the humanitarian sector. This reinforces our earlier sense that, while not all learning leads to change, all significant change *does* leverage and build on different kinds of learning.

Finding 2: There is no straightforward relationship between learning and change. There are also examples of change processes that have advanced despite significant strategic and operational learning, in part because of the influence of dominant regimes and of powerful influencing groups (as with mobiles). There are numerous ways that learning can be used as a way of resisting change – for example demanding that new approaches be much more learning-based than existing, accepted approaches, and ensuring that the burden of learning lies disproportionately with the new and unconventional. Finally, the absence of strategic learning can be seen as a continual issue for some change processes (localisation, participation) despite the well-established and longstanding need for change in these areas.

Finding 3: When it is done right in different crisis contexts, learning can help humanitarian responders in the following ways:

- feasibility, focused on showing that something works and how, to enhance understanding and acceptability
- comparative analysis, showing how something works relative to existing practices, demonstrating empirical credibility
- framing, in terms of defining specific problems, opportunities and/or challenges in relation to how the current regime works or does not
- adaptation, in terms of helping adjust and align with the current regime or create challenges to the *status quo* from within
- contextual, focusing on the factors and actors that hinder or enable the application of learning
- communications, to make the emotional/normative/values-based appeal for change, using images, metaphors, principles and morals.

Finding 4: From this analysis, it is clear that humanitarian learning is never an easy or a straightforward process. Rather, when and where it happens, it is a contested process of raising and resolving conflicts, differences in perspective and tensions between the implications of learning processes and the existing regime. This 'learning struggle' plays out in multiple dimensions (economic, technical, political, cultural, infrastructural). There is also a need for the 'learning struggle' to change tactics and course at different points in the change process.

Finding 5: Effective learning strategies need to encompass at least four kinds of approach:

- At the niche level, learning needs to be evaluative and technical, and explore possibilities in an open way while maintaining the interest and engagement of relevant networks.
- At the point of breakthrough, the learning needs to be social and political in nature, borrowing principles from policy and advocacy efforts, and to operate like a campaign.
- When being operationalised, learning is about organisational change and adaptation, but it needs to occur in an inter-organisational fashion to ensure effectiveness.
- When learning needs to be transferred to other crises, it must work more at the level of systems change, putting in place the policy, technical and social systems that can help deliver a shared vision for how the sector as a whole should operate.

Finding 6: It is interesting that none of the processes looked at here was supported or enabled by formal organisational learning efforts. Organisational learning as it has been practised in the humanitarian sector has largely served to reinforce and support existing regimes. Criticisms and challenges to the *status quo* are extremely unlikely to emerge from institutionally sanctioned mechanisms such as evaluations, beneficiary feedback, after action reviews and so on. While these institutional practices are no doubt useful to enable course corrections and incremental adaptations, their primary purpose is not to effect change.

Finding 7: When learning processes have an influence on the sector, it is because they are not routine and ordinary; rather, they are 'extraordinary' in every sense of the word:

- They are based on a critical understanding of the need for change in particular domains of humanitarian response, and have a sense of a mission for changing the sector.
- They bring together networks and groups of passionate and motivated people who have first-hand experience of the existing dominant regime and have also been involved in early experimental efforts in change.
- There is some form of individual and collective learning, informal and formal, which is communicated to a wider audience.
- The rationale for the learning involves not just what needs to change but also why it needs to change, and how – and the considerations go beyond specific practices to systemic considerations.
- The learning processes are almost always cross-organisational in their scope and cross-hierarchy in their engagement of stakeholders.
- They are not static but change over time based on the specific needs and opportunities that arise as different crises emerge.

Finding 8: Finally, perhaps the most important lesson from all of this is that humanitarians do not have to simply wait for new crises to emerge in order to embark on crisis-driven learning processes. The systemic learning framework provides a solid basis not just for understanding how learning has contributed to change in the past but also on which to design effective systemic learning strategies to improve humanitarian aid.

By making more active and deliberative use of such approaches, we believe the sector can start to apply more systemic and mission-oriented strategies to create the enabling conditions for change, building on existing lessons and emergent networks in different areas. Work can be done to stimulate niche explorations, build alliances, sensitise institutions and foster an enabling dialogue. All of these things mean that, when the time is ripe, and there are opportunities for new learning in crisis responses, the effort is not starting from scratch.

