

Organisational change in the humanitarian sector

Paul Clarke and Ben Ramalingam

2.1 Introduction

Most of us, at some time or another, will try to change how work is done in our organisations. We may work in organisational functions that exist to create change and improvements in performance: evaluation; policy development; training and learning; or strategic planning. We may be a manager or non-managerial staff member who sees how things could be done better and attempts to ‘put them right’. Whatever the starting point, we will often end up in a similar place: frustrated and dissatisfied, with changes incomplete, and facing apathy, confusion and unintended consequences.

This chapter addresses the topic of change in humanitarian organisations. Drawing on the findings of a programme of research conducted between October 2007 and January 2008 (Box 2.1), it questions the efficacy of some of our traditional approaches to change and performance improvement, and suggests alternative principles and approaches developed outside the humanitarian sector. It considers whether these approaches can be introduced into humanitarian agencies, and presents examples of successful organisational change programmes from NGOs, the UN, donor agencies and the Red Cross movement.

What follows is not intended as an instruction booklet or ‘how to’ guide for organisational change. There is great variety among the actors who make up the humanitarian sector, and we would look in vain for a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution for organisational change (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1998). Instead, this chapter presents some approaches to thinking about organisations and how they change, and shows how these approaches have been implemented.

Box 2.1 Programme of research informing this chapter

This chapter is based on a literature review, and on three groups of interviews.

The literature review, which ran throughout the project, considered published and unpublished literature related to:

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Box 2.1 Programme of research informing this chapter *continued*

- the context of humanitarian work, changes in this context over the past two decades, and future trends
- evaluations of humanitarian operations
- descriptions, reports and evaluations of new initiatives and changes in humanitarian organisations
- theories of organisational change
- case studies and practice of organisational change from beyond the humanitarian sector.

The interviews were conducted in three phases.

- 1 With humanitarian practitioners and with observers of the humanitarian sector, focusing on changes in the humanitarian context since the early 1990s, and on how the sector in general has responded to changes in ‘thematic’ areas such as physical security, information technology and increased politicisation, and to changes in management practice.
- 2 Focusing on specific changes within individual humanitarian organisations or groups of organisations. In most cases, these changes took the form of an explicit initiative or project (see Box 2.2).
- 3 Concentrating on four specific case studies (see Box 2.4 in Section 2.6 below). For each of the case studies, there were between three and six interviews, plus document reviews, and feedback from the case study participants

The rest of this chapter consists of six sections.

- **Section 2.2** outlines some of the major changes in the world that have influenced humanitarian work over the past decade, considers how humanitarian agencies have responded to these changes, and asks what these responses mean for organisational change in the humanitarian sector in future. It also considers a number of the ‘institutionalised’ approaches used to generate

change in humanitarian organisations (evaluation, knowledge management, policy development and training activities), and the assumptions underlying their use.

- **Section 2.3** presents some approaches to organisations that have been developed by specialists in organisational development and change management.
- **Section 2.4** discusses how these approaches to organisations can be used to create different ways of implementing organisational change.
- **Section 2.5** looks at the specific structural and cultural constraints that humanitarian agencies may have in implementing the approaches presented in Section 2.3.
- **Section 2.6** considers how different humanitarian organisations have implemented change. It draws on 4 case studies and the experience of 15 other organisational-change projects, synthesising these experiences to present an overview of effective practices and challenges.
- **Section 2.7** summarises the key points and arguments of the chapter, and draws out fundamental lessons for successful change in humanitarian organisations.

2.2 The big picture

2.2.1 A changing world

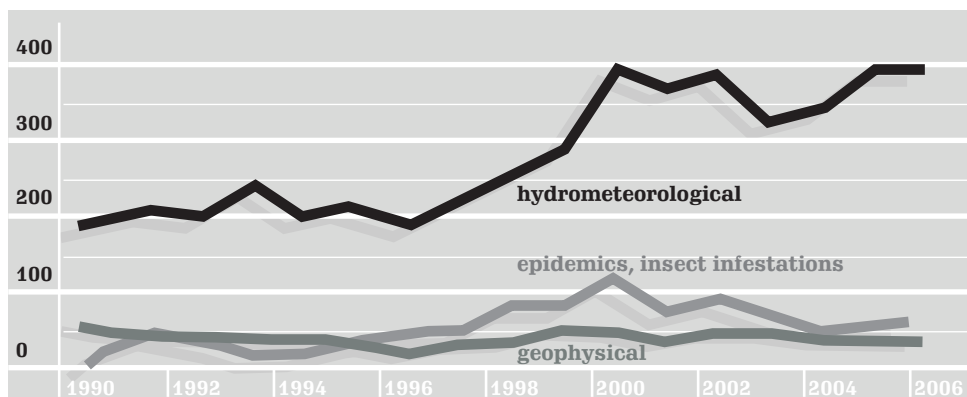
Wherever in the world you are reading this, the chances are that it has become a very different place since the 1970s. Across the planet, the locus and techniques of production, and of daily work, have changed. In many places our patterns of consumption – the things we eat, and surround ourselves with – are very different. Many of us can communicate and access information instantly, wherever we are. Defining aspects of the cultural and political landscape, locally, nationally and

internationally, would be unrecognisable to someone transported from the 1970s. These technological, demographic, economic, ecological and political changes look set to continue. Transported forward in time by thirty years, we might have trouble recognising the world of the 2030s.

The humanitarian sector, linked to a wide variety of actors across the globe, is particularly exposed to shifting currents of change. As Dorothea Hilhorst (2003) suggests, ‘NGOs operate in a number of different domains. The result is a situation where a great many forces pull and push actors in different directions.’ In order to improve performance, and sometimes just to remain operational, humanitarian organisations often find themselves responding to these pulls and pushes by altering their own practices, structures and tools. The forces that have driven change in the humanitarian system are cogently described elsewhere⁴ but as they form the background to many of the changes that have taken place within and between humanitarian organisations, it is worth touching on them briefly here.

Perhaps the most important change in the external environment has been the increase in the number and scale of emergencies (Figures 2.1 and 2.2), coupled with increased funding for humanitarian action (Figure 2.3). As well as changes in scale, the scope of assistance has expanded since the end of the Cold War. Humanitarian aid has been delivered in more difficult and contested environments, as humanitarian space ‘opened up’, allowing improved possibilities for access to affected populations.

Figure 2.1 Number natural disasters, 1990 onwards



Source: Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Guide (2007)

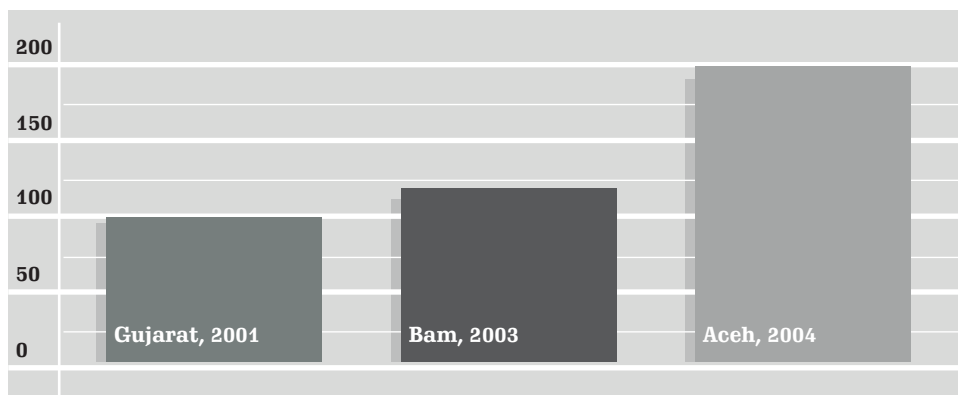
Figure 2.2 Changes in bilateral humanitarian assistance, compared with overall overseas development assistance, 1975 onwards

Changes in ODA by decade (2004 prices)	US\$128bn projected	2010	??	Changes in bilateral humanitarian assistance by decade (2004 prices)
	US\$104bn up 68%	2005	US\$8.4bn up 140%	
	US\$62bn up 0.3%	1995	US\$3.5bn up 176%	
	US\$62bn up 47%	1985	US\$1.3bn up 160%	
	US\$42bn	1975	US\$0.5bn	

Source: Development Initiatives at <http://globalhumanitarianassistance.org/gha2006.htm>

In response, the humanitarian sector has grown tremendously, as traditional humanitarian agencies have expanded and been joined by new actors. The number of international NGOs involved in humanitarian work has increased substantially, particularly in high-profile crises such as Rwanda, Kosovo and the Indian Ocean tsunami (Buchanan-Smith, 2003). As Weiss and Hoffman put it, there have been ‘more crises with more interlocutors combined with more agencies with more capabilities’ (Weiss and Hoffman, 2007).

Figure 2.3 Numbers of international agencies responding to disasters



Humanitarian emergencies have not only become larger, more numerous and more accessible: they have also changed in nature. Most humanitarian organisations have responded to more and more difficult emergencies by reconsidering their own base of skills and technologies. In this, they have generally been supported by the donors and by more general shifts in organisational culture in the global North (and particularly by the philosophy of new public management). Many agencies have

employed more technical specialists, and have imported management approaches from outside the sector. They have also invested significant amounts of time and money in a variety of quality-improvement programmes and on inter-agency coordination mechanisms. Technological change has meant that mobile phones, laptops and email are now ubiquitous, leading to new possibilities for communicating, with ramifications on organisational structures, management and decision-making.

The increased scale and visibility of humanitarian action has led to increased interest in the sector from the media and the general public. In many cases, agencies have responded by reassessing their approach to these stakeholders, in order to forestall negative media coverage and mobilise public support for their activities. There has also been much more analysis and scrutiny of humanitarian operations, demonstrated by the growing number of evaluations and accountability mechanisms being applied across the sector.

At the same time, donors have become significantly more involved in humanitarian issues (Macrae et al, 2002). Increased donor engagement is a function of increased need, but it is also, many humanitarians argue, part of a broader agenda among some Northern governments to redefine approaches to the global South: humanitarian work is being incorporated into the '3 Ds' of Defence, Development, and Diplomacy. This politicisation of humanitarianism (exemplified for many in the description of NATO's intervention in Kosovo as a 'humanitarian war') has, arguably, made more money available for certain types of goods and services in certain areas of geopolitical significance, affecting the degree to which modern humanitarianism follows the traditional principles of neutrality and proportionality.

Such political changes, and the growing awareness that humanitarian work has become politicised, have exacerbated a trend, which can be dated to the end of the Cold War, of increased physical risk for staff in humanitarian operations. Humanitarian workers are now commonly targeted by armed groups, and in response humanitarian organisations have been forced to change their practices to enhance the security of staff and beneficiaries.

In summary, there have been massive changes in the context in which humanitarian organisations work over the past decade. Over the same period, and largely in response to these changes, many humanitarian organisations have changed their skill base, strategic orientation, structures, operating procedures and management

systems. All of this has led to larger and more complex humanitarian organisations. Box 2.2 illustrates the diversity of change initiatives, listing the 19 initiatives explored during research for this current chapter.

