Are you about to start an analysis to better understand the urban context you’re operating in? You’ve got some questions, and a tool you’d like to use — but what else do you need to think about? This brief list of dos and don’ts draws key findings from ALNAP’s latest study - ‘What’s Missing? Adding Context to the Urban Response Toolbox’, and includes 10 quick tips to bear in mind when using any context tool.

1. **Do think carefully about your objectives.**
   The success of your analysis rests on having a clear and realistic objective. It’s a critical first step to ensure the analysis is useful and meets expectations. Don’t skip it!

   *For more information on what to consider when setting objectives, see Section 4.1.1 of the study.*

2. **Don’t try to do too much.**
   Setting realistic parameters is important. Any analysis exercise will require you to make decisions about balancing, for example, your timeframe, the depth the analysis goes into and accounting for resource and logistical realities. It may help to focus analysis on one or more specific neighbourhoods, rather than an entire city.

   *See Sections 4.1.2 and 4.1.3 for more.*

3. **Do establish a common understanding of ‘context’**.
   ‘Context’ can be used to mean many things, so it’s important to make sure everyone is on the same page. In this research, context is defined as ‘the environment within which something (a situation, such as a humanitarian crisis) happens and which helps to explain it’.

   *See Section 2 for more on what context is and why it’s important to understand it.*
4. **Don’t use tools off the shelf.**
All tools should be adapted before use – to the specific environment and to account for the information and the resources available. Tools can also be combined to maximise their strengths. If your organisation has a tool they’ve developed for understanding context, that doesn’t mean it alone is the best one for the job.

*Look through the tool, look at some alternatives (see the Annex to the study) and read Section 4.2 to ensure you’ve explored different options.*

5. **Do think about how the analysis will be of practical use to your response.**
Keeping in mind the practical application of your analysis will help ensure analysis doesn’t end up on a dusty shelf. For example, you can focus analysis on the geographic area where you expect to be working and include a response analysis step as part of the exercise.

*See Box 1 in the study.*

6. **Don’t be led by your sectoral focus.**
Keeping an open mind will help ensure critical aspects of context aren’t missed. You won’t know what information could be relevant in advance, and the context (which includes the economy and livelihoods, politics and governance, social/cultural aspects, services and infrastructure, space and settlements and existing stakeholders) is all interconnected and doesn’t fall into sectoral buckets. Organisations with sectoral expertise in shelter will still need to understand some aspects of the local culture, politics, and urban services to have a context-relevant response.

*See Section 2.3 for more on why it’s important to understand the broader context.*

7. **Do joint analysis.**
Though there are challenges working with others, the benefits of joint analysis significantly outweigh the negatives. Joint analysis builds a shared understanding of context, maximises a diverse range of skills and perspectives and makes efficient use of resources.

*Read more on using context tools jointly in Section 4.4.*
8. Don’t get a consultant to run the whole exercise.
It can be tempting to consider hiring a consultant to carry out the analysis exercise if staff are short on time themselves – but in doing so you’ll miss out on the value of the process, and you won’t build in-house capacity. If you do hire a consultant, get them to play a facilitative role and ensure the exercise itself actively involves in-country and HQ staff to maximise diverse potentials.

See Section 4.5 for more.

9. Do think about uptake from the beginning.
Uptake is one of the biggest challenges as so often analysis can end up discarded and unused. There are lots of things you can do to prevent this, such as: involving key stakeholders and ensuring findings have practical application. Key to this is thinking about uptake from the outset. If you consider uptake when setting your objectives, you’ll be much more successful at the end.

See Section 4.7 for more on how to ensure your analysis is used.

10. Don’t stop once the analysis exercise is complete.
The analysis exercise itself is just one part of an ongoing journey to understand the context you’re responding in. Analysis should be a continuous process if your responses are to be consistently context-relevant and effective.

For more on this see Section 4.3.

For more information about this research and the tools, visit our website:
https://www.alnap.org/our-topics/urban-response.