

Key Messages from ALNAP's Eighth Review of Humanitarian Action

Contents

Chapter 1 — Counting what counts: performance and effectiveness in the humanitarian sector	2
Chapter 2 — Improving humanitarian impact assessment: bridging theory and practice	7
Chapter 3 — Innovations in international humanitarian action	11

The ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action series aims to advance analysis and understanding of key trends and issues relating to humanitarian learning and accountability as a means of supporting improvement in sector-wide performance.

This eighth edition contains three in-depth studies.

The first study is on humanitarian performance and provides a wide-ranging overview of the performance agenda – at the heart of ALNAP's work – drawing on experiences from the private, public and development sectors.

The second study focuses on impact assessments in humanitarian action, and provides a comprehensive framework to help bridge theory and practice in operational settings.

The third study is a systematic review of innovations, which presents ways to think about and improve innovations in the sector.

This key message summary aims to share the main findings of this year's Review with a wide audience. Copies are available in English, French and Spanish. For these or for the full version of the Review itself (in English only), please contact the ALNAP secretariat at alnap@alnap.org.

Chapter 1

Counting what counts: Reflections on aid effectiveness and performance in the humanitarian sector

Key message 1

Humanitarian performance should be defined in terms of both its effects on those affected by crisis and according to core humanitarian principles. A more integrated approach to performance, bringing together different levels, functions and initiatives within the system, could help to overcome many of the perceived failures of humanitarian assistance.

There is no widely accepted definition of humanitarian performance, but the working definition developed for this study includes the collective effects of the interdependent humanitarian system of international, national and local agencies, working to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of conflicts and disasters. Performance and quality approaches are currently highly fragmented, both conceptually and in practice. A more integrated approach to humanitarian performance would be useful at all levels of the humanitarian system. If conceived and implemented effectively, such an approach could facilitate a stronger, more evidence-based, understanding of the progress made to date and gaps remaining in humanitarian performance.

Key message 2

The international development sector has adopted a system-wide performance agenda in the form of the Millennium Development Goals and the associated aid-effectiveness agenda centred on the 2005 Paris Declaration. At present, there is no equivalent scale or unity of approach within the humanitarian sector.

Performance approaches widely used in the private, public and third sectors include those based on several different traditions in performance management. Results-based management, used widely in many development organisations, focuses on setting goals and objectives, against which performance is then measured. Quality management emphasises above all the perspective of the ‘customer’ or recipient, and financial audit is a third key tradition. Mixed or balanced approaches, or ‘multi-dimensional frameworks’, have been used more recently as a way of adapting and integrating ideas from disparate disciplines. The approach adopted in the development sector, around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), involves different agencies and countries harmonising operating procedures, emphasis on country ownership, and explicit measurement of performance. Although their achievement has proved uneven and problematic, the MDGs provide a framework for collective endeavour that does not exist in the humanitarian sector.

Key message 3

The humanitarian system is characterised by a high degree of interdependence. The increasing scale of emergencies, coupled with rising expectations and comparatively limited response capacities, means that even the largest organisation cannot launch an effective response on its own. Despite this, policy apparatus for reflecting on and improving collective performance within the humanitarian sector remains limited.

While there are some cross-organisational efforts to standardise aspects of performance management, there is little consistent or collective working across the whole humanitarian sector. Most performance-related initiatives are still taking place at the level of individual projects or programmes. There are still no baselines, no agreed definitions of performance and an absence of any kind of mechanism able to track performance. The system is still reliant for information on performance from a mixture of different sources, including separate reports, disjointed research and the (very) occasional joint evaluation. There are several approaches to performance management shared by different 'clubs' of organisations, such as NGOs, donors, the Red Cross Movement or UN organisations. There is none that involves all humanitarian organisations. A system-wide performance framework would have several potential benefits, including the generation of shared indicators of performance which could be compared across different emergencies and over time.

Key message 4

There are many existing projects, initiatives and approaches for monitoring and reporting on performance within the humanitarian system. However, these have been established for a range of different purposes and different focuses and address aspects of performance. Many operate in parallel, and some overlap. Most efforts do not involve regular collection and analysis of data. Those that do are often fragmented in their approach.