Box 2.2 Change initiatives covered in this chapter

- **Emergency Capacity Building project** – inter-agency cooperation to build NGO capacity for humanitarian response
- **Groupe URD** – support to quality assurance in humanitarian organisations
- **HRDN (Philippines)** – creating a humanitarian response network
- **ICRC** – introduction of results-based management
- **ICRC** – strategic and structural changes in the last decade
- **Islamic Relief** – planning and implementing a humanitarian strategy
- **MSF** – responses to a changing environment during the 1990s
- **ODI** – introducing cash-based approaches to humanitarian assistance
- **Oxfam International** – implementing a single, common emergency strategy within the Oxfam International family
- **Plan International** – implementing a rights-based approach to humanitarian programming
- **SC (UK)** – moving a rights-based approach into emergency work
- **SC (US)** – building the organisation’s capacity for working in, and with, emergencies
- **UN WFP** – introduction of results-based management
- **Valid International** – introduction of community-based therapeutic feeding
- **World Vision International** – building the capacity to learn through the H Learn Project
- **DFID** – strengthening humanitarian donorship through the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative (case study)
- **WFP** – improving needs assessments of emergency work (case study)
- **Action Aid** – rights-based approaches in emergency work (case study)
- **IFRC** – consolidation project to create regionally based ‘zonal offices’ (case study)

What can we learn from the responses of humanitarian organisations to these ‘external’ changes? Four key points are worth noting. Firstly, change is a given: humanitarian organisations, by their nature linked to so many elements of global human activity, do not remain still as the world moves around them. Rather, they are sites of continual adaptation, driven by the need to find a balance between global trends and local pressures.

Secondly, change in humanitarian agencies has been profound and wide-reaching. Many of the organisations considered in this chapter are very different from the same organisations that worked in Rwanda in 1994. The profundity of organisational change in the humanitarian sector is often unrecognised, obscured by the fact that these changes have often been unplanned and haphazard, and have taken place over long periods of time. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that humanitarian organisations have made large-scale changes to what they are, and how they work.

Thirdly, humanitarian organisations have the potential to do more than react to changes in the external context. It is certainly true that many organisations have responded to external pressures in similar ways: they have become larger, more diverse and more complex; they employ higher numbers of technical specialists, engage more actively with the media, use more formalised management procedures, subscribe to inter-agency quality-improvement initiatives, and have higher levels of contact with other agencies.

However, these general trends should not disguise the great differences between organisational responses to the changing context. While some agencies have happily accepted increased support from traditional donors, others have ‘made a conscious decision not to grow’, or have looked for new sources of funding. While many have introduced decentralised organisational structures, others have not; and some have tended to centralise decision-making and control. While many organisations have broadened their mandates, others have decided to keep a tight focus on certain technical areas. In short, there are many examples of organisations making conscious – and often contested – choices about *how* they want to change.

Finally, the changes that humanitarian organisations make to themselves affect and alter the humanitarian context. Humanitarian organisations may often have been under pressure from donors and the media to ‘do better’, but in many cases their responses have led other agencies, donors and the general public to rethink the meaning, methods and possibilities of humanitarian action. Change in the

humanitarian sector is a dynamic and continually evolving process, where many elements interact with one another.

2.2.2 Institutionalised approaches to change in the humanitarian sector

On the basis of the above, it seems likely that humanitarian organisations – like all organisations – will always need to change, that large-scale change is possible, and that they will have opportunities to make active choices about how they want to change. This suggests that humanitarian organisations should work to ensure that they have adequate capacities for change. Being ‘good at change’ means, first and foremost, being able to deploy the most appropriate and effective approaches to ensuring that change is successful. How effective are the traditional approaches to facilitating change in humanitarian organisations?

Faced with the need to identify how to respond to external circumstances, to decide what has to be done differently, and to put these changes into effect, many humanitarian organisations have increasingly institutionalised a number of mechanisms to facilitate change. These include (but are not limited to) evaluations, learning and knowledge-management systems, policy development, training and internal communications activities. In many cases, organisations have established specific departments to conduct these activities. Four of these approaches are of particular interest to the ALNAP membership because of their explicit focus on learning and accountability as a means to improve performance (Box 2.3). Many cases have also been the subject of a number of reviews and assessments (several conducted by the ALNAP secretariat on behalf of its members).

Box 2.3 Key institutionalised approaches to organisational change

- **Evaluations** aim to identify what was done, how well it was done, what, if anything, should have been done differently, and – ideally – how things should change as a result.

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Box 2.3

Key institutionalised approaches to organisational change *continued*

- **Organisational learning and knowledge-management systems** aim to improve organisational performance through better use of information tools and group reflection processes.
- **Development and implementation of organisational policies and procedures** formalise or redraw organisational rules and codes laying out what will be done differently, and why, often in response to anticipated or ongoing changes in internal and external contexts.
- **Training** activities allow teams and staff members to gain access to new knowledge and skills, or to reconsider their attitudes, in order to carry out new or different work.

While many other techniques are also employed, evaluations, knowledge management, policy development and training are perhaps dominant in terms of the amount of time and funding that they receive within organisations in the humanitarian sector. Approaches to these mechanisms differ, and their success varies from one situation to another. But overall there seems to be a widespread feeling that none of the approaches is as effective in producing real change as those working in humanitarian agencies would like.

Peta Sandison, writing in last year's Review of Humanitarian Action, concluded that: 'only a minority of evaluations are introducing evident changes'. This was particularly true where 'findings... challenged strongly held beliefs and behaviour embedded in the organisations' culture' (Sandison, 2006). On the knowledge and learning side, ODI work has highlighted that such initiatives, often presented as drivers of organisational change, often get reframed as support functions, usually dominated by IT systems. ALNAP work in 2004 on field-level learning has also shown that, despite good intentions and sound starting points, many initiatives focus on documents, systems and products, and so fail to support learning in operational contexts, which is generally a social, human and tacit process.

A 'policy-led' approach to change is also not without problems. The model of policy-making as a rational process that gathers evidence and provides guidance for appropriate actions is highly questionable. In humanitarian organisations, as elsewhere: 'policymaking and [its] implementation is a chaos of purposes and accidents' (Clay and Schaffer, 1984). And on the implementation side, levels of adherence to codes of conduct at field level differ significantly from one situation to another. As Minnear puts it: 'data are inconclusive about the extent to which collective guidelines are making a difference (in practice)' (Minear, quoted in Weiss and Hoffman, 2007). This route to organisational change appears to stumble on the simple fact that 'none of the agencies involved can simply communicate directives to change policy or practice and expect them to be implemented' (Sandison, 2006).

Training and capacity building also fail to offer a magic bullet for organisational improvement. The ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action of 2004 suggested that 'much of the training provision in the Sector appears to be weakly linked to the action practice of humanitarian agencies' (ALNAP, 2004) at least in part because the kinds of 'social' learning approaches preferred by many humanitarian personnel – coaching, on-the-job training, mentoring – are under-utilised (ALNAP, 2002). The experience of one international organisation in conducting management training is perhaps illustrative of a wider problem:

'one year after (the) workshops, staff were more or less disappointed... they were never able to reproduce the newly learned ways of interacting with each other back in their traditional environment' (Finger and Ruchat, 2003).

The shortcomings in these areas are well recognised, to the point that some of these issues may read like sector-specific clichés. But the facts remain: many of us spend significant amounts of time and money on activities which we sincerely hope will change the way that work is done in our organisations, and these activities often fail to deliver. We might believe that we know what the problems are. We might have known for some time. But it can seem almost impossible to do anything about them. As the report of the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition noted, many of the same problems of humanitarian action have been identified year after year – in some cases for over twenty years – but have still not been addressed (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006).

2.3 Conceptions of organisations and organisational change

2.3.1 What is an organisation?

Humanitarian organisations are not alone in finding change difficult. The success of planned organisational change is difficult to measure, but where measurement has been attempted in public- and private-sector organisations, the findings are sobering. The majority of change efforts fail (Schiemann, cited in Maurer, 1996; CIPD, 2003). And yet, as we have seen, change – sometimes incremental, sometimes extreme and transformational – happens all the time, in all organisations. And some planned change initiatives do in fact succeed.

The fact that planned change initiatives so often fail in the private and public sectors has led many practitioners to challenge the assumptions that are made about how organisations change. This challenge begins with a fundamental reassessment of what ‘organisations’ actually are. If you were to think for a minute about your organisation, how would you describe it? If you were to choose a metaphor for the organisation, what would it be? And what would be the implications of that metaphor for changing the organisation? In his highly influential book, *Images of Organizations*, Gareth Morgan suggests that:

‘all theories of organization and management are based on implicit images or metaphors that lead us to see, understand, and manage organizations in distinctive but partial ways’ (Morgan, 2006).

One of the most prevalent metaphors for organisations is the machine. The machine metaphor leads to thinking of organisations in terms of inputs and outputs. The leading business thinker Charles Handy suggests that under the influence of such metaphors, organisational structures are designed according to organisational charts that look ‘similar to the output diagrams you see in power stations’ (Handy, 1988). The machine metaphor leads to ‘technical’ recommendations, ‘levers’ for change, ‘restructuring’ and ‘re-engineering’ of the organisation for maximum efficiency.

From a disciplinary perspective, the machine metaphor finds resonances in engineering and economics, and was popularised in the scientific management approaches of Frederick Taylor in the early twentieth century. The machine metaphor is powerful because it is, under certain circumstances, very useful. To quote Morgan (2006):

Mechanistic approaches to organizations work well under conditions where machines work well: where there is a straightforward task to perform; when the environment is stable...; when one wishes to produce the same product time and time again, and when the human machine parts are compliant and behave as they have been designed to do.

Unfortunately, although this may have worked for Ford in the 1920s, most organisations do not fulfil these conditions – and very few, if any, humanitarian organisations do. And yet the metaphor stays with us. In international organisations, the implementation of all four of the approaches for change outlined above – learning, knowledge and evaluations; policy development and implementation; and training – have been based on the assumption of machine-like organisations. At some level, humanitarian organisations are seen to work as rational engineered entities which can be understood as the sum of their parts, and which can be acted upon successfully by the provision of tools, techniques and codes. The dominance of this metaphor means that certain assumptions are made in each of the institutionalised approaches to change outlined above in Section 2.2.

For example, it is assumed that information will flow smoothly through the organisation, and be used ‘rationally’: After-action reviews of one emergency response will be picked up and used in other, similar crises, or external or post-event evaluators will identify successes and failures and make recommendations to management which will then be translated into action. Policies and procedures are assumed to be able to change the behaviour of an organisation’s members by rewriting the operating guidelines and instructions. Training, while recognising the fundamental role of individual capacities in the organisation, assumes that the organisation is equal to the sum of its parts: if enough people know how to do things differently, then changes will occur.

But many who work to produce lessons and recommendations, develop policy or design training daily face the question: ‘will this actually make a difference?’ Sandison’s point that ‘using evaluation is as much a people issue as a technical one’

(Sandison, 2006) finds broader echoes across many different kinds of initiatives. The recognition that organisations are not machines but groups of people, and that these people do not operate as ‘human machine parts’, requires us to bring a variety of other analytical approaches to bear on the understanding of what organisations are, and of how they change.

These approaches come from disciplines traditionally concerned with how humans and other naturally occurring entities organise themselves, perceive the world and change their understandings and organisation over time. Insights from psychology, educational science, anthropology, evolutionary biology, non-linear mathematics and post-modern management practice have led to the creation of new metaphors for organisations, and these metaphors underpin a number of different approaches to organisational change.

There is great diversity among these approaches, but there are also some widely shared ideas. For the purposes of understanding change in humanitarian organisations, three related metaphors are of particular importance, which together help build understanding of organisations as more complex, dynamic and unpredictable than the machine metaphor allows.

- 1 Organisations as communities with distinct cultures** By thinking of the organisation as a community, with its own values and beliefs, practitioners have been able to draw in perspectives from ethnography and cultural anthropology to understand how organisations work.
- 2 Organisations as minds** By thinking of the organisation as an intelligent, reflective entity – by thinking of it as a mind – it is possible to see similarities between how individuals and organisations understand changing circumstances, respond to new stimuli, and learn. Using such approaches, practitioners have been able to describe what happens when organisations change in terms derived from Gestalt psychology (for example, Nevis, 1988) and from psychological studies of responses to bereavement (Kubler Ross, 1969).
- 3 Organisations as complex adaptive systems** By thinking of organisations as complex systems and understanding their behaviour in terms of principles that have been identified in other complex systems – such as the weather, the human body or flocks of birds – change in organisations is understood as dynamic, unpredictable and beyond the control of any one individual or group.

