To register your interest in participating in the Steering Group, please contact the research lead Alice Obrecht (a.obrecht@alnap.org)

What is this ALNAP research about?

ALNAP is working with its Members to develop and test approaches to action learning in frontline humanitarian response. The aim of this work is to improve the quality of within- and cross-response learning in order to make improvements to humanitarian operations.

This work looks at two broad sources for learning within a humanitarian response.

- **A first source for learning is from within the response itself:** the implicit knowledge that already exists amongst frontline staff and the people they serve. Action research is a broad family of approaches with an emphasis on placing knowledge users at the centre of research activities. In action research, practitioners consciously use a variety of approaches to better understand their situation and solve practical problems faced in their work. All action research approaches are participatory (the user of learning participates in generating the knowledge) and action-oriented (knowledge is used to take action, to improve practice or solve a problem). Such approaches can provide structure to the informal learning already taking place in a humanitarian response, making it easier to communicate and share this learning for wider use.

- **A second source for learning is external:** evidence and knowledge from other humanitarian responses that can be applied to improve quality in a new response. While there are increasingly large numbers of lessons learned products and evidence being produced in different response settings, it is difficult for individual decision-makers to understand which is most relevant for their work, and how to apply these findings to their own situation. ‘Implementation science’ is a set of
approaches used to apply research findings to specific contexts. Implementation science was developed originally in the health sector to support the implementation of effective health interventions in different contexts. These approaches could be further developed to support the contextualisation of lessons learned and other evidence for use by decision-makers in humanitarian response.

Rationale

A great deal of knowledge exists in frontline humanitarian programmes, yet is rarely shared or fully utilised. There are many reasons for this. A shortage of time and resources means that it is challenging to apply structured approaches to reflection and learning, especially for national and local NGO responders. Monitoring and evaluation practices tend to be geared more towards meeting donor requirements than towards identifying and acting on new learning in order to improve a programme (Warner, 2017). Sometimes, the implicit knowledge and expertise held by individual frontline staff is undervalued or not recognised as ‘real’ knowledge because it is not expressed in formal documentation.

Even when structured learning approaches, such as research or impact evaluations, are used to understand the effectiveness or quality of an intervention, it is difficult for practitioners in other contexts to apply this learning directly to their own work. Findings from such research can be kept within single organisations or teams and not widely shared. When learning is shared, there are challenges around accessing and using this learning. There is little existing knowledge on best practices for adapting interventions in order to successfully apply lessons learned from one context to another.

This means that the assistance received by crisis affected people does not always fully reflect available knowledge on how best to support them and therefore is not as effective or relevant as it could be.

At the same time, there is increasing evidence that adapting and improving humanitarian programmes throughout implementation can increase the effectiveness, relevance and appropriateness of humanitarian action (Obrecht and Bourne 2018; Mercy Corps and IRC 2016; Campbell 2019). However, it is difficult to adapt and improve a response unless field staff are able to learn from what they are doing and apply learning from similar experiences elsewhere.

Activities and Timeline

The ALNAP Secretariat will be commissioning a set of approaches to action learning that can be used by humanitarian practitioners in a response. Approaches will be grouped around three themes, selected for their relevance to the key challenges in collecting and using learning for field-level decision-making. Each approach will be developed by a consultant with relevant expertise and will consist of a short methods paper and a set of exercises or practices to be used by frontline responders. These may be accompanied by the development of tools, such as apps or templates, depending on interest from end users and time availability.
ALNAP will establish a Steering Group, drawn from its membership, who will oversee the development of these approaches. Steering Group members will have the first opportunity to test and trial these approaches in their organisations, supported by ALNAP. A package of approaches to action learning will be produced on the basis of this testing and input.

**Steering Group: Composition, Benefits and Nature of Commitment**

**Composition**

The Steering Group will be comprised of 3-8 members and is open to any interested staff at a ALNAP Member organisation with an operational presence. Members from ALNAP's non-operational constituencies, such as academic institutes, are also welcome on the basis of relevant experience with action research, implementation science and operational research methodologies.

**Benefits to participating**

By participating in steering this research, Steering Group members will:

- Influence sector-wide practice and understanding of how to support higher quality learning in frontline response
- Have first access for themselves and their organisations to approaches and methods developed by experts
- Have access to advisory services to strengthen their own organisation/field teams' capacity for making improvements to a response through learning
- Have their organisations prominently featured and recognised in publications by ALNAP, which are widely disseminated and read across the humanitarian sector

**Nature of Commitment**

Steering Group members will be asked to commit to testing or trialling some of the developed methods and tools with their organisation—likely with specific teams or a single office, for ALNAP Members with multiple offices. The ALNAP Secretariat will provide limited financial support for the costs of piloting, such as logistics costs for in-country day long workshops.

Steering Group members will be asked to participate in up to 4 group calls over the period of May–December 2019. SG members will also be requested to review and provide inputs on:

- The TORs for the methods and approaches to be developed by consultants
- Inception report
- Drafts of the methods and approaches developed by consultants
- Mapping review of action learning produced by ALNAP
- Learning Review produced by ALNAP
The total time commitment for SG members is expected to be 5-6 days. This includes time spent working with ALNAP to connect with interested teams in their organisation for testing the approaches and methods.

**Steering Group engagement:**

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<tr>
<th>Milestone</th>
<th>Estimated time commitment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First SG call: Steering Group reviews and approves TORs for methods papers</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual calls with SG members to inform scoping</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second SG call: SG provided with Inception report to review and sign-off</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
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<td>Feedback on draft approaches to be piloted: over email</td>
<td>1/2 day</td>
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<td>Third SG call: SG to discuss plans for piloting/testing</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
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<td>Facilitating organisational contacts for piloting/testing</td>
<td>1-2 days</td>
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<tr>
<td>Face to face meeting: SG receives final versions of methods/approaches and Mapping Paper; comments provided in face to face meeting</td>
<td>1 day</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feedback on Learning Review document: comments provided over email</td>
<td>1/2 day</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fourth SG call: Review of project and discussion of plans and support available for further roll out of approaches</td>
<td>2 hours (may be longer if this is moved to a face to face meeting)</td>
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