Existing performance-related approaches and initiatives can be seen to focus on five different aspects of the system – (1) context, needs and inputs at the global and local levels (2) projects and programmes (3) whole operations (4) organisations (5) system-wide performance. They also address different aspects of performance, often in parallel or with overlap. Many initiatives do not systematically gather data against their performance criteria, making it hard to track progress against their specific goals for improving the system. There is an increase in initiatives that do track data – especially against indicators such as mortality and nutrition, and the last few years have seen steps towards improved gathering and sharing of information and data across such initiatives. The problem now is not so much lack of information on humanitarian assistance but *fragmentation* between monitoring and measurement systems, which have often been set up for contrasting reasons, without common standards, based on different methodologies and categorised according to different definitions. There is clearly scope for the range of available approaches and methods to be usefully synthesised, both at the conceptual level and also in terms of the data available. Such a synthesis could help to foster an effective and coherent analysis of humanitarian responses.

Key message 5

Despite the considerable number of systems gathering data, and the range of initiatives attempting to address performance issues, most of these initiatives tend not to use the available data to improve performance. There is often no connection between data collection and the use or application of those data for systematic reflection and learning.

Much assessment and monitoring effort in the sector focuses on what should be done, often in accordance with stated objectives as laid out in proposals, and stop short of reflecting on what was actually done, and how well. As a result, existing performance mechanisms – such as reporting to donors – are generally not used to their full potential, becoming instead a disconnected administrative chore. Systems established to track key indicators such as mortality and nutrition have been developed outside organisations, tend not to include any way of establishing attribution of humanitarian performance to the changes they monitor, and tend not to be used within agencies to inform their analysis. Even where performance systems are reasonably well-developed – for example, results-based management systems in multilateral humanitarian agencies – they are seldom used as the basis for management decisions and resource allocation.

Key message 6

While evaluation plays a central role in current humanitarian performance, and has many benefits, it may not be adequate for the longitudinal monitoring of trends in performance. Evaluation and results-based performance management are often regarded as alternatives but they have different and complementary functions.

Evaluation can be tailored to the needs of the agency concerned, and can generate learning and accountability in some form even where monitoring systems are weak or absent. Evaluation also allows detailed exploration and explanation of what happened and why, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches ideal for understanding context and generating recommendations. The likelihood of more joint, system-wide evaluations of selected operations is a welcome development and will provide an important source of information for assessments of the overall performance of the humanitarian system. However, the specific and highly customised nature of evaluations makes it difficult to compare results directly between them. In contrast, performance monitoring determines whether specific results were achieved, using mostly quantitative indicators, and enables comparability across a wider scale and range of activities, and over time. Any integrated performance framework needs to intelligently combine performance monitoring with evaluation in order to fulfil its potential.

Key message 7

While the humanitarian system already has many of the elements necessary for a comprehensive model of performance, there are several key areas with little or no information or inadequate methods of inclusion and analysis.

Four outstanding gaps in humanitarian performance management are identified in this study. First, the views and opinions of key stakeholders, especially beneficiaries and affected populations, are underutilised. Other stakeholders, including partners, Western donor publics and national governments, also appear to be routinely left out of performance considerations. The relative lack of mechanisms within performance approaches for seeking opinions at beneficiary and community levels bears out the frequent criticism of the humanitarian system that it does not make sufficient effort to gather beneficiary views, and pays little regard to such views when they are available. Second, there appears to be considerable scope for improving analysis of how contexts affects and can constrain performance. This would require some methodological development and testing, but such analysis has the potential to inform operational planning as well as subsequent performance assessments. Third, there is scope for more consideration of organisational capacities, especially in terms of capacity strengthening, partnerships and innovation (the last of which is looked at in an accompanying study in this year's Review of Humanitarian Action). The fourth and final gap in performance efforts is the lack of focus on impact and outcomes, although there is some evidence that this is beginning to change (again, the focus of an accompanying study).

Key message 8

In moving towards a more coherent and consistent approach to performance management in the humanitarian sector, a useful first step would be to integrate and balance the existing variety of concepts and methods. This would also reflect the fundamental interdependence of the modern humanitarian system.

A balanced, comprehensive and coherent framework for humanitarian performance could be discussed and agreed across agencies. Such a framework could draw on and adapt aspects from a range of different approaches to performance and quality management. Existing efforts and initiatives could then be mapped and collated against the framework. This approach could also enable the identification and clarification of key issues and gaps within the humanitarian system. It could for example be used to improve harmonisation of processes for performance reporting, thereby reducing the administrative burden of existing reporting systems. It could also be used to prioritise gaps to be filled by sustained, sector-wide efforts in research and development, such as how to incorporate beneficiary perspectives, context analysis, capacity strengthening and impact assessment. With the agreement of common case-study or pilot countries within current and planned projects, work could be synthesised across initiatives to generate a series of integrated and comprehensive views of performance in the selected settings.