2.3.2 Organisations as communities

If we think of the organisation as a human society, it becomes easier to accept that an organisation will inevitably have both a social structure and a culture, and that any process of organisational change will involve changes in both of these areas. The organisation's structure is tangible, and easily described. It is composed of a variety of elements: a legal personality; an organisational design; written rules; identified members and premises. But there is more to an organisation than this. To quote Handy again:

'If organisations are communities... rather than machines, then it is natural to expect that each community will have its own taste and flavour, its own way of doing things' (Handy, 1988).

This 'taste and flavour' is the culture of the organisation. Organisational culture is often invisible and hard to define (Schein, 2000), but most definitions would agree that culture is created by the members of the organisation and outlines a basic understanding of how the world is and of how the organisation (and its members) should be in the world. In understanding how the world is, people take complex reality, select important elements of that reality, and configure them to create a meaningful picture of the world. So the world within which humanitarian, and indeed any, organisations work is as much one that they have created as one which objectively exists. As Barnett and Finnemore (2004) note, international organisations 'help to define shared international tasks (like development) and create and define categories of actor (like refugee)'. Kent (2004) suggests that these creations are vital for the continued existence of organisations: 'assumptions about the outside world... help the organisation to structure and order... inputs. Without them, organisations would be paralysed or would succumb to bedlam.'

An organisation's culture – shared understandings of the world, of the place of the organisation in the world, and of 'normal' behaviour around power, diversity and use of time – are often so integrated into everyday life that they are taken for granted. Yet they guide the behaviour of members of the organisation, and are a powerful factor in how work gets done. Any significant change in any formal, visible element of the organisation will need to be accompanied by changes in the 'shadow world' of the organisation's culture.

Much policy- or evaluation-driven change concentrates on changing the ‘formal’ organisation, without addressing the worldview, beliefs and attitudes that underpin this structure. Knowledge-management approaches tend to have an overt focus on the formal world of documents and electronic information systems, and so fail to engage with the informal, social world where much knowledge is tacitly held. Training programmes, which mainly rely on changing people ‘one by one’, can overlook the importance of a group culture in determining behaviour.

2.3.3 Organisations as minds

If we think of the organisation as a human mind, with emotional and reflective capacities, we can begin to appreciate the role that emotion plays in making decisions about organisational change. The metaphor is an interesting one as it helps us to understand why change is often accompanied by powerful emotional responses. These emotional responses can broadly be understood at two levels, evoked by a perceived threat to the wellbeing of either the individual or the organisation.

At the individual level, the people in an organisation have emotional needs for control, inclusion and emotional closeness (Schutz, 1958). Not everyone needs the same things to the same degree, and so these needs are constantly being negotiated within teams and organisations. When the status quo of an organisation is threatened, individuals feel confusion about whether these needs will be met in the future. Organisational changes may lead to a gain or a loss of power (control) for managers or units within the organisation, or may create the need to dissolve old working relationships and create new ones, upsetting existing groups and relationships. Unsurprisingly, people may feel excited but also confused and threatened under these circumstances.

At the organisational level, the emotional component is more profound. As we have seen, people tend to invest their organisation with meaning: participation in an organisation’s culture means that individuals (when they are at work, at least) internalise a specific way of seeing the world. This in turn creates a strong emotional bond to the organisation. Any change in the organisation – even a fairly minor change – can be interpreted as a threat to that worldview, and to the meaning of the organisation. Such changes typically create emotional confusion and distress, and

this, in turn, leads to resistance to the change. It is important to recognise that this sort of resistance is a necessary and useful element of how organisations work. It preserves the culture of the organisation, prevents bad ideas being implemented, and allows the organisation to retain some stability and continuity in a changing environment. In short, it is a natural mechanism that organisations have evolved in order to make change difficult (Nevis, 1988; Maurer 1996).

Anyone who has managed a change programme can attest to the strong emotional responses that organisational change provokes. It can be easy to assume that individuals are responding ‘selfishly’, because they wish to maintain their individual status and influence. But, when we see the organisation as a community, we can also recognise that the emotional response may be natural and largely ‘disinterested’ – being in defence of the organisation itself.

These emotional responses manifest themselves in various ways. In some cases, there may be overt defiance or argument. But, often, resistance to change is unconscious and hard to identify. We all resist change in our lives through a variety of behaviours that prevent us from sitting down and focusing on the situation, and on what might be done about it. These behaviours include: blaming oneself or others for the ‘problem’, moving the focus of thought or conversation away from the issue; and accepting ‘wholesale’ what we are told without personally engaging with it.

‘Traditional’ approaches to change, which begin with the assumption of the organisation as a machine, and which depend on assumptions of rationality, are not designed with resistance in mind. Change programmes that are embedded in rationality tend to ignore resistance, downplay it as a selfish, emotional response, or attempt to engage with it through rational debate. As a result, they often end up as victims of resistance: ignored, shelved or used selectively.

Thinking of the organisation as a mind opens one further important perspective. While the human mind resists change – and particularly change which is externally imposed – it can change itself through the process of learning. Writers such as Peter Senge suggest that organisations, like people, can learn. Organisational learning certainly requires that the members of the organisation learn, but ‘individual learning does not guarantee organisational learning’ (Senge, 1990) – and other conditions are also necessary. Senge argues that organisations learn when they

become competent in five particular ‘disciplines’, and so can create a situation where ‘new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured... and where people are continually learning to see the whole together’ (Senge, 1990). This ‘seeing the whole together’ – systems thinking – is, he argues, the key to becoming an organisation which is able to change itself.

2.3.4 Organisations as complex, interconnected systems

Systems thinking suggests that, unlike machines, organisations are not composed of a set of discrete components acting together in predetermined ways to create a defined output, and closed off to the outside world. A more apt metaphor, and one which may help to further understanding, may be to view them as open, dynamic systems, akin to ecosystems. Such systems are made up of elements in constant interaction with each other and their environment, reshaping themselves as they do so (Mittleton-Kelly, 2003). Certain parts of organisations have multiple, far-reaching relationships with other parts. Feedback processes mean that change in one aspect of an organisation – say its size – have multiple effects on other aspects of the organisation. As a result, the overall organisational properties may emerge in an unpredictable and often uncontrollable way from the rules governing the behaviour of the individual parts. From this perspective, the overall health and performance of the whole organisation depends as much on how different elements interact with each other as on how they work individually.

Seeing organisations from this ‘complex-systems theory’ perspective allows us to challenge some basic assumptions that we often make about organisations. Seen from this point of view, organisations are not externally designed from a set of components to do a single job. They are organic and self-regulating: they create themselves, and they can, under the right circumstances, recreate themselves from within. At the same time, organisations are less monolithic than they may appear. At any given time, different parts of the organisation will be moving in different directions at different speeds: they will not be ‘aligned’, and will often disagree with each other on specific ways of doing things, while operating within a larger cultural whole. And finally, where an organisation is an organic whole, the relationships between the parts of an organisation are often as important as the parts themselves. Any humanitarian organisation (and indeed the entire humanitarian system) is composed of an intricate web of interrelationships and so changes in one area will

have effects – often unexpected effects – elsewhere. At the same time, because each part has multiple relationships within the system, changes to any single part will generally also require changes to the related parts.

In complex organisations, transformational change ultimately involves the creation of new organisational realities that can break the hold of dominant patterns in favour of new ones, which are not fully within the control of any one group or individual (Ramalingam et al, 2008). These new patterns cannot be precisely defined in advance – it is possible only to nurture elements of the new reality, and create conditions under which the new reality can arise. Of particular importance is the notion that when existing patterns of action are particularly powerful, significant change may not be possible, because the organisation ends up trying to do new things in old ways.

The implications of the complex-systems approach for ‘traditional’ change strategies are many and varied. Briefly, understanding organisations as living systems helps to explain why evaluation results may not easily reach decision makers, why new policies often encounter unexpected opposition from parts of the organisation at several removes from the ‘target’ of the change, and why interventions concentrated on one area (such as changing procedures or individual behaviour), without considering how it relates to others, often fail.

2.3.5 Key points: the power of new perspectives

Organisations are not, of course, communities, tribes or nations. They are not minds or ecosystems. But they are systems composed of people, and so organisational metaphors based on humans, communities and complex organic systems may be more useful than metaphors based on cogs, inanimate parts and machines. It is also important to note, as Morgan (2006) does, that no one approach or way of looking at organisations is the right one – all perspectives are necessarily partial.

But by rethinking what organisations are, and opening our minds to new perspectives, we can become open to assimilating approaches to organisational change that may be more effective than those we have used in the past. At the very least, this would hopefully move us towards a situation where institutionalised approaches for change – such as evaluations, knowledge and learning systems, policy development and capacity-building and training – are used in ways which fit

better with the realities of organisations, and can be used to initiate and support real organisational change.

2.4 Rethinking organisational change

We have seen that using new metaphors can help to identify new and possibly more effective approaches to changing organisations. How do we transform these ideas into action? Again, we can look to the experience of the private and public sectors. A variety of authorities, who have explicitly stated the need to move away from mechanical ideas of organisations, have suggested specific approaches that can be used to address change in an organisation.² There are differences between these approaches, but also numerous common threads, and it is these which are addressed here.

Given that the metaphors we have considered draw from the human, communal and complex aspects of organisations, it is not surprising that many thinkers suggest that change activities should focus not just on things (policies, structures) but on people and on how people behave when they work together in groups. Change programmes which focus entirely on changing the formal and visible aspects of the organisation, and which do not address the values and beliefs shared by those in an organisation, the way the organisation thinks about and responds to these changes, and the interconnected and interrelated nature of organisations are unlikely to be successful. As Pascale (quoted in Cranier, 1996) puts it: ‘organizations that churn through a succession of doings... without altering their underlying being often end up older... but rarely wiser. Transformation entails a shift in being – at the personal *and* organizational level’ (emphasis added).

What might a more realistic view of change look like? It would recognise that different parts of the organisation are likely to resist changes in individual and group roles and status. It would also recognise that members of the organisation will resist changes that they see as being against the culture and meaning of the organisation. It would welcome this resistance as a normal sign of a healthy organisation (it would be more worrying if nobody cared that things are changing). To address this

resistance, the group planning the change could provide adequate time and space for personnel at all levels to discuss the changes, to identify what is, and what is not, changing, and to explore the implications of these changes on their day-to-day work.

In addition, it may be helpful to clarify how the changes relate to the mission, culture and meaning of the organisation (creating a 'vision') and to identify who within the organisation believes that changes are required, and why they believe this, plus what will happen to the organisation if the changes are not made (creating a 'business case'). Both vision and business case appeal simultaneously to the rational and, importantly, the emotional needs of the organisation's members.

A 'complex-systems' perspective on organisations suggests that changes in one part of the organisation will have effects on other parts of the organisation, and that it is not effective to think about changes in one area in isolation from the rest of the system. For this reason, change may be more effective where it is designed and led by a broad representative group. In some cases, this can be achieved by 'getting the whole system in the room' – using workshops where hundreds of people create a common plan for making changes (Owen, 1997). In others, it might be achieved by the creation of cross-functional project teams, who communicate with a wide variety of groups across the organisation.

If we see the organisation as a complex system we can also expect that, as the change progresses, different parts of the organisation will perceive it in different ways, and disagree on how things are going. This might be addressed by investing in internal communications mechanisms that allow the organisation to publicise successes and failures and encourage different groups of staff members to discuss the process as it unfolds. In addition, the uncertainty of the change process, and of the new contexts to which the organisation is moving, requires leaders who are able to encourage more open thinking about change, and provide legitimate ground for new ideas and patterns to emerge (Ramalingam et al, 2008).