5.2 A new agenda for organisational learning in the humanitarian sector: bridging the crisis–change gap through systemic learning strategies

Despite this report's overall judgment that learning in humanitarian action remains insufficient overall, it is possible to see from a number of pioneering endeavours that learning has already made a significant change to the way the sector operates.

The problem is that we have not learned the right lessons from these collective learning efforts. While all of the organisations analysed for this report are taking measures to strengthen learning, our interviews revealed that many leaders do not see learning as high priority. Despite this, a

number of the major change efforts cited had been directly influenced and enabled by learning efforts.

There is a clear opportunity and incentive for humanitarians to take more purposeful and systems-based action in a systemic and integrated approach to learning. Expertise and resources exist to advance efforts to overcome longstanding challenges.

One of the lessons from across all of the case studies is that, at its most productive, this is neither an easy ride nor a toxic battle, but rather a dynamic negotiation, based on working through different interpretations and ideas about what humanitarian aid is for, and its role in the world. Done right, these debates and processes will shape the collective future not just of specific approaches but of the whole sector. Now is the time to focus on this in earnest.

Over the next 18 months, ALNAP will work to identify promising avenues for sustained engagement, to test this framework within novel programmes and initiatives, and to subsequently share experience and expertise through transparent reporting and knowledge exchange.

5.3   Next steps

We identify five broad areas for humanitarian organisations to harness the existing opportunities for positive action on humanitarian organisational learning and to build the evidence base to inform ongoing and new change efforts in the future.

1. Commit to systemic learning efforts across coalitions and networks of humanitarian organisations, through implementing mission-oriented learning efforts that seek to bring about specific changes in humanitarian results, and that invest in collective learning processes as a means of enabling such changes.

2. Establish learning partnerships across actors working on high-priority niches – be they humanitarians, affected communities, business, government or civil society – to deliver collective learning, evaluate outcomes, finance shared pilots and develop plans for crisis-driven windows of opportunity.

3. Pool resources and expertise to design and deliver learning processes between crises, targeting sector-wide changes.

4. Use the systemic learning framework to interrogate and evaluate existing change efforts from a learning perspective, to highlight critical enablers and barriers in such efforts.

5. Commit to full transparency around systemic learning efforts in terms of what has worked, what has not and the barriers to sustained change.

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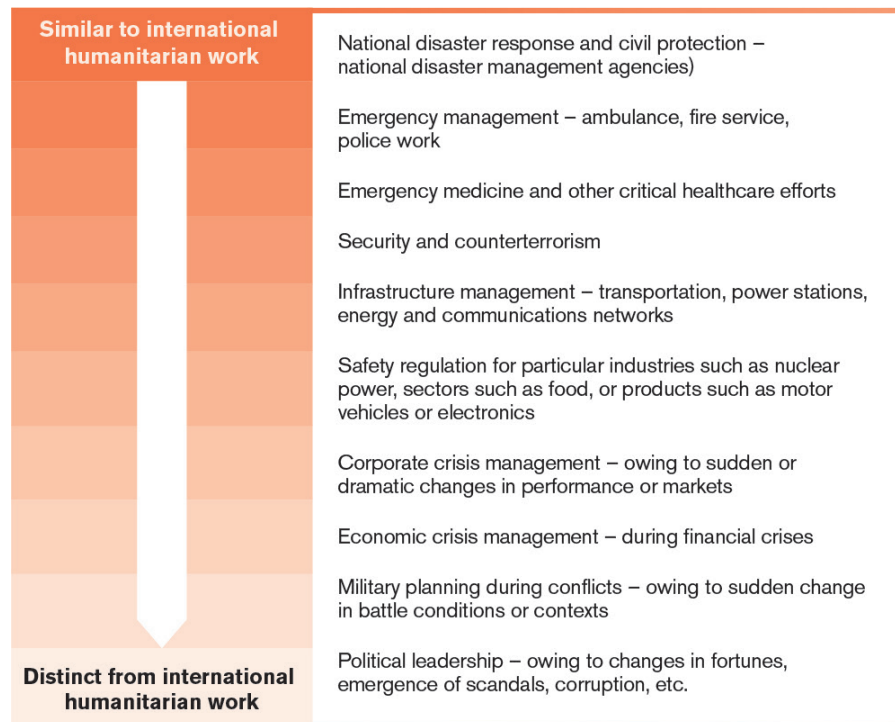
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Appendix: Organisational learning in crisis contexts

The literature and practice on learning in crises beyond international humanitarian work spans efforts that have some strong similarities to aid work (including sharing some of the same institutions) as well as some that are quite separate and distinct.