Key message 9

The ongoing and regular synthesis of system-wide performance would be a major step further towards a more relevant, strategic and credible international humanitarian system. A regular synthesis could enable preliminary assessment of the 'state of the system', and set a baseline for establishing collective goals and assessing progress against them.

There have been some landmark reviews of the overall humanitarian system, such as the 2005 *Humanitarian Response Review*, and there are key ongoing series such as the *World Disasters Report*. However, these reviews focus on particular elements of humanitarian performance, or vary their themes from year to year, and so do not provide consistent, regular analysis of the same issues. A regular synthesis of the whole humanitarian system could begin with a pilot assessment looking at performance using existing

data, and supplemented with tools such as interviews and surveys to cover selected data gaps. Eventually, such an approach could be used to set shared, system-wide goals and to track progress towards them. In this way, performance could provide an overarching framework for understanding the vast array of humanitarian initiatives, approaches and techniques. The challenge is to reframe all these initiatives in terms of their separate but complementary contributions to the effectiveness of humanitarian aid. Doing so would help to move considerations of humanitarian performance beyond narrow snapshots to a more longer-term, strategic perspective. In doing so it is important to be aware of the problems associated with the performance agenda, and to carefully navigate them whilst harnessing the benefits. In its ongoing effort, actors in the sector would do well to remember the words of Albert Einstein: 'not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted'.

Chapter 2

Improving humanitarian impact assessment: bridging theory and practice sector

Key message 1

Humanitarian impact assessment focuses on the effects of humanitarian aid, and reflects increasing concern to better understand what aid achieves. In order to be credible, impact assessment requires greater involvement from beneficiary populations and local actors. Humanitarian impact assessment is still relatively unusual, often being perceived as too difficult and too expensive. However, evidence from impact assessment efforts suggests that there are ways to navigate these challenges.

In a context of limited resources and increasing debate about humanitarian performance, there is now considerably more analysis and scrutiny of humanitarian operations. Evaluation of humanitarian action now attracts increasing levels of donor funding and agency commitment, as well as public and political interest. Yet, the role of beneficiaries remains peripheral or at best partial in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian aid. Moreover, evidence about the impact of aid interventions is scarce, and impact assessment is held by some to be insufficiently rigorous in the sector. Despite this, evidence shows that humanitarian impact assessment is possible, and there are different ways to determine the causes of change in humanitarian conditions in different contexts.

Key message 2

Calls for more and better impact assessment must be supported by shared approaches to understand and navigate the challenges faced. Work done as part of this study shows that humanitarian impact assessment requires coordinated, sustained and joined up effort in five key areas. Together, these five areas form a suggested conceptual framework which can be used as an analytical tool and as a starting point for developing and improving practice.

There are five key areas to think about with regard to any impact assessment initiative. First, an impact assessment must balance the priorities and interests of a range of different stakeholders. Is the assessment for learning or accountability; is it for donors, the agency, wider academic research, or the affected people? Second, how should humanitarian impact be defined – impact on what, and over what timescale? Third, how can impact be measured? What indicators are appropriate, and against what baselines or comparison groups? How can it be proved that any observed or reported effects are actually caused by a particular intervention? What methods are appropriate to the given context, and how will issues of data, baselines, and timing be addressed? Fourth, how should data on impact be analysed and interpreted, and what role should

affected people play in this? Fifth, how can incentives and capacities be developed to enable and improve humanitarian impact assessment?

Key message 3

It is necessary to make difficult and political choices in determining the balance of interests and priorities in an impact assessment. There are many ways to approach impact assessment, and consequently great diversity in possible purpose, scope and design. Case studies show the importance of negotiating stakeholder ownership of impact evaluations as early as possible in the process of design and implementation.

Like all humanitarian evaluations, and indeed all approaches to performance, impact assessments are often determined by two institutional priorities: accountability and learning. Yet, there is an inherent tension between these two objectives. For example, the framing of impact assessment in terms of accountability for results can encourage risk aversion among humanitarian agencies and thereby undermine the learning and innovation required for improving performance. The overall focus of an impact assessment may be influenced by numerous stakeholders including beneficiaries, donor governments and publics, recipient governments, national and international NGOs, the media and researchers. It may be that the interests and aims of all these groups are not reconcilable or achievable. However, evidence shows that the findings from impact assessments are more likely to be used if the design and process fits the needs and interests of the end users. And choices regarding the purpose and scope of impact assessments will shape the selection of methodologies, the kinds of knowledge and conclusions generated, and follow-up and use of these. It is therefore essential to allow adequate time for the meaningful participation of all relevant stakeholders in defining the purpose and scope of impact assessments.