Compare the above reflections to the more orthodox view of change. There, the context in which the change is required is understood through discussions between a small number of senior executives who work using command-and-control approaches to move the organisation towards a predictable new state. Decisions are made at the top, policy is determined and then 'rolled out'. The day-to-day change is supported by a range of training programmes to get the staff accustomed to new

procedures and processes. External evaluations are used to determine the success or failure of the effort. While none of what has been suggested above in this chapter is particularly revolutionary, it is in marked contrast to this more traditional ‘command-and-control’ approach to organisational change.

2.4.1 Key points: putting new perspectives to work

Writers who have considered organisations from a starting point of human and organic metaphors agree in broad terms on how change can be most successfully implemented. They suggest that the change process should focus on changes in both the ‘formal’ and the ‘informal’ side of an organisation. In addressing the informal side, they propose a variety of activities to create a clear direction for the change process, increase organisational participation at all stages of the process, and improve communication between the various parts of the organisation. These approaches have important (and challenging) implications for how the organisation is led, and how power is perceived and used within the organisation: power can help processes occur, but it cannot – or should not – determine the outcome of these processes. The implication of this is that many organisations may need to make significant changes before they are able to change.

2.5 Change in humanitarian organisations – a special case?

A broader and more inclusive approach to change takes longer, requires more financial resources, and will generally feel more confused and less controlled than the more traditional ‘top-down’ approach. Given the nature of humanitarian organisations, such investments can only be morally justified if the likelihood of success is high. As we have seen, much of the thinking on organisational change has been developed in very different contexts: how well does it transfer to the humanitarian sector?

Humanitarian organisations have much in common with organisations in other sectors. In their goals, and increasingly in their structures and management mechanisms, they are similar to Northern welfare systems (Slim, 2006). Very often, they work in the same situations – even in the same places – as military organisations, and increasingly they might be carrying out similar tasks (Weiss and Hoffman, 2007).

Former UK minister for international development, Hilary Benn has likened the humanitarian sector to a global fire service. As was highlighted in the 2003 Review of Humanitarian Action (Borton, 2004), there are even some parallels between humanitarian organisations and the UK construction industry: both sectors are highly fragmented; actors who are in competition with one another often work together on specific projects; and labour turnover is high. However, while humanitarian organisations share many attributes with organisations in these other sectors, the specific mix of these attributes is unique to the humanitarian sector. Further, this specific humanitarian mix creates very real constraints on implementing the approaches to change outlined above – although, as we shall see, many humanitarian organisations have found ways around these constraints.

No two ‘humanitarian organisations’ are alike. Many important humanitarian actors are not independent organisations, but rather component parts of larger NGOs or agencies. And, as we have suggested above, there are important differences between the various actors who make up the humanitarian system: they have different mandates, and work through different structures to fulfil different strategies aimed at a variety of constituencies. As one interviewee put it: ‘An NGO water engineer is connecting a tap. But he is doing a fundamentally different job from a water engineer in the UN or the Red Cross. The reasons for doing [the job] are very different’.

This section aims to identify organisational elements common to different humanitarian actors, and which distinguish them from private- and public-sector organisations. It does this by looking at five specific aspects of humanitarian organisations: vision and strategy, business process, structure, staffing and organisational culture. These five areas have been chosen not just because they are ‘standard’ elements of organisations often analysed in change programmes (for example: Galbraith (1977), Warner Burke (1994)) but also because they are the elements that create specific challenges for the implementation of the change approaches outlined above. Most importantly, they were referred to time and again by interviewees during the research for this chapter.

2.5.1 Vision and strategy

As Hugo Slim points out in the previous ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action (Slim, 2006), there are a variety of visions of the end point of humanitarianism, which spring from differing views of the nature of international society. Optimists expect humanitarianism to lead ultimately to a system of global welfare. Pessimists believe that ‘the very idea of organised, impartial and effective humanitarian action is a very high ideal never likely to be fulfilled.’ As a result, ‘there is no shared definition of the humanitarian agenda’ (Darcy and Hoffman, 2003), although there is broad agreement around core elements and principles. There is diversity between organisations as to the ‘end point’ of humanitarianism (Walker, 2007) and there is also great diversity of opinion within many organisations: most humanitarian organisations are culturally and linguistically diverse, and this diversity leads to different assumptions about how the world works, and how the world should work.

These differences in what humanitarians are trying to achieve are mirrored by differences of opinion on how humanitarian organisations should position themselves to achieve these ends. One clear fault line, which is visible both between and within many organisations, is that between ‘traditional’ humanitarian response – the immediate and impartial provision of goods and services that allow survival – and a broader view of humanitarianism, which concerns itself with areas such as human rights and protection.

Several interviewees felt that this tension had increased over the last decade, as the profile of humanitarian action increased, and agencies which had previously worked predominantly in development attempted to bring developmental ‘best practice’ to bear on their humanitarian work and to increase the linkages between humanitarian and development action.

And these kinds of differences are passionately felt. However it is conceived, the humanitarian endeavour is about saving lives – any decision about what an organisation does, or how it does it, affects whether human beings live or not. Humanitarian workers have often devoted a huge amount of themselves to their job – living away from family, with limited possibilities to relax, in situations of some hardship and insecurity. The people in humanitarian agencies have very high levels of emotional attachment to their agency: interviewees talked about ‘visceral responses’ to what were, on the surface, fairly simple technical changes.

Results-based management was 'hated' by a good proportion of staff members in one agency; in another, there was overt resistance to 'a different philosophy of what the organisation is all about'. One staff member of a UN agency has noted: 'The [change] agenda... is not a noble one and... it is almost the duty of staff to resist such change' (Finger and Ruchat, 2003).

This has important implications for any change process. Humanitarians will strongly resist change that threatens their idea of their organisation. And yet there may be many ideas of the organisation held simultaneously, which makes the creation of a common vision of change related to the essential meaning of the organisation much more difficult – and also much more important. A second implication is that it can be hard to create a compelling case for change. Where there is not a single, agreed purpose for the work of an organisation, where 'doing good...(is) seen to be enough' (Goodhand, 2006), it is hard to demonstrate whether an organisation is succeeding or not: 'without any definition of success, how can anyone ever look back on a week or a year and say "that was well done"?' (Handy, 1988). And similarly, how can anyone look back and say 'that was badly done – and we urgently need to improve'?

2.5.2 Business processes

When looking at organisations, many analysts give great weight to understanding business processes, which are the mechanisms by which key inputs are transformed into outputs in order to meet an organisation's goals. They are defined by the organisation's strategy, and, in turn, should help define the organisation's structure.

In many humanitarian organisations, the strategic tensions outlined above lead to two core 'macro' business processes occurring at the same time. Typically, one 'macro-process' aims to change the context of humanitarian action. It has traditionally faced North, and has been structured around the collection of information as an input, the transformation of this information through analysis, and the dissemination of campaigning and advocacy products to catalyse change. The other 'macro-process' aims to change the situation for people caught up in emergencies. It has traditionally faced South, and has been structured around the collection of resources, the transformation of these resources into goods and services needed by affected populations, and the effective distribution of these goods

and services to people most in need. An increasing challenge for many agencies is to merge these two processes into an effective single way of working. Multiple processes can be inefficient. More importantly for this discussion they make change harder, because staff can rapidly become concerned that any change is privileging one process over another – which not only affects their individual status within the organisation, but also their idea of what the organisation stands for.

A second, very visible aspect of the business process of many humanitarian organisations – or at least of the second ‘service-delivery’ process – is that it is largely a linear one-way flow from donor, via implementing agency, to recipient. There are only very weak links between recipient and donor: ‘In the market for humanitarian relief, the consumer (i.e. the aid recipient) neither purchases nor pays for the delivered service’, and this leads to ‘weak incentives on the part of the humanitarian agencies to deliver good-quality services effectively’ (Binder and Witte, 2007). This last example is a particular problem for the legitimacy of aid agencies. As one recent review of international aid put it: ‘improving the welfare of beneficiaries is the ultimate goal of aid agencies... [but] links between beneficiaries and a donor are weak to non-existent... Many activities do not focus on beneficiaries as much as on policy goals’ (Gibson et al, 2005).

This lack of feedback from beneficiary to donor, and the focus on policy goals, can make changes that are driven by operational realities more difficult. Poor services in other sectors would generally affect share price, or mean missed ‘targets’, and this would have negative implications for the service provider. But in the humanitarian sector, ‘once they have reached a certain size, agencies usually go out of business due to poor financial management and rarely if ever due to poor field performance’ (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006). It is hard to identify a compelling need for change when funding is not linked to the experience of beneficiaries. This is doubly the case if bringing ‘failure’ or ‘problems’ to light might jeopardise funding and future organisational health.

However, donor attitudes and other financial pressures should not be used as an excuse for preventing change. We have suggested above that humanitarian agencies are not passive, but are capable of making choices about how they act in their environment. UN agencies, the Red Cross and NGOs are all active in creating the ‘rules of the game’. Meanwhile donors often have diverse views – as Freitas demonstrates in her analysis of decision-making in UNHCR (Freitas, 2004), and as do Graves et al (2007) in their analysis of the development of the cluster system –

and this diversity expands agencies' room for action. Far from doing what the donors say, agencies have, on occasion, collaborated with donors to create stories of crisis that meet the needs of both parties (Darcy and Hoffman, 2003). Interviewees also spoke of successfully engaging donors in robust debate – refusing funds for activity in certain areas; broadening or changing their funding base to move to 'less politicised' money; and even, in one case, favouring autonomy over growth. So while 'official donors clearly exert significant influence over both the size and shape of humanitarian response' (Macrae, 2002), it is also true that: 'many NGOs continue to operate a policy of self censorship in relation to official donor policy' (Macrae, 2002). This sort of self-censorship – 'the donors would never agree' – can be a form of resistance to change, blaming others for the avoidance of changes we are worried about making ourselves.

2.5.3 Structure

The challenge for any organisational structure is to find the simplest possible way of conducting the business process of an organisation. This requires balancing the need for differentiation (between, for example, technical functions and geographical locations) with the need for uniformity and coordination across the organisation.

In this respect, many humanitarian organisations face a challenge. They are by their nature highly internally differentiated by location, with offices in many different countries. In the last decade, with increased specialisation, they have also become increasingly internally differentiated by function. At the same time, increased interaction with governmental and – more recently – corporate donors, and with other agencies has led in many cases to an increase in the number of organisational units which exist to interact with the external, organisational world. In the course of this growth, structural distance, between policy and operational units, or between evaluators and operational units, has grown.

So most humanitarian agencies, which were geographically differentiated to begin with, have become more so – and many of their personnel are in inaccessible places. This structural fact makes it difficult to use a broad and inclusive approach to change programmes: it is harder to create opportunities for real discussion about what is changing and why. It can also lead to a 'compartmentalised approach' to change, where different units work on their own piece of the picture. This is in

contrast to the complex-systems approach to change, which suggests that it is more effective to bring different units and perspectives together to plan the change in a multi-functional team.

Humanitarian organisations have had to decide how they are going to coordinate their organisational structures, and the decisions that they have made have also had implications for how easy it is to institute change. Broadly speaking, organisations have placed themselves on a continuum. A very few, at one end, ensure uniformity through the creation of centralised, tightly hierarchical structures, where most decision-making power is concentrated close to the top. More commonly, they have diffused power ‘down and out’, but ensured that uniformity is maintained by the use of normative policies, standards and guidelines. At the other end of the spectrum, some organisations have greatly increased the autonomy of individual units, and provided very little in the way of normative guidance.