The parallel worlds of crisis management

Similar to international humanitarian work	National disaster response and civil protection – national disaster management agencies)
	Emergency management – ambulance, fire service, police work
	Emergency medicine and other critical healthcare efforts
	Security and counterterrorism
	Infrastructure management – transportation, power stations, energy and communications networks
	Safety regulation for particular industries such as nuclear power, sectors such as food, or products such as motor vehicles or electronics
	Corporate crisis management – owing to sudden or dramatic changes in performance or markets
	Economic crisis management – during financial crises
	Military planning during conflicts – owing to sudden change in battle conditions or contexts
Distinct from international humanitarian work	Political leadership – owing to changes in fortunes, emergence of scandals, corruption, etc.

These parallel worlds of crisis management are not completely distinct from the international humanitarian realm. Connections between the two often run through governmental disaster management agencies or national Red Cross societies. These organisations employ individuals and teams that play a central role in national crisis management in most countries in the world and therefore also in these parallel systems.

Given such links, and the significant period of time that has passed since international humanitarian organisations first started discussing organisational learning, it is curious how few attempts international

humanitarian actors have made to learn from these parallel crisis management realms. One partial exception is a 2002 ALNAP study on learning in comparable sectors (ALNAP, 2002), which looked at the military, the UK National Health Service and construction. This study did not look at the features of crisis learning per se but more at the organisational and structural features that made them comparable to humanitarian work. There have also been studies on leadership that have sought to draw in insights from sectors such as emergency medicine and the fire service. Humanitarian conferences and events frequently invite leaders from these parallel sectors to share wisdom and insights – but in our experience such exchanges are usually temporary and relatively light-touch.

This seemed a gap worth addressing, and this part of the report attempts to do so in a preliminary way, with a focus on how organisational learning works, illustrative examples, barriers and the key enabling factors that underpin successful crisis learning. A fuller and more detailed exploration than has been possible in this study would be worthwhile.

It is something of a truism that crises are events for which one cannot plan. At the same time, for many organisations and sectors in every country in the world crises are not a one-off but a routine occurrence. These crises are many and diverse – from natural disasters and conflicts to terrorist attacks, product defects and corruption. While the literature on learning from crisis is relatively small, some common themes and issues emerge from our scan.

The focus of organisational learning on overcoming strategic and operational challenges through reflection and the sharing of ideas and knowledge would seem to hold considerable value for crisis responders and managers. Indeed, this has underpinned much of the interest in organisational learning among crisis responders. At the same time, the urgency, uncertainty and complexity of crises means that they present unique sets of constraints, which limit the scope for systematic learning.

Experiences of crises have a profound influence on how organisations operate and behave. Fundamental beliefs and values might be challenged, as might perceptions about the social and physical world and how it works. Crises can result in a profound sense of loss, devastation and bereavement – but eventually can also be seen as turning points toward hope, renewal and change. However, for organisations that deal with crises as part of their core mission, each event generates moments and opportunities for learning, meaning that learning happens 'in leaps … rather than smoothly over time' (Simmons, 2009: 2).

During crises, organisations have to manage people, resources and information in ways that enable them to perform assessments and execute necessary tasks in as rapid and effective a fashion as possible. The literature identifies four distinct types of learning that might take place when a crisis strikes. Interestingly, these map onto and extend the learning loops typology that we saw in Section 2 of this report:

1. **Reactive learning:** Organisations are responding to situations as they occur, and doing their best to meet expectations and navigate pressures in the face of sudden and unexpected circumstances. This does not usually involve formal learning processes, and is typically ad hoc, and more arbitrary than systematic in nature.
2. **Improvement learning:** crisis responders modify their actions and behaviours based on the emerging differences between expected and obtained results. This usually requires some formal or informal feedback, analysis and adaptation (akin to single loop learning).
3. **Strategic learning:** Crisis responders develop new methods and approaches based on prior experiences (akin to double loop learning).
4. **Anticipatory learning:** Crisis responders rethink their *modus operandi* based on taking a bigger picture view of the patterns and dynamics of crises over time (akin to triple loop learning).