Key message 4

To enable effective assessment of the impacts of a humanitarian intervention, its underlying logic or 'theory of change' must be clear and explicit, not over-ambitious and based on a solid understanding of humanitarian needs. Impact can be defined in various ways, but it is most important to clarify its meaning in ways that are specific to particular interventions or contexts, and that enable practical implementation of an effective assessment.

It is generally agreed that impacts can be positive or negative, primary or secondary, direct or indirect, and intended or unintended. Definitions useful in humanitarian impact assessments may also specify impacts as the changes in people's lives attributable to an intervention. This definition emphasises the ultimate effects on individuals and communities – whether people are better off because they are more independent or safer, or not, rather than whether certain amounts of aid have been distributed or camps established. The impacts may not necessarily be long-term, given the often immediate and rapid nature of humanitarian interventions. Both the importance of attributing changes to a particular source, and the complexity of doing this, are reflected in the emphasis on the possibility of negative and unintended impacts. This can be seen as the difference between 'effectiveness', which focuses on the intermediate objectives of an intervention, and 'impact' which goes further in looking at the intervention in the wider socioeconomic and political context. Any practical definition of impact will depend entirely on the specific context and the goals of the programme being assessed.

Key message 5

Impact assessment inevitably involves value judgements about which kinds of changes are significant, and for whom. The choice of indicators and methods is therefore critical, yet hard to determine

in advance and out of context. There is a range of ways to generate useful measures of impact, and there are a range of methods that are appropriate to distinct contexts, needs and budgets. As cited later: ‘methodological appropriateness could be considered the “gold standard” for impact evaluation’.

Impact assessments should ideally be carried out when impacts are likely to be visible and measurable, and not finished or forgotten, so timing of the assessment is critical. Aid recipients should be involved in identifying and selecting indicators to measure impact, because their choices may differ from those of other stakeholders. While baseline data collected before an intervention are useful in measuring impact, they are not essential. Impact can still be assessed against perceptions of how things were before the intervention, or in comparison with otherwise similar groups who did not receive the intervention. Either qualitative or quantitative data can be used to assess impact, but the most effective assessments often involve a mixture of both approaches. They are often complementary and can in combination enhance confidence in identification of the causal impacts of humanitarian programmes. Rather than asking, ‘which methods are appropriate for assessing humanitarian impact?’, it is more useful to ask, ‘which methods are appropriate, feasible and worthwhile under these specific conditions?’

Key message 6

Impact assessment involves the analysis and determination of causality, to show that observed changes are caused by a particular programme or activity rather than by other factors. There are two broad approaches to this – comparative approaches, and theory-based approaches, and both have distinctive benefits and drawbacks in the context of humanitarian aid.

Establishing causality in humanitarian situations is complex because results are unlikely to be due

to any single factor. There are two broad approaches to determining attribution in humanitarian impact assessment: comparative methods attempt to establish what would have happened without a particular intervention, and theory-based methods examine a particular case in depth to explain how an intervention could be responsible for specific changes. While there are understandable ethical reservations about withholding an intervention from certain groups for the purpose of assessing its effects, comparative methods can be useful in providing more information about the particular merits of different aid strategies, such as the choice between cash or food aid, or the benefits of innovations relative to existing practices. Theory-based methods require that causality must be inferred from information about the context, from beneficiaries and key informants and by triangulation with data from other sources. It is important to note that comparative and theory-based approaches are not mutually exclusive. For example, there is no reason why a randomised evaluation could not be embedded within theory-based approach. However, at present, most impact assessments do not combine the approaches.

Key message 7

Crisis-affected people and local and national actors are often crucial to assessing impact, as they know the context best, and are best placed to assess how lives have changed as a result of aid.