A system reliant on technical policies and guidelines for regulating activity and ensuring uniformity has several inherent weaknesses. Firstly, skilled professionals tend to resent guidelines (Williams, 1995), unless these guidelines are part of a larger professional framework encompassing training, accreditation and reward. Secondly, centralised guidelines are not flexible enough to allow for differences over time, or between places. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, an organisation which creates guidance and policy at the centre, particularly where the headquarters are at some distance from ‘the field’, will tend to look inwards, to itself, and not outwards, to the context in which it is working. As a result, decision-makers may remain insulated from the need for change. This tendency to reserve key issues to central managerial and policy functions may go some way towards explaining why humanitarian organisations ‘are not sensitive to patterns of change’ (Kent, 2004), why the leaders of humanitarian organisations give more credence to the opinions of each other and of donors than to those of beneficiaries (Sandison, 2006), and, finally, why many humanitarian organisations find it hard to innovate and implement radical new ways of doing things.

For all these reasons, many thinkers (for example: Goodhand (2006), Handy (1988), Handler Chayes et al (1997)) suggest that humanitarian agencies will be more responsive to their external environment, more flexible, and more able to change where they move authority closer to the field, and build shared meaning around core organisational values, rather than around key organisational policies and rules.

This approach certainly makes it easier for parts of an organisation to identify the need for changes which meet field realities and which are simultaneously tied into the core meaning of the organisation. But without very highly developed systems for internal communication, and an acceptance on the part of the organisation of a higher level of risk, these initiatives can become trapped in the office that produced them, failing to break out and become ‘mainstreamed’.

We will see, below, how humanitarian organisations have overcome these difficulties to create real and lasting changes. For now it is enough to note the problem that Van Brabant identified in his review of the introduction of new security measures in humanitarian organisations: ‘decentralised organisations risk losing overall consistency’, while centralised organisations tend to produce ‘dead documents’ (Van Brabant, 2001).

2.5.4 Staffing

Two elements of the staffing of humanitarian organisations are notable for their effects on change processes. The first, and most obvious, is the high level of turnover of humanitarian staff. Given the long-term nature of many change initiatives (in our interviews we discussed changes that had taken place over periods of three to fifteen years), this discontinuity in staffing makes long-term participation in change projects unrealistic. At the same time, as the interviews suggested, it also offers opportunities to humanitarian organisations: new personnel, with less invested in an organisation, are less likely to find change threatening, and the recruitment of new personnel provides an opportunity to select people with a profile that fits the reformed organisation.

An ODI-HPN Network Paper (Loquercio et al, 2006) echoed this finding, suggesting that most humanitarian agencies welcome a degree of staff turnover: it offers flexibility in relocating personnel, brings in fresh analysis, and can be used as an opportunity to develop staff members through progressively challenging assignments. However, it was also found that unplanned staff turnover is problematic and expensive, affecting learning and efficiency, and the capacity of agencies to respond to new emergencies and to continue existing work.

Regardless of how problematic turnover was seen to be, many organisations also see turnover as beyond their control, seeing it as a result of short-term contracts which are themselves a product of donor insistence on low overheads and short funding cycles. This approach resonates with the point made above about the tendency to use donor attitudes as a way of resisting change. While it is accepted that external factors do to some extent shape the realities of the organisations, agencies should acknowledge that they have a degree of responsibility for the current situation, and could do a lot more to change it.

The second staffing issue that relates to change is the relative weakness of performance-management systems in many organisations. This may be linked to the lack of clarity in the humanitarian sector around objectives, responsibilities, relationships and outcomes that was mentioned above. This reduces the possibility of supporting new (changed) behaviour with explicit sanctions and rewards – a mechanism which is often used to ‘embed’ changes in the private sector. In some cases, sanctions such as disciplinary action have effectively been used to ‘force’ behavioural change (Van Brabant, 2004). However, this runs counter to the culture of many humanitarian organisations, where informants suggested that the most effective rewards – and sanctions – are peer recognition and the feeling of a job well done. This highlights the importance of clarity around the shared values and principles that guide the organisational mission.

2.5.5 Organisational culture

Given the difficulty of ‘unearthing’ culture in a single organisation, let alone the diversity of cultures among all the organisations involved in the humanitarian sector, any comments on organisational cultures within the humanitarian sector will be both broad and conjectural. That said, there are some cultural themes that may affect the ability of humanitarian organisations to conduct successful change activities.

The first theme concerns how humanitarians think of time. Time, in many humanitarian organisations, is a series of short, discrete cycles. Many agencies use some form of ‘project cycle’ for operational planning. Funding periods and contracts

are short. Each emergency is different in place, nature, scale and staffing and, when the wheel has gone full circle from needs assessment to evaluation in one place, it starts anew in another. When the world is perceived in short, unconnected cycles, it makes it harder to see the need for reflection, learning and change: the next cycle will, in any case, differ from this one, and we will deal with that when it occurs. It also makes it harder to think in the longer timeframe that is often required for change activities.

The second theme concerns how humanitarians think of effective human activity. Humanitarian work – or at least the ‘service-delivery’ type of work, tends to respond to massive problems by providing goods and services. Problems are acted on effectively by the provision of food, medical care, shelter and so on. In responding to internal ‘problems’ within humanitarian organisations, there seems to be a similar tendency to create and deploy things: knowledge-management software, training packages and guidelines on CD-ROMs. As was suggested above, a focus on products, rather than on people, can make change activities less effective, because such a focus leads to an emphasis on the technical nature of the change, to the detriment of the community, culture, people and complex-systems elements.

The third and final theme concerns how humanitarians think of the correct way for people to relate to one another. In general, there is a high level of respect for the individual, a belief that consensus is the best possible decision-making option, and a desire to prevent conflict where possible. This attitude can, paradoxically, prevent open discussion: people avoid conflict, and so conversations with high emotional charge are also avoided. This can prevent the sort of discussions that are often necessary in a change process; significantly, several informants talked of the importance of ‘painful debates’ in the success of change processes.

2.5.6 Key points: challenges to change in humanitarian organisations

Humanitarian organisations are different from many of the organisations used as the basis for developing organisational-change approaches and mechanisms. They face a unique combination of challenges. Although some of the organisational aspects identified here are shared by organisations in other sectors, only humanitarian organisations possess this specific strategic, structural, process, staffing and cultural profile. Seen in the light of the broader approaches to change outlined in Section 2.4

above, the profile is problematic. Because of how they are put together, we can expect that humanitarian organisations will: encounter very high levels of resistance to change; find it difficult to create common visions of change processes which fit with their understanding of their role in the world; find it extremely difficult to create an urgent case for change; have difficulty in assembling cross-functional teams to lead change efforts; struggle to create high levels of discussion across the organisation; and will, generally, be unable to use rewards and sanctions to enforce behaviour.

When we speak of high levels of resistance to change, it is important to emphasise again that ‘resistance’ is a necessary and normal response to the threat of loss, and that it is often not explicit or conscious. We also resist change by behaving in such a way as to avoid becoming engaged with the change process. Resistance occurs in all change processes, in all sectors. What is interesting here is that it seems to take specific forms in the humanitarian sector. Three types of behaviour, in particular, stand out.

- 1** Denying that planning for change is a priority when there are lives to be saved. This could be seen as a result of the context in which humanitarian organisations work, and the culture that this helps to form.
- 2** Denying that change is possible because of factors beyond the organisation’s control. This relates closely to the unusual funding and accountability mechanisms found in the sector. (Often, the excuse is that donors won’t accept different ways of doing things.)
- 3** Concentration on ‘cosmetic’ changes that produce policies or packages, rather than on work to address people’s everyday behaviour. This may be a result of a culture based on service delivery.

These resistance behaviours are powerful and effective, because they are partially true. The priority *is* saving lives – although this should not prevent the organisation also trying to get better at saving lives next year. It can be hard to change in the face of donor opposition, although many organisations have been successful. Training packages and new guidelines are important elements of many change projects, although they are by no means the only elements. These responses to change occur so often in the humanitarian sector that we should pay particular attention when we find ourselves, or our colleagues, voicing them.

2.6 Lessons from experience: catalysing change in the humanitarian sector

Despite all of these challenges, change can and does happen in humanitarian organisations. In the course of researching this chapter, one of our key informants told this story:

at a meeting to review experiences, one agency discussed the introduction of a new approach. They consulted widely, obtained CEO endorsement and designed a nice flowchart which was given to every staff member – most displayed it beside their desk and the new ways slipped into the DNA of the organisation almost unnoticed. When the story was told by one of the managers responsible, another senior manager from the same organisation admitted that she'd forgotten that they ever worked in a different way.

What is interesting about this – apart from the techniques used to support the change – is that the senior manager had forgotten that a change had taken place. It's not an uncommon occurrence: a hallmark of successful change is that people often forget that life was different before. Horror stories are told, and success stories often forgotten. It is also important to highlight that change is easier when it doesn't challenge existing power bases or status. Arguably, when change processes attempt to challenge these important human elements they are certainly remembered!

This section analyses data gathered on 19 different change initiatives (from donor organisations, NGOs, UN organisations and the Red Cross movement) in order to highlight some of the practices that have supported successful change processes within the humanitarian sector. While most of these were explored with interviews alone, four of these change initiatives were approached as more detailed 'case studies', which included document analysis, a series of interviews and/or workshops, and detailed feedback from participants. These four case studies were the UK Department For International Development (DFID) uptake of Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD); ActionAid's move towards a rights-based approach to humanitarian work; the World Food Programme (WFP) project to improve capability in needs assessment; and the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) Consolidation Project. These are described in more detail in Box 2.4.

Box 2.4 Case studies of change initiatives in humanitarian organisations

DFID In 2003, DFID, as part of a group of donor organisations, established the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative (GHD). This initiative is based around 23 principles of good donorship, and signatories to these principles work together and individually to implement the principles in their working practice. The case study considered the approach that DFID has taken to integrating GHD principles into its work. This integration has taken place within the larger context of development of humanitarian principles and practice within DFID, and over a period during which DFID's internal capacity in humanitarian issues has grown significantly. Four years after signing up to GHD, the principles form a large part of DFID's Humanitarian Policy, informing DFID's humanitarian work and leading to visible changes in the speed of financial commitment and in the geographical areas that receive funding.

ActionAid This case study considered the approach taken by ActionAid to re-orienting humanitarian operations around rights-based principles and approaches. ActionAid's experience demonstrates the power of a field-based, largely decentralised approach to change in humanitarian organisations. The introduction of a rights-based approach has been supported by ActionAid staff members, who feel that it gives ActionAid a distinctive role and profile. Informants saw the response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, which included work to ensure communities knew of their entitlements and to support land rights, as an example of what ActionAid can achieve in humanitarian assistance by 'changing the how part'.

Strengthening Emergency Needs Assessment Capacity (SENAC) at WFP The SENAC project was put in place in 2005 following an internal and external push for strengthening needs assessments within WFP, so that their response would be in accordance to the specific needs of beneficiaries. Drawing on outside expertise, and using a mixture of direct policy change, capacity building and senior management intervention, the programme has led to a shift in the culture and attitudes towards needs assessment. This is borne out by the data: in 2004, needs assessments for emergency operations and protracted relief and recovery operations were documented in only 45 per cent of cases; in 2007, the corresponding figure had risen to 95 per cent.

CONTINUED

Box 2.4 Case studies of change initiatives in humanitarian organisations *continued*

Consolidation Project at IFRC Approved by the Red Cross General Assembly in 2005, the Consolidation Project was one element of a much broader change process, which sought to decentralise the regional directors from Geneva HQ into a series of Zonal Offices based in the region. The rationale was to make the Secretariat more focused on the needs of the national societies, and to give them a greater role in capacity building and strengthening operational responses. The Zonal Offices were created within the original timeframe, and senior personnel are now in place, in line with the original goals.

There is a range of approaches that can help to understand the process of change (Box 2.5). Whichever model is used, the practical implications are the same: different things will happen at different phases of the change process, and so those managing the change will need to use different approaches to address the situation from one phase to the next.

Box 2.5 The process of organisational change

Many writers have observed that successful change processes go through a series of stages.