Based on the above, formal crisis-based organisational learning approaches have three important contributions to crisis response efforts:

1. **To limit the effects of crises as they unfold:** For those working in the midst of crises, making effective decisions and leading means being open to the emerging situation and 'constantly learning from and assessing the present state, determining the future state, and planning ways to reach the desired state through implementation of well-developed plans' (Wang, 2008).
2. **To ensure that lessons are learned for other similar crisis responses:** Because by definition crises are out of the ordinary, in many contexts they can represent a 'focusing event' that brings attention to particular economic, social and political issues that the crisis illuminates or magnifies. This phenomenon of 'crisis spotlights' means that, in many crisis contexts, there is a window of opportunity for bringing about changes in policy and practice. For example, the risk of an infectious disease was no greater in April 2020 than it was in April 2019 but the spread of COVID-10 made citizens, politicians and the media much more aware of the possibilities in this regard.
3. **To step back and reflect on the need for systemic change:** Crises that are deemed especially significant – because of either their scale or the prevailing context – can 'crowd out' other events or issues that might also generate valuable learning. Focusing learning on large-scale events may seem intuitive but can in fact be counterproductive in many settings, because it means missing out systemic problems. To take one widely cited example, in forestry it has been identified that efforts to put out small forest fires quickly lead in time to more large-scale fires, because the rapid mitigation of such small fires allows burnable undergrowth to accumulate. In these and other settings, learning processes need to be able to move from individual crises as the unit of analysis to the overall system, to better understand how the dynamics *across* a range of crises have evolved over time.

As the above illustrates, organisational learning within and between crises is neither simple nor straightforward. Numerous scholars of learning from crises have commented on the gulf that exists between 'lessons observed' and 'lessons learned'. It is worth quoting from one of these at length here:

Because social and political pressures [for learning] are the greatest in the immediate aftermath of the event, while the event's status on the agenda is freshest, a great deal of attention is paid to ensuring that lessons really are learned, so that the worst effects of the next disaster can be avoided. These pressures also mean that lessons learned reports are usually very quickly generated. It is difficult to claim that any actual learning occurred because insufficient time has elapsed between the event, the creation of the report, and any subsequent tests of the 'lessons'. Instead, these documents really focus on 'lessons observed' or, more simply, the observations that officials and experts made about the preparations before and responses to the crisis or disaster. Moreover, most of the time, these reports are narrow-bore efforts to derive meaning for a particular constituency; in the disaster field, these groups include first responders, communications experts, and public health officials. There are few comprehensive efforts to learn broader strategic lessons about the events based in sound science; this is consistent with the idea that single-loop learning is more common than double-loop learning. (Birkland, 2009)

Just as with organisational learning more generally, in crises significant *individual, process, cultural* and *organisational* issues serve to limit the potential of and space for learning.

Despite the challenges to organisational learning that have been identified, in a number of examples in the parallel worlds of crisis management learning *has* been significant. Ambulance and fire services have become more effective, surgical procedures have been made safer, emergency departments have learned to be more innovative, flights have become much secure, large-scale infrastructure sees fewer accidents.

Constraints to learning within and across crises

	Individual	Process	Cultural	Organisational
Learning within crises	There is strong individual resistance to learning because of the necessary acceptance of inadvertently causing harm to others in the worst cases – and in the best case of not doing as much good as possible.	The disruptive and dynamic nature of crises challenges the kinds of processes by which decision-makers generally want to arrive at evidence-based judgements. The 'do something' mentality means there is an expectation of action.	'Negative framing' of learning is common to many crisis settings, whereby the learning process itself can become associated with and even implicitly blamed for failures.	Different individuals and groups will reach different interpretations of the same events or processes, leading to 'a mosaic of conflicting lessons' (Beck and Plowman, 2009).
Learning across crises	Defensive routines mean failures and errors are feared and covered up, rather than acknowledged – leading to repetition.	Established learning processes tend to be superficial and 'surface-oriented'. Learning relies on 'whistle blowers' outside sanctioned processes.	Groups are most open to lessons that do not challenge their assumptions and beliefs. Crises can lead to a blame and avoidance culture.	Learning is highly fragmented, because of the absence of centralised coordination mechanisms for learning.

The literature usefully identifies a number of wider enabling factors that have a significant influence on whether crises lead to significant learning.

- At an **individual** level, people need to be able to process and learn from adverse incidents in ways that are insulated from the prevalent crisis response culture, and connect to learning as a positive light, thereby breaking the 'blame learning loop'.