Participation of crisis-affected populations is not yet a standard feature of evaluations, and when it does happen it is either often informal and opportunistic, or formalised in the form of surveys. The process of impact assessment, and particularly the analysis and interpretation of results, can be greatly improved by the participation of affected people, who are the best judges of their own situation. The process can also assist communities and NGOs to measure impact using their own indicators and their own

methods, overcoming the weaknesses inherent in many donor and NGO evaluations which focus on process and delivery over results and impact. Evidence from case studies shows the benefits of partnerships between donors, implementing agencies, communities and other stakeholders – the latter should include national and local actors as far as possible.

Key message 8

Improving accountability for humanitarian impacts requires a cultural shift, and clear articulation of how agencies can benefit from assessing their impacts. Evidence suggests that there is still some way to go in this area, and there is a lack of organisational capacity and incentive for humanitarian agencies to carry out impact assessments. Investment in sustainable partnerships may be key to positive changes in this area.

Many commentators note a lack of individual and organisational capacity to carry out good impact assessment within the humanitarian sector, despite a wealth of tools and methods. High staff turnover, lack of a 'learning culture' and inadequate resources are contributing factors. Disincentives for effective evaluation, learning and transparency include the complexity of impact-assessment methodologies, the rigid nature of agency programme and budget cycles, and aversion to the perceived risks of failure. The development sector includes several system-wide initiatives to strengthen capacity in impact assessment, but there is no equivalent in the humanitarian sector. This potential is yet to be explored, and could include scope for addressing the associated disincentives and costs. Evidence suggests that the design and implementation of impact assessments requires skills available only through investment in long-term partnerships between academics, donors, governments, practitioners and targeted recipients. Such approaches to impact assessment will involve learning that leads to improvements and

innovations in how humanitarians operate. Ensuring the institutional sustainability of impact assessment in this way will also help to mitigate the considerable costs of impact assessments.

Key message 9

The final point is a note of caution: the desire to prove impact is a complex one, with many different underlying motivations. The desire to *prove impact*, if implemented in a narrow and self-interested way, may lead to never in fact *improving the real impacts of humanitarian work*. There is therefore a crucial need to ensure that the ongoing impact-related debates, actions and practices keep at their core the notion of an approach to impact assessment that is shaped by humanitarian principles first and foremost.

The final point is a note of caution: the desire to prove impact is a complex one, and one with many different underlying motivations.

If, as impact assessment gains more prominence, attention and resources, it is pursued first and foremost for narrow institutional or political purposes, the likelihood is that it will become yet another instrument that has failed to deliver on its early promise to improve humanitarian performance. The desire to *prove impact*, if implemented in a narrow and self-interested way, may lead to never in fact *improving the real impacts* of humanitarian work.

There is therefore a need to ensure the ongoing debate on impact – and the actions and practices that result from it – keep at their core the notion of an approach to impact assessment that is shaped by humanitarian principles first and foremost. At the heart of this ongoing effort should be a principled and pragmatic approach to realising the potential of impact assessment to contribute to improving relief efforts, and delivering better assistance to those affected by emergencies around the world.

Chapter 3

Innovations in international humanitarian action

Key message 1

Innovation processes have the potential to stimulate positive change: successful innovations can capture the humanitarian imagination, and provide new ways of delivering assistance to those who need it most. Instead of asking, 'what went wrong?', and aiming for incremental improvements in delivery of aid, innovation demands new ways of thinking and the boldness to answer more searching questions, such as 'how are things currently done, and is this the best way to do them?'

Innovations are dynamic processes which focus on the creation and implementation of new or improved products and services, processes, positions and paradigms. Successful innovations are those that result in improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, quality or social outcomes and impacts. Although many of the factors determining the success of humanitarian work are beyond the control of humanitarians, and there are many context-specific *transactional* innovations in the delivery of aid, the sector is not capitalising on its innovative potential, and in some ways may be becoming more conservative and insular. With a few exceptions, humanitarian organisations have not made a sustained attempt to stimulate a culture of innovation. Where there are examples of good practice and good ideas,

these are disconnected and have not been systematised within organisations. Consciously prioritising and managing innovations can provide an important and, as of yet, under-utilised mechanism for improving humanitarian performance.

Key message 2

Understanding the scope of innovations and bringing this understanding into organisations can help agencies to become more strategic in how they improve their work. Models such as the '4 Ps' approach are a good starting point for agencies planning to develop their work on innovations, providing a framework to understand the innovation efforts ongoing within organisations, and to elevate it to a strategic priority.

