

# Learning from disruption: evolution, revolution or status quo?

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DISCUSSION STARTER



While responding to epidemics and reflections on racism in aid were not new to the humanitarian system, the COVID-19 Pandemic required new ways of working in fast order, and the BLM protests brought renewed urgency to how aid organisations consider their roles and approaches.

— 2021 ALNAP Meeting Background Paper

# Discussion starter

Recent research and experience from the past two decades suggest that change in the humanitarian system – particularly transformational change – may have more to do with the influence of external forces than planned internal shifts (Bennett et al., 2016; Knox-Clarke, 2017). This is certainly reflected in the system's response to 'mega-crises'; and the profound sense of failure from both the international response to the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami that helped to create watershed moments in the evolution of humanitarian action, for example. But what does this mean for humanitarians? How can they promote positive shifts while mitigating negative disruption?

This Background Paper to the **2021 ALNAP Meeting – Learning from Disruption: evolution, revolution, or status quo?** – offers a starting point for discussion. Drawing on interviews and literature review, it looks at two external disruptors that have to varying degrees dominated conversations about change in the humanitarian system in the past two years: the COVID-19 pandemic and the decolonising aid debate.

The findings from this preliminary research suggest that, since the start of 2020, the international humanitarian system has experienced disruption as a result of and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that parts of the system have demonstrated positive shifts towards greater localisation, flexible funding, inter-agency coordination and resource pooling, and care for staff mental well-being. However, this picture is not consistent across the system, nor do all these changes look set to be long-lasting.

This paper suggests **three** distinct stories of disruption that have emerged since 2020:

# 1

## **Short-term adaptation followed by a return to 'business as usual'.**

Some agencies worked differently out of necessity for a short period of time in 2020 – for example by reducing the presence of international staff in crisis-affected communities, adapting and redirecting programme activities, and applying more flexible procurement and financing procedures. However, these changes were not 'locked in' through meaningful changes to policy or organisational systems and practices. The expectation is that, in these areas, agencies may largely return to pre-2020 ways of working.

# 2

## **Harnessing disruption to accelerate existing change processes.**

Several humanitarian agencies, particularly INGOs, were already engaged in organisational change processes around localisation and flexibility in 2019. For these agencies, COVID-19 and the decolonisation debate served to further support, and in some places accelerate, a shift in motivations, attitudes and systems rather than act as primary or significant catalysts of change.

# 3

## **Potential to spark long-term adaptation in areas where little progress has been made over the years.**

The current disruptions have again highlighted the fundamental need for change and improvement in the areas where there has been insufficient progress (for instance, in crisis preparedness, accountability to affected populations, and addressing structural inequalities in the system). It remains to be seen whether the disruptions experienced over the two years will influence greater learning and spark slow-moving long-term changes.

**At a thematic level, the insights from key informants and recent literature revealed some signs of potentially enduring change and improvements, alongside some key challenges:**

- Localisation may have accelerated out of necessity under the pandemic as the system needed to rely more heavily on local actors. This is a positive step towards diversifying leadership roles. However, power imbalances between local and international actors are deeply engrained and may prevail for some time, without sustained, focused and high-level efforts to address them.
- There was greater flexibility in financing in 2020, in terms of donors easing earmarking restraints and increasing unearmarked funding. This was welcomed, but largely benefited UN agencies and large INGOs. Direct funding to local actors remained negligible even though their roles and responsibilities in crisis responses grew manifold.

- Organisations minimised supply chain disruptions by moving cargo and personnel through UN and EU humanitarian air bridges and by procuring personal protective equipment (PPE) and other essential items jointly and locally. This demonstrates the capacity to be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances. However, some agencies felt they could not benefit fully from all the available mechanisms.
- COVID-19 triggered a new way of working for organisations that were new to remote management and accelerated practices in agencies that were already using this approach. Yet many challenges arose, including maintaining the quality of work, additional bureaucracy and a discrepancy between the importance of upward accountability to donors and taxpayers in relation to accountability to affected people.

- The volume of discussions around mental health and well-being grew during the pandemic. This helped to highlight the importance of mental health and, in some cases, promoted positive action. However, there seemed to be high variability between agencies; some were able to improve staff care practices, while others were not.

The 2021 ALNAP Meeting will further explore these themes and more, to share learning and experiences of where and how the system is changing, how best to manage and promote positive trajectories already underway, and how to mitigate negative disruptions. The meeting's aim is to develop a shared understanding of the issues, and by doing so, build the capacity of humanitarian actors to work together to drive real and sustainable changes that improve outcomes for crisis-affected communities.

Visit [www.ALNAP.org](http://www.ALNAP.org) to read the full 2021 ALNAP Meeting Background Paper.



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Amina Khan, Fatimah Khan and Anne-Lise Dewulf are a group of consultants commissioned to author this report with Alice Obrecht and John Mitchell.

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