- The Gestalt school (exemplified by Nevis, 1988) sees change as a six-stage cyclic process in which: people become aware of a situation that challenges their previous understanding of the world; decide to devote energy to thinking about the situation; break down their old perceptions; and create a new way of being.
- Kubler-Ross, whose work looks at the individual's response to change rather than the change itself, identifies five stages, from denial to acceptance (Kubler Ross, 1969).
- Kurt Lewin, one of the most influential thinkers to consider change in organisations, describes a three-phase model (Lewin, 1954): unfreezing, where the organisation recognises that it needs to be different; transition, where new ideas are created – typically a period of insecurity and confusion; and freezing, where the new ways of working are institutionalised within the organisation.

The experience of our informants suggested that organisational change programmes did indeed move through a number of distinct phases – although reality was messier than any model. Some phases took longer than others, phases overlapped, and different parts of the organisation were often going through different phases at the same time. Most of the change processes considered had, broadly, to:

- 1 create awareness of the need for change across the organisation
- 2 prepare for and plan the changes required
- 3 ensure that the changes were implemented

2.6.1 Creating awareness of the need for change

All organisational change processes begin somewhere. At some point, someone realises that there is a problem in conducting ‘business as usual’. This realisation may come to an individual or a group, and it may occur simultaneously in different parts of the organisation, or even outside the organisation.

The case studies considered for this chapter show that this initial realisation can happen almost anywhere. In IFRC, it crystallised among senior management at the secretariat, and was the result of multiple reflection processes including an environmental analysis and a visioning exercise. In ActionAid, there was a recognition within the emergencies team that it was falling behind – a recognition shared, to a degree, by country offices, but not initially seen as a priority by the organisation’s management. In WFP, a team with responsibility for needs assessment had already been formed when key external donors raised concerns about needs assessments; and in parallel leading thinkers outside WFP had been exploring the issue of needs assessments in the humanitarian sector more generally.

In a number of cases, recognition of a problem was accompanied by a sense of ‘threat’: the situation was perceived to be bad enough to threaten the continued existence of ActionAid’s emergency team; the IFRC secretariat was concerned about its continued relevance to the wider organisation; and the notion that the credibility of WFP might be at stake gave a strong push to the SENAC change initiative. This sense of threat was common to many change programmes. Informants said: ‘we

saw that this could be the breaking point'; 'Unless we reinvented ourselves, we needed to end (the organisation)'; 'There was a threat to the existence of the organisation itself'.

In other situations, change was galvanised by the perception of a powerful opportunity. This was most often the case where the change would have direct impact on the lives of beneficiaries. For example: DFID's engagement with GHD, and the overall process of rethinking DFID's humanitarian policy, was largely the result of the recognition that DFID was well placed to have real impact on the experience of beneficiaries in situations of crisis. Elsewhere, the work to develop Community Based Therapeutic Feeding started from the recognition that mortality rates in emergencies could be decreased by such approaches.

If a change programme wishes to win the support of the organisation as a whole, the first thing that it needs to do is to communicate – to the organisation as a whole – its understanding of the situation and the threats or opportunities which lie behind this situation. As we have seen, the nature of humanitarian organisations can make this difficult. Organisations are highly differentiated, which often impedes internal communication. The passion around humanitarian work, and the personal investment that staff members have made in creating the organisation as it is, make people unusually resistant to change. The fact that these organisations work in crises every day can inure them to impending threats, and the lack of a clear relationship between funding and results can often make it hard to demonstrate that the organisation is threatened: if it does nothing, it may not lose funding, whereas if it exposes its weaknesses, it might be penalised by donors and the public.

There are certain historical moments when it is relatively simple to build support for the idea of change. One such moment occurred during and after the Rwanda crisis, and was reprised with the publication of the Multi Agency Evaluation, in 1996. The debates surrounding the failures in Rwanda were 'heated, widespread, and often soul searching' (Buchanan-Smith, 2003). They were almost unavoidable for any humanitarian – colleagues argued, families and friends outside the sector wanted to know what had gone wrong. This widespread and public sense of failure 'was a major factor in creating momentum for change' (Buchanan-Smith, 2003), launching an 'accountability revolution'. It was in this atmosphere of 'ferment about how the (humanitarian) system could be reformed' that DFID began the process of thought that informed its adoption of the GHD principles.

We must hope that such historical moments will be few and far between. However, this leaves many evaluators, field managers and executives with a problem – how to convince others of the opportunities or the threats that they see so clearly? The experience of our informants suggests that the following approaches may be useful.

Bringing issues to the attention of the organisation's leaders

Where senior managers were not aware of a situation, or of its potential implications, informants suggested that the first step was to gain their support. Management support is a key ingredient of project success: in many cases, CEOs ensured that change programmes received the resources and access that they needed to succeed. In several cases, leaders created an environment where active participation and honest debates were encouraged. They also sent out very powerful signals that things in the organisation were changing by changing their own behaviour. However, leadership support is not a given in many change programmes. The leadership of any organisation has many claims upon its attention, and many executives may be ambivalent about the change, particularly if they have been in the organisation for some time and have been instrumental in creating the 'status quo'.

Our informants suggested several approaches to galvanising leadership behind a change. In ActionAid, the head of the emergencies team, who had access to senior management and to the governing body, lobbied relentlessly. In DFID, the head of the humanitarian division worked closely with Secretaries of State Clare Short and Hilary Benn to develop new ways of thinking about humanitarian action. The visit of Hilary Benn to Sudan in 2004 catalysed support for new approaches – including GHD – in DFID, and more widely in the sector. Another approach, which was used successfully in some organisations, was simply to 'tell them like it is': stating the (often uncomfortable) situation clearly, and clarifying the support required from leadership to address the situation. This direct approach goes against the culture of many organisations: it is, as Peter Block suggests in a guide to consulting for change (Block, 1999), a 'high-risk/high-return' approach to work, but the returns can prove it is worth doing.

Getting support from outside the organisation

In the SENAC project, a turning point occurred when the Director of ECHO, at a WFP Executive Board meeting, said that WFP assessments were not believable, and

offered to help to WFP build capacity in emergency needs assessments. The SENAC project was also supported by an advisory body of 'all the gurus' from outside the organisation, including several people who had been critical of WFP in the past. Composed of respected external actors, the advisory body enabled WFP to receive external critical advice that supported the 'case' for change.

Another way of bringing external pressure to bear on organisational thinking is to use the media. To promote support for Community Based Therapeutic Feeding, Steve Collins of VALID International produced an article for *Lancet*, and articles in *Field Exchange*. This meant that the message reached a specific (medical) target audience through media they trusted. A rather different use of external media to catalyse urgency was the 'leak' about sexual abuse in west Africa, which simultaneously caused internal reflection and raised the topic to the level of a serious threat to the continued legitimacy of several humanitarian organisations.

Bringing people together to identify risks and opportunities

ActionAid and WFP needed, in the early stages of their programmes, to catalyse management support. In IFRC, the problem was reversed: senior managers needed to gain the support of middle management and of the organisation as a whole. Looking back on the change process, IFRC informants felt that this area could have received more attention. One effective approach was that taken by the management of Islamic Relief, who convened strategy meetings for a cross-section of staff members in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the USA. These meetings allowed Islamic Relief personnel to build a common understanding of the situation and potential consequences for Islamic Relief, and to generate a common commitment to address the situation.

Of course, it is not always feasible to bring large numbers of people together. To get around this problem, Groupe URD use a facilitated audit, which allows country teams to 'self-assess' their effectiveness before initiating change activities. Similarly, Oxfam International developed a self-assessment tool that was used early in the process of creating a more effective emergency response across the Oxfam family. Save the Children (US) have found that peer assessments can also help to make parts of the organisation aware of the need for change. What all of these approaches have in common is that they allow staff members to become aware of the situation, and of threats and opportunities, for themselves.

Thinking of new ways to present an argument

In every discussion of the ActionAid case, the ‘story of the school’ emerged unprompted: ‘We realised that we were building great schools, and creating islands of excellence – but when we left, things fell apart’. This simple story ‘captured the imagination of everybody in the organisation. It was close to the heart for everybody.’ Story-telling is increasingly recognised as a powerful tool to build support for change across an organisation (Denning, 2004): stories spread in a way that arguments don’t. However, it is perhaps no coincidence that, at the time when this story was being told, ActionAid was introducing a variety of new media for transmitting information across the organisation (Owusu, 2004), and so people were used to getting information through the medium of stories. In general, informants suggested that it is helpful to present the case for change in a way that captures the attention of the ‘target audience’. As we have seen, senior managers are often galvanised by articles in the news media. Many of us enjoy a good story. But for Steve Collins and Valid International in their work on developing community-based therapeutic feeding, the key in attempting to influence a medical audience was to present quantitative, impact-related data. For this audience, as scientists, this was the ‘story’ which best met their needs.

2.6.2 Preparing and planning for change

The second key phase in a change process is to decide on what the organisation needs to do, and how it is going to do it. In many organisations, change planning is the preserve of senior management. Where a change programme is seen as a ‘strategic’ initiative, it can be hard for the leadership of an organisation to let go of control and allow the people who will implement the plan to have a hand in designing it. On the other hand, where change programmes are designed in a functional area of an organisation they can end up as one plan competing for attention among many: an ‘HR thing’ or ‘Field idea’ which is easily marginalised and forgotten. Wherever the plan is created, it is hard to include a broad range of experience from across the organisation, and to meet the various emotional needs of different parts of the organisation.

Traditional planning approaches also have the tendency to create ‘paper products’ generated ‘at predetermined times... full blown, all ready for implementation’

(Mintzberg, 1994). This sort of planning, which relies on assumptions of things in the future being understood in the present, is particularly unsuitable for situations of change.

These problems are not unique to humanitarian organisations. But, as ever, the humanitarian context compounds and adds to them. Change plans often require long timescales, which work against the 'cyclic' way in which time is perceived in humanitarian organisations. They also require some degree of unanimity on the goal and meaning of the organisation, which, as we have seen, can be disputed within humanitarian organisations. As a result, the planning stage of any change in a humanitarian organisation can be a period of real conflict.

Again, the experience of many humanitarian organisations suggests that these problems can be overcome. Some of the approaches that have proved successful are outlined below.

Being realistic about time

One informant, talking about the introduction of results-based management (RBM) in a major agency, suggested that it was 'a marathon, not a sprint. A change like this won't be quick and it won't be painless'. The experience of other organisations bears this out. Most of the initiatives discussed here have been underway for three years or more. In one case, the integration of a rights-based approach to humanitarian work took place over a period of 15 years. IFRC found that it was unrealistic to expect that a major restructuring could be undertaken in two years, and emphasised one very important fact: emergencies do not stop happening while the organisation changes, and any change plan needs to include actions to preserve business continuity.

Securing adequate resources

The SENAC project at WFP was made possible because ECHO and other donors 'put their money where their mouth was' and gave significant financial support. DFID also suggested that robust levels of funding had made it much easier for them to introduce GHD principles into their work. Organisational change, particularly if it is to involve broad participation, can be a costly exercise – although these costs need to be weighed against the costs of doing nothing. As with evaluation utilisation, the costs of change are far from trivial (Sandison, 2006).

Identifying the right people to plan the change

In general, the experience of most agencies has been that those people who have not been involved in planning the change have tended to resist its implementation. To varying degrees, DFID, IFRC, Oxfam International and the Emergency Capacity Building project, among many others, found that centrally planned projects encountered resistance when they were ‘rolled out’. WFP and ActionAid have both found that partner agencies not involved in the original design process can be sceptical about changing their approaches later. This is probably unavoidable. For agencies of any size, it is nearly impossible to have everybody equally involved in planning a change process. But if it isn’t possible to get everybody around the table, it does seem important to get the right people around the table.