Stories of innovation include dedicated visionaries and sustained campaigning but also a great many coincidences, accidents and opportunistic adaptations. How can humanitarian organisations learn to use innovations, and plan to encourage them? According to the 4 Ps model, innovations can be directed towards improvements or new developments of four aspects: (i) *products*, such as improved cooking stoves or food products to counter malnutrition; (ii) *processes*, such as methods for stockpiling goods, improved coordination, or improving learning and quality

assurance; (iii) the *position* of an organisation and its work in relation to key stakeholders, for example by changing an organisation's public profile or by changing attitudes to an area of work such as shelter; (iv) *paradigms* or combined attitudes and beliefs determining the fundamental approach to humanitarian work, such as the calls for paradigm shifts in humanitarian business models towards beneficiary participation, local ownership and capacity development. Exploring these ideas in the context of humanitarian work gives a new way of understanding and harnessing organisations' creative potential.

Key message 3

The process of innovation is neither fixed nor linear, and depends greatly on political and organisational context, as well as chance and serendipity. However, analysis of the development of innovations across different sectors shows that successful innovation processes are proactive intentional processes, include several common elements, and progress through a number of key developmental stages.

Innovation in the private sector is often compared to evolution. Organisations, like organisms, survive and grow through variation, selecting new elements which help them to prosper in a particular environment. Organisations that innovate are more likely to thrive. Despite the complexity and unpredictability of innovation, a successful innovation process usually includes some or all of five key elements: *recognition* of a problem, challenge, or opportunity; *invention* of an idea or solution to the problem, or a way to exploit an opportunity; *development* of the innovation by creating practical plans and guidelines; *implementation* of the innovation in terms of changed operating practice (often using pilots and then scaling up); and *diffusion* of the innovation to ensure its wider adoption for benefits outside the original setting. This does not mean that all innovations are sequential, linear processes with clearly defined stages. Rather, these are broad and overlapping phases through

which many innovations pass. Although idealised, this model is useful because it allows different processes to be understood and compared – helping organisations to 'repeat the trick' – by providing guidance on how innovations progress.

Key message 4

The theory and practice of innovation, originating from the private sector, is itself evolving, and has been adapted and re-applied to fit the different needs and realities of companies and entrepreneurs. Its relevance for humanitarian work is that it can help organisations to focus on positive and proactive approaches to improving their work.

Modern innovations theory derives from early twentieth-century capitalism, based on individual firms aiming to develop new products through investment in research and development (R&D), or exploit new markets. This 'closed' model of innovation has been central to the maturation of industrial capitalism. However, as information technology grows in importance, and users become less passive, this closed model is being replaced by more 'open' strategies based on recognition of the fact that the sources of ideas and the drivers of the process have become increasingly diffuse. In particular, open, democratised innovation models suggest that many of the most radical innovations come not from experts and specialists in R&D but from front-line staff, consumers, users and suppliers – those traditionally excluded from innovations processes.

So how is this commercial-sector practice relevant to the non-profit humanitarian sector? Many humanitarian innovations have succeeded despite a lack of willingness to change, and despite outright restrictions and inhibiting factors. A more active approach to innovation, actively searching for new ideas that improve practice is needed to free up the innovative potential in the sector. More innovations could be created and developed further if individual and organisational capacities,

relationships and wider contexts were aligned in support of innovation. This model also applies to the humanitarian context, in which the increased involvement of affected people and stakeholders demands a more open and flexible approach to innovations.

Key message 5

There are many examples of innovation and change in the humanitarian sector – beyond the idea of incremental learning from the past, and towards transformational learning for the future. But many organisations still do not have strategies to manage innovation, making it likely that many ideas are not picked up. A realistic understanding of what is possible can be complemented with learning from past innovations to seek new ways to realise improvements.

Overall, the debate about humanitarian innovation is closely intertwined with the debate about the current weaknesses of humanitarian action. Some commentators have claimed that humanitarian aid has entered a period of crisis, and there is considerable cynicism about its effectiveness, others worry about its increased conservatism and risk-aversion. However, there is also good work in progress, and positive changes are under way. Examples looked at in this study include the growing acceptance and increasing use of cash-based programming, and the growing use of community-based care in cases of Severe Acute Malnutrition, the use of handheld and mobile technologies and new ways of understanding shelter work. A number of organisations have new product development processes or operational research efforts which focus on generating and assessing innovations in humanitarian response, and these should be seen as important strategic developments. Evaluations and research are of particular importance – among other things, they can help to identify and share innovations that have taken place in projects and programmes, and are essential components of effective pilot processes, in which

systematic assessments can test and demonstrate the value of new products, processes or approaches to the delivery of aid.