- At a **process** level, more emphasis is needed on methods and approaches for dialogue, sharing tacit knowledge and experiences, exploring challenges from different perspectives and opening up space for novel solutions.

- At a **cultural** level, more attention is needed to identifying the roots of problems, challenging assumptions and being open to 'stirring up the trauma' of learning

- At an **organisational** level, there is a need for a more holistic approach to understanding how learning contributes to change in the sector, with particular attention to points of leverage and to cross-organisational learning processes.

Drawing on the different studies looked at here, it is possible to set out a number of steps apparent in the crisis response system that make it more likely that the learning system or process will be significant. We do this here

drawing on the example of how COVID-19 affected the global food retail industry.

Step 1. A crisis becomes a focusing 'spotlight' event, generating policy and operational attention and creating both pressure and resources for learning at individual, organisational and cross-organisational levels.

The emergence and spread of COVID-19 led to a wholesale change in the global socio-technical regime. Widespread national lockdowns created pressures on both traditional and online retailers in terms of the scale of the demands placed on digital approaches. These ranged from the digitalisation of payments among small retailers as a result of the move away from cash, to the widespread use of e-commerce channels as the predominate means of conducting transactions for non-essential retailers, to the establishment of safe working and shopping spaces for those retailers that were deemed essential and where retail spaces stayed open. The closure of restaurants and canteens, together with episodic panic buying, created greater demand for food retail, through both face-to-face and online channels.

Step 2. Social groups and networks mobilise around the challenges generated, both to find solutions in the specific crisis response and to reflect on the adequacy of existing approaches.

Thanks to the widespread definition of food as a critical service, retailers, markets and delivery services all stayed open, albeit with limitations on numbers and strict safety and hygiene measures.

Step 3. Alignment occurs between the individual, processual, cultural and organisational factors to create an enabling environment for learning – most typically on a temporary basis but sometimes in a sustained way. This does not simply emerge perfectly formed – greater alignment results from debate, discussion, dialogue and negotiation.

Industry, consumer and worker groups coalesced around shared challenges and to develop some common principles and ways of working.

Step 4. New practices and policies are designed and tested both in the ongoing crisis response and in preparation for subsequent ones.

Specific measures for hygiene, purchasing and worker protection emerged and were operationalised across stores of different kinds. These included limits on numbers of shoppers, hygiene practices around baskets and trolleys, rules on the use of cash, the need for adequate personal protective equipment and so on.

The massive increase in online food shopping and resulting changes in the behaviours of shoppers also led to changes in retailer practices – for
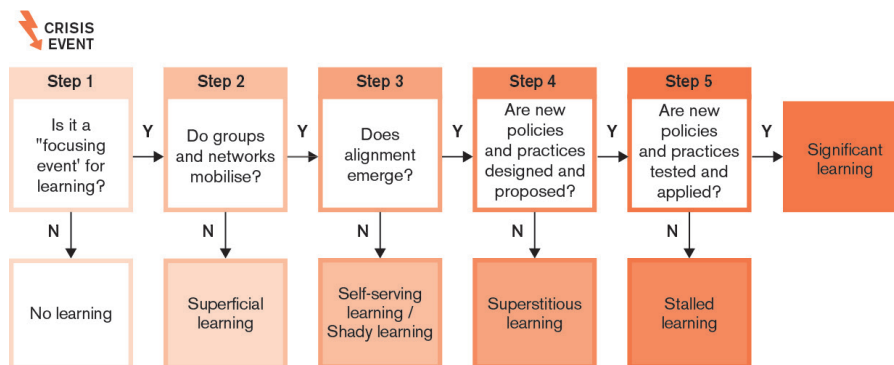
example in fleet management, supply chain and delivery strategies and so on.

Step 5. The application and adoption of new practices leads to new experience curves, and virtuous circles of change that play out within the current crisis and for future crises.

As the risk of COVID-19 infection has diminished, the motivation behind online retailing has receded and consumers have turned back to traditional face-to-face experiences. That said, the efficiency and effectiveness of online food retailing has been maintained, and certain groups, such as the elderly, have continued to shop online, despite not having done so before the pandemic. Perhaps the most sustained change in behaviour among consumers has been the large-scale move away from cash towards digital payments.

The figure shows how these steps lead to the different kinds of learning–crisis interactions described earlier.

The five steps of how crises lead to learning

Source: Authors.

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