Several informants suggested that any parts of the organisation critical to the success of the change should be involved in developing its direction. Often, they achieved this through the creation of a multi-functional team to design and lead the change effort. In DFID, this was made easier because operations, policy and finance personnel worked together in the same organisational unit. In WFP, the initiative was led by the ODAN unit, included numerous field personnel, and was supported by staff members from operations, policy and evaluation departments. In ActionAid, a group of peers from the field developed the emergency strategy. In ECB, teams included representatives from HR, finance and IT, and were ‘critically important’. Informants felt that these groups: prevented the change programme from becoming ‘owned’ by one part of the organisation; helped the identification and coordination of simultaneous activities across the organisation; and made better plans, with input from a variety of specialist areas.

Clarifying what really needs to change

While it can be tempting to focus on the creation of tools and policies, many organisations found that success came from concentrating on changing behaviours. WFP realised early on that the SENAC project would be successful only if it led to better humanitarian decision-making, and not just to better assessment methodologies. ActionAid has created very little in terms of written guidance, choosing instead to concentrate on what staff actually do in emergencies: ‘we don’t have too much in the way of written materials. It’s people who carry the past to the present’.

The overall GHD process initially concentrated on international promotion of GHD principles rather than their practical application (GHD, 2007), and DFID's domestic action plan for GHD implementation reflected this orientation with an emphasis on research, publications and participation in external fora. However, much of this work was done collaboratively by the people who would later be expected to work according to GHD principles: one informant suggested that how these products were created was as important as the products themselves. While several other participants in the GHD process have found that 'consensus and buy-in needs to be established' (Graves and Wheeler, 2006), and that 'progress at field level has been slower than hoped' (GHD, 2007), DFID feels that the GHD principles are now followed across DFID's humanitarian support system – which includes emergency responses, regular core institutional support to UN agencies and Red Cross Red Crescent, support to pooled funds, project funding and country level funding to regular ongoing programmes. This is – in part, at least - because they were created by 'users'.

Encouraging energetic debate

Within the ActionAid planning team, 'there were lots of fights and heated debate'. The SENAC team made a point of working in as transparent a fashion as possible, and while there was a sense that this would be repeated, there was also a sense that the change team 'got a hard time because of it'. Many informants felt that these debates should be encouraged, because they allowed the honest expression of frustration and concern, and allowed for better planning. They also suggested that it helped to establish rules for argument, so that 'while they argued with one another, they heard each other'. Oxfam International, for example, discussed how to have disputes that 'separated content from personal relationships'. One informant went further, and stressed the importance of actively searching out disagreements and concerns that were not being expressed openly, so that the necessary arguments could take place before the plan was implemented.

Relating change plans to the underlying values of the organisation

Several organisations found that planning for change was easier when discussions were anchored in the role and direction of the whole organisation, and related changes to the values of the organisation. Changes aimed at direct results in the field seem to have been more easily assimilated into humanitarian organisations than did those with a more indirect effect. Humanitarian organisations exist to save the lives

and improve the welfare of individuals, and those projects which could be seen to do so – initiatives in therapeutic feeding, or in rights-based approaches, for example – ‘struck a chord’, and gained broad acceptance more easily.

In contrast, projects that focused on internal efficiency, and so were felt to be further from the values of the organisation, found it harder to capture people’s imagination. Just as it was important to show how changes would support the core values of the organisation, it also helped to demonstrate that changes did not conflict with existing values. This prevented the ‘either/or’ or ‘win/lose’ attitude that can frustrate many change efforts.

In ActionAid, staff stressed that a rights-based approach to humanitarian action was not in opposition to service delivery, but rather expanded on the work that was already being done. One informant felt that ‘often... change managers don’t give enough credit to things done well’ and should take more time to recognise that the change is a small part of the whole: a project was ‘95 per cent the same’ when it was working in the ‘new’ way. Successful change in one area often relies on continuity in others: ‘Theory would suggest that if fundamental – or even significant – change is to occur... some characteristics of the organisation must not change’ (Goodstein and Burke, 2000).

Concentrating on principles, and allowing local adaptation

Where changes were related to new methodologies or approaches, many organisations found that it was more successful to roll out key principles and allow local teams to plan their own way of implementing them, than to roll out detailed guidelines. ActionAid sees its strategy as ‘the base, not the limits’, ‘there is freedom locally and flexibility to do it the way we want it’. Similarly, Oxfam International has encouraged country teams to adapt approaches to their local environments, and recognised that the final change ‘won’t look the same everywhere’. DFID personnel in the field appreciate both the high degree of support that they receive in implementing GHD, and the degree of autonomy in how they choose to implement it.

Staying flexible

World Vision, in its implementation of the H Learn project, was clear that ‘what works, works. What doesn’t work, we’ll change’. This flexibility allows good ideas

created in some parts of the organisation to be included in the change plan as it develops. IFRC has found success through a similar approach, and concludes that ‘we are slowly going in the right direction, and learning by doing’.

2.6.3 Implementing change programmes

After the thought, the planning, the unexpected opinions and passionate arguments, comes implementation: actions are taken, results – both positive and negative – start to become visible. It’s often a slow and confusing process, and can sap the energy of people involved in the change. This is particularly true when things don’t work as planned. Again, the humanitarian context creates specific difficulties. The short timescales of humanitarian work often contribute to this problem, by making it difficult to retain focus on a multi-year project; and this is exacerbated by the high turnover of personnel in many agencies.

The relative weakness of performance-management systems in humanitarian organisations, compared to the private sector, also robs managers of a tool which is elsewhere used to reward changed behaviours: even where performance management tools exist and are linked to the change programme, informants suggested that the link is normally ‘theoretical at best’. And yet change programmes have to be planned with implementation in mind. It is the implementation, and not the planning document, that creates real change. The experience of our informants suggests that the following approaches can help to maintain organisational ownership and people’s individual commitment to the change.

Tracking changes and publicising success

In many of the organisations represented by the change programmes discussed, there was a focus on continual feedback between those coordinating the change process, the senior managers leading the change process, and those working to implement the changes. This enabled adjustment of ongoing plans and could significantly improve morale. The GHD group has ensured that it maintains a focus on monitoring progress: this allows DFID staff and the other actors in the GHD process to see hard, quantified results of how donor funding is being allocated.

ActionAid has used a variety of media to demonstrate the real impact of its approaches on beneficiaries and communities (Owusu, 2004). Several agencies saw the benefits of publicising success. The ECB's knowledge fair, for example, allowed a broad selection of stakeholders to understand and reflect on what had been achieved in the first phase of the project, and raised interest and commitment within ECB organisations.

Providing personal support

For many, this was the most important element in implementation. Building personal relationships with people during the change, and giving encouragement throughout the implementation period, allowed implementation to proceed successfully. In the IFRC's consolidation project, one-to-one discussions allowed staff to 'engage together as people', and helped them to think about the change from different perspectives.

Using high levels of turnover and mobility to support the change

IFRC has found that turnover among the change team has led to some confusion and lack of continuity. But it has also been able to use competency-based recruitment to ensure that newly hired staff members have the right profile to work in the revised organisational structure. Staff turnover and mobility can be a two-edged sword (Loquercio et al, 2006), but in general, it appears to have benefited the change initiatives that we studied.

One organisation hiring a new programme director, went 'looking for someone who had the right mindset... (who) provided an umbrella for creative thinking'. ActionAid found that its rights-based approach to humanitarian action was sufficiently distinctive to attract new staff members who fitted with, and helped to develop, the ideas. DFID staff members also feel that recruitment has been a tool that has allowed them to build a team that supports the organisational direction. Both DFID and ActionAid also noted the importance of staff mobility for spreading new ideas across an organisation.

Removing redundant policies and procedures

In general, change seemed to be easier to implement in organisations where there was less ‘organisational furniture’ – old strategies and policies that got in the way. Perhaps the best example of this was in DFID, where thinking around humanitarian and GHD principles took place in an environment that was ‘policy-light’. While operating according to established humanitarian principles, the organisation had little in the way of internal humanitarian policies. Under these circumstances staff members, rather than clinging to old ways of doing things, were looking for new ways: it was less a programme of change than a creative process. Most change initiatives will not have this advantage. When ICRC implemented RBM, it addressed this problem by explicitly removing old procedures as new ones were implemented. This ensured clarity, won support, and ensured that no significant new work was created.

Building in systems that motivate change

Money may not motivate humanitarians as individuals (although several humanitarian organisations are now considering performance-related pay) but budgets certainly motivate countries and units. Tying change to budget allocations was one particularly successful way of motivating people in humanitarian organisations to experiment with changes. Similarly, tying change to oversight mechanisms (particularly where these mechanisms influenced budgetary allocations) was also a successful method of maintaining support for change. For this reason, DFID chose to include adherence to GHD principles in assessments by the National Audit Office (Bourne, 2003), and included the assessment of humanitarian work (and implicitly the GHD principles) in the DAC peer review (OECD, 2006).

2.6.4 Key points: experiences of humanitarian organisations

The experience of our informants suggests that there are many success stories to be told about change in humanitarian organisations. It also suggests that where programmes were successful (and, hearteningly, most of them were) they tended to take similar approaches. Broadly speaking, these approaches mirrored those considered in Section 2.4 above. They started with the end in mind. They placed a premium on high levels of engagement from the outset, allowing people from across

the organisation to understand the situation and recognise a need for change early in the process. They welcomed, and listened to, opposing points of view. They put thought into how to communicate ideas across the organisation. They looked at how change would affect a wide variety of internal stakeholders, and left flexibility for different parts of the organisation to plan how to make things work at their levels. Finally, they recognised that the process would take time, resources and continual, ongoing support. The experience of these organisations seems to show that, with creativity, innovation, resilience and commitment, humanitarians can overcome the constraints to change that exist in the humanitarian sector.

2.7 Summary and conclusions: changing humanitarian organisations

2.7.1 Summary of findings

This chapter began by suggesting that humanitarian organisations, working as they do in many different contexts, are particularly affected by changes happening in the world around them. The speed and scale of changes in the external world force humanitarian organisations to make continuous changes in order to remain effective in fulfilling their mandates. In many cases, small-scale and incremental changes will not be sufficient to adapt to the turbulent global environment: organisations will need to radically transform elements of themselves. In transforming themselves, they are not passive actors: organisations can make choices about their own future, and these choices can affect the future of the humanitarian system.

Unfortunately, large-scale organisational changes are hard to make successfully. Most analysts of change in the private and public sectors conclude that the majority of planned change programmes fail to meet their stated objectives. The ‘institutionalised’ tools which humanitarian agencies have in the past used to adapt and transform their work – evaluation, knowledge management, policies and capacity development – have not always proved successful in catalysing change.

Experience from beyond the humanitarian sector suggests that successful organisational change projects often begin by re-evaluating the nature of organisations themselves.

It is common to use the metaphor of a machine when thinking of an organisation, but this perspective tends to lead to an engineered approach to change, where an implicit analogy is made between the people of an organisation and machine parts, and it is assumed that people will respond in predetermined ways to external inputs. By seeing organisations as human systems, with cultures of their own, we become open to new possibilities for changing organisations. These approaches emphasise communication and broad engagement as methods for addressing the natural emotional discomfort that people feel in a situation of transition.

However, the specific nature of humanitarian organisations makes it challenging to apply these approaches. Internal tensions around the vision and strategy of humanitarian organisations, the lack of widely agreed and accepted performance criteria with which to judge success or failure, multiple business processes, the use of normative rules and guidelines to minimise internal diversity, high levels of staff turnover and a cultural premium on rapid action all militate in various ways against widespread organisational reflection and planning.

And yet, despite these constraints, many humanitarian organisations have been reasonably successful in making changes to their structures, procedures and ways of working. Organisational change in the humanitarian sector is a slow and often difficult process. It is normally contested, sometimes confusing, often costly, frequently incomplete, and can decrease capacity in the short term. It is almost always an intense struggle for all of those involved. But, as the examples in this chapter show, to varying extents, it is possible.