Key message 6

Innovation processes should be supported by effective information-sharing, within and between organisations, and humanitarian agencies should aim to work in partnerships for innovation. Partners can usefully be drawn from humanitarian counterparts and from beyond the sector.

Given the limited capacity for R&D within the sector, humanitarian agencies need to consider how to draw on wider sources of expertise and ideas, from both inside and outside the sector. While there are some examples of individual humanitarian organisations linking with academics and private-sector companies to explore the development of a particular product, there is considerable scope for greater cooperation. This needs to be done on the basis of competencies, mutual learning, and, importantly, continuity. Many innovations in the humanitarian sector have begun the process from recognition to development but then faltered or stalled, often for many years, before achieving wider implementation and diffusion. More work to understand how partnerships can build on the skills and capacities of different parties would be especially useful in the humanitarian sector, and will have relevance beyond innovation. The informal networks prevalent in the sector could also support innovations more effectively.

Key message 7

A sector-wide mechanism to promote and facilitate innovation is missing from the humanitarian sector. Innovation intermediaries have been successfully used by private-sector companies and increasingly also by non-profit organisations, but there is presently no organisation taking this role in the humanitarian sector.

In their efforts to promote innovations, agencies should not restrict themselves to an institution-specific approach, and innovations must be dealt with as cross-organisational, open initiatives from the outset. A new mechanism to facilitate innovation processes could focus initially on innovation capture and exchange. Similarly, donors and senior decision makers should be engaged to champion the innovations agenda from the outset, perhaps through a sector-wide advisory coalition. The emergence of open-innovation models has led to the formation of innovation intermediaries to facilitate the exchange of new information, knowledge and technological invention. A cross-sector facility to act as an intermediary on humanitarian innovation work would fill a gap and benefit the sector overall. The ALNAP membership would be well placed to establish such a mechanism, in collaboration with other organisations, to highlight ongoing case studies of innovation, provide support to innovation processes, raise resources for R&D in the sector, and share knowledge.

Key message 8

Safe and appropriate spaces for experimenting and innovating should be found in the humanitarian sector.

While innovation in corporations may be a metaphorical survival imperative, innovation in the humanitarian sector may be literally necessary for survival. People's lives and livelihoods can depend on getting aid of the right type and quantity to the right place on time. There may well be space to encourage greater innovation in aid delivery, without compromising ethical principles or taking risks with lives and livelihoods. But the central question is how to create a culture of 'honourable risk' in humanitarian work. By definition, innovation requires new ways of thinking and new approaches to practice. Innovation, also by definition, faces a high risk of failure but can create new opportunities by doing things previously thought impossible. Finding safe spaces for experimentation, and mechanisms to promote 'honourable risk' as a central value in humanitarian assistance is perhaps the first step to a more innovative and yet principled humanitarian response. The challenge to non-commercial innovation is to innovate in the face of complex and ambiguous rules, multiple conflicting interests of diverse stakeholders, and a variety of resource, operational and ethical constraints. The key here is to ensure minimum standards, and allow innovations which at least meet these standards while improving on performance in key areas, and without causing additional or unanticipated problems or costs.

Key message 9

A focus on innovations could help to support shifts towards proactive work to prevent disasters, rather than only reacting after the event, and towards increasing local ownership of humanitarian activities; enabling a shift from 'catastrophe-first' innovation towards 'vulnerability-first'.

The principles of disaster prevention, local ownership and beneficiary engagement require considerable shifts in attitudes and approaches to humanitarian crisis response. Some of the most radical humanitarian innovations relate to wholesale changes in the sector. At the macro level, it is more effective to prevent disasters than to respond to them, even more so as global vulnerability increases. And, as found in the tsunami response, where they exist, it is far more

effective to build on and support local capacities, thereby re-orienting the system. In the medical sector, illness is seen as a normal part of life, and both preventing and treating illness is regarded as a continuous work in progress. By contrast, humanitarian disasters, whether natural or not, are somehow seen as abnormal despite their regular occurrence, which frames the response to them in purely reactive terms.

A shift in this attitude may be difficult but is essential if we are to create a culture which encourages real and lasting humanitarian innovation, and a humanitarian business model capable of meeting a complex and volatile future. The perspective that is needed is clear: aid agencies must seek to move beyond 'catastrophe-first' model of innovations, towards putting 'vulnerability first'.



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