The change projects which were explored here appear to have followed a process consisting of three distinct steps: the ‘why’, ‘what’, and ‘how’ of change. In most cases, they started with a clear understanding of why the change was required. They possessed a clear idea of what needed to change, and of the combinations of elements which needed to be addressed in the organisation to make this change happen. And they adopted a coherent plan to make these changes.

Perhaps more importantly, the projects tended to approach these three steps from a position placing people at the centre of the process of organisational change. The

language that informants use to explain their experiences is telling here: it is striking how many people talked of ‘creating a cultural shift’, ‘getting new ideas into the mindset of the organisation’ and ‘overcoming people’s uncertainties and fears’. In all these cases, there was recognition that sustainable change would be created only through people, and that changing inanimate things – structures or documents – was a means to this end, and not the end in itself.

While inanimate objects can be fundamentally changed by external forces, people cannot. People can certainly be coerced, or made to comply, but they cannot be made to change: where changes occur, it is because people have changed themselves. Similarly, organisations, as groups of people, will change where they choose to change themselves, and not when they are advised, told or restructured to do so. The approaches taken by many of the projects discussed in this chapter recognised this, and put this recognition into action by ensuring high degrees of internal debate and communication.

The approaches taken in these projects do not preclude the use of the more commonly used, institutionalised approaches to organisational change. In all cases, there was an evaluative element to the change process – a method for understanding the current state of organisational activities. In several of the projects, policy formulation played an important role in catalysing change. Training and mechanisms for disseminating ‘tacit’ knowledge through the organisation were often central pillars of the change plan. What differed was the approach that organisations took to these activities, which tended to be both more internal to the organisation and more inclusive than is generally the case in current practice of evaluation and policy and staff development.

2.7.2 Five suggestions

We would like to conclude with five suggestions, which build on the findings presented above. The first of these suggestions concerns clarity of purpose. In this chapter, we have suggested that successful change programmes benefit from a clear vision of the future. This vision needs to describe *what the organisation will do differently* in the ‘outside world’ (activities), and it needs to show *how the organisation will be different* (culture and structures). A vision which concentrates exclusively on *what* the organisation will do differently can lead to a situation where new processes

are created, but are never fully implemented because the organisation hasn't changed enough for new approaches to take root. On the other hand, a vision which concentrates only on *how* the organisation will be different is seldom compelling: it might outline the new organisational structure, but it doesn't show why this structure is important or how it relates to the purpose and work of the organisation.

However, creating a clear vision which links internal changes to external impact can be difficult, because there are often varied opinions of what the organisation's purpose and intended impacts really are. One way through this might be to use common criteria for assessing humanitarian action, such as those of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (Box 2.6). Such criteria can be used to clarify what an organisation aims to achieve, in humanitarian terms, by making organisational changes. If a change initiative can be explained in terms of its hoped-for effects – direct or indirect – on the relevance, appropriateness, coverage, connectedness, coordination, efficiency, effectiveness of the organisation's relief work, then much of the confusion around change initiatives can be minimised. These criteria may not be perfect, and they may require adaptation, but as one commentator has suggested, they are perhaps the best means the humanitarian sector has of knowing what it is doing, and judging how well it is doing it. Such a mechanism also has scope to be better used to address one of the key weaknesses of change initiatives – assessing and evaluating them.

The second suggestion relates to motivation and incentives. As we have seen, organisations, and the people who compose them, may not feel motivated to change – and where this is the case, there are few external incentives to spur them on. Experience suggests that this situation can be addressed in four steps. Firstly, one can consider what motivates the organisation, and the people in the organisation, to work as they do. Secondly, one can ask how the proposed change will affect these sources of motivation. Thirdly, one can see whether the change can be designed in such a way as to strengthen this motivation. Finally, one can create incentives which match what people in the organisation actually want.

For example, if we assume that humanitarian organisations are motivated by both the humanitarian imperative and the need to obtain funding, then we can expect the first suggestion above (tying change to OECD-DAC criteria) to support one strand of this motivation, by showing how the change affects humanitarian work on the ground. The suggestion may also serve as a basis for creating a powerful incentive

Box 2.6 The OECD-DAC Criteria for Humanitarian Aid Effectiveness

Criterion Definition

Relevance/Appropriateness Relevance is concerned with assessing whether the project is in line with local needs and priorities as well as donor policy. Appropriateness is the tailoring of humanitarian activities to local needs – increasing ownership, accountability and cost-effectiveness accordingly. Example of change programme: SENAC project to improve needs assessments.

Connectedness Connectedness refers to the need to ensure that activities of a short-term emergency nature are carried out in a context that takes longer-term and interconnected problems into account. Example of change programme: rights-based approaches in ActionAid which broadened aid beyond immediate delivery to approaches to decrease long-term vulnerability.

Coherence The need to assess security, developmental, trade and military policies as well as humanitarian policies, to ensure that there is consistency and, in particular, that all policies take into account humanitarian and human-rights considerations. Example of change programme: introduction of humanitarian programmes which use on-the-ground evidence to pressure for coherence in donor policies: civil-military cooperation programmes.

Coverage The need to reach major population groups facing life-threatening suffering wherever they are. Example of change programme: GHD attempts to improve the coverage of humanitarian aid provided by government donors.

Efficiency Efficiency measures the outputs – qualitative and quantitative – achieved as a result of inputs. This generally requires comparing alternative approaches to achieving an output, to see whether the most efficient approach has been used. Example of change programme: Work by agencies to analyse and improve the efficiency of their supply-chains and logistics

Effectiveness Effectiveness measures the extent to which an activity achieves its purpose, or whether this can be expected to happen on the basis of the outputs.

CONTINUED

Box 2.6 The OECD-DAC Criteria for Humanitarian Aid Effectiveness *continued*

Implicit within the criterion of effectiveness is timeliness. Example of change programme: Community-Based Therapeutic Feeding, which utilises community capacities to deliver better nutrition

Impact Impact looks at the wider effects of the project – social, economic, technical, environmental – on individuals, gender- and age-groups, communities and institutions. Impacts can be intended and unintended, positive and negative, macro (sector) and micro (household). Example of change programme: Introduction of Results-based management (RBM) approaches.

linked to the second strand of motivation: if the results of a change programme can be measured, then resources might be allocated on the basis of these results.

At the individual level, the same principle applies: we should attempt to link proposed changes and incentives to the things that make people come to work in the morning. Humanitarians may be motivated by many things: the chance to express personal values in their work; relatively high levels of autonomy within the organisation; professional recognition; personal ‘power’ and influence; access to a wide variety of professional opportunities; or financial reward. The ‘mix’ will differ from person to person, and from one organisation to another. Spending some time trying to understand the key motivating factors in any particular organisation allows for the design of a change programme that meets these needs – or, at the very least, which does not frustrate them. It also allows for the design of effective incentives: if people are not motivated primarily by financial reward, for example, then monetary incentives to reward ‘new’ behaviours will be of limited value, whereas internal recognition, or increased professional mobility, might make change more attractive.

Of course, some change programmes will inevitably cut across the things that motivate people. This is particularly the case where a change will mean that certain individuals or groups stand to lose power or influence – power, or at least status, is a very important motivator for many people. Where a change is taking away things which people hold to be important, this should be made explicit, however

uncomfortable this may feel in the (at least superficially) egalitarian and consensual world of the organisation. Ideally, those who are losing something should be given an opportunity to ask for something in return: in effect, the ‘unwritten contract’ between the individual and the organisation is being recreated, and it is likely to be a more effective contract if it has been negotiated by both sides. When a change programme goes on for any length of time (and most do), such re-negotiations may have to occur at each stage of the process.

Seen from this perspective, a change process is more than a one-way communication process – when it is successful, it is a powerful institutional negotiation between what an organisation is and what it should become, between what will be gained and what will be given up – and perhaps most importantly, by whom, and for whom.

This takes us to the third suggestion, which focuses on leadership. Leadership is being increasingly discussed in the humanitarian sector – most visibly in relation to coordination efforts, reform initiatives and programme management. There is also a growing debate on leadership in accountability efforts. Effective organisational change invariably requires effective leaders – and these leaders are of a specific type. Leaders who successfully navigate periods of change encourage and facilitate difficult negotiations. They are prepared to disrupt existing patterns of organisational behaviour, to create and highlight conflicts, and to challenge institutional taboos. They also recognise their own role in creating and maintaining the status quo, and so are prepared to accept a loss of control, and a measure of ambiguity about the future, as the price for increasing innovation and engagement. This may mean letting go of personal control over the hierarchy, or loosening the structures and rules within the organisation that aim for consistency and uniformity.³

The fourth suggestion is about system-wide, rather than organisation-specific, reform and the potential of collective action in bringing about such change. There are a number of well-recognised and entrenched features of the humanitarian system which can impede effective humanitarian action, and which may be amenable to collective-change efforts. To take four: that organisations greatly overlap, and so are expected simultaneously to collaborate and compete; that response-driven work creates a culture of reactivity, increasingly driven by media profile; the structure of financing within the system; and that the formal ‘Western’ system receives the lion’s share of attention, but is, in fact, only part of a larger

humanitarian system which also includes local action, market activity, remittances and ‘informal’ assistance (Slim, 2006).

What can collective organisational-change efforts bring to such a system? Most of the change initiatives analysed in this chapter are agency-specific. At the moment, the system is still characterised by a high degree of independence between actors operating at different levels. Initiatives which aim to change aspects of the humanitarian system tend to be fewer in number than those which highlight specific agencies or types of agencies. There are such cross-organisational change initiatives, for example the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative and the Emergency Capacity Building project, but – as these examples show - they still tend to focus on specific actors. They also often coalesce around the creation of specific products, or around addressing technical issues, which are easier to address collaboratively than are changes in attitudes and behaviours. This is clearly an important gap.

Efforts for collective action might draw from a number of the principles outlined in this chapter. They might attempt to create a shared vision of the future: as Graves and Wheeler (2006) point out, one of the key gaps in the current humanitarian-reform process is the lack of an overall strategic roadmap. They might look, in more detail, at the rationale for systemic change: what happens if we do nothing to improve the humanitarian system? They might pay more attention to ensuring that the right people are involved in the why, what and how of changes, by including ‘non-traditional’ stakeholders. And they might focus on changing ‘how we do things’ – structural issues, relational issues and power dynamics – rather than falling into the trap of ‘changing what we do’ by making technical adjustments and creating products, guides and systems.

Our fifth and final point is simply this: if an organisation wants to change, if it wants to be different, it needs to work differently. It is hard to create change by doing new things in old ways. As the tsunami evaluation found, ‘agencies need to pay as much attention to how they do things, as to what they actually do’ (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006).

This is challenging for anyone who believes that they see how things could be better in an organisation, and wants to ‘put them right’. The temptation is often to act on the organisation, to try and push or pull it towards one’s own way of thinking. This approach fails to recognise that, wherever we stand in the organisation, our view is

likely to be partial: there are other, important elements that we may not see or understand. It also, critically, overlooks that fact that even if we want to change the organisation or the system, we are a part of it – and this conditions how we understand the problem and how we create solutions.

So the first and hardest step before acting on the organisation is to challenge our own assumptions and to act on ourselves, to begin working in a way that exemplifies how the organisation will be in the future, and not how it is now. To paraphrase Tolstoy: everybody thinks to change the world; nobody thinks to change themselves.

Notes

- 1 See, for example: Stoddard (2003), Macrae et al (2002), Van Brabant (2004), Donini et al (2006) and Goodhand (2006).
- 2 See, for example: Kotter (1996), Ackerman Anderson and Anderson (2004) and Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1998).
- 3 The ALNAP Secretariat, working with HPG, ICVA, People in Aid and others, will be leading a collaborative initiative on humanitarian leadership starting in 2008, which will explore some of these issues in more depth, and should prove of relevance to issues of organisational change and humanitarian reform.

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