FACING THE UNKNOWN
MANAGING UNCERTAINTY IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

33RD ANNUAL MEETING

ONLINE CURTAIN RAISER: 18 NOVEMBER 2020
MEMBERS EVENT: 19 NOVEMBER 2020

ALNAP
08:00–09:00 GMT

Opening session
Learning in uncertain times

09:00–09:10 GMT:

Break

09:10–10:25 GMT

Breakout session
Participants can choose from three breakout sessions running in parallel. Sessions include:

- **Session 1** Managing operational uncertainty
- **Session 2** Resourcing for uncertainty
- **Session 3** Transforming uncertainty: finding opportunities for change and improvement

10:25–10:30 GMT:

Break

10:30–11:00 GMT:

Looking ahead

For Breakout session details see pages 4 – 6.
14:00–15:00 GMT

Opening session
Learning in uncertain times

15:00–15:10 GMT

Break

15:10–16:25 GMT

Breakout session
Participants can choose from three breakout sessions running in parallel. Sessions include:
- **Session 1** Managing operational uncertainty
- **Session 2** Resourcing for uncertainty
- **Session 3** Transforming uncertainty: finding opportunities for change and improvement

16:25–16:30 GMT

Break

16:30–17:00 GMT

Looking ahead

For Breakout session details see pages 4 – 6.
BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Overview

COVID-19 has brought with it an unprecedented climate of uncertainty. With few useful experiences to draw upon, individuals, organisations and societies are struggling to define and adapt to a ‘new normal.’ Although uncertainty is familiar terrain for humanitarians accustomed to operating in unstable circumstances, COVID-19 has thrown up a heady mix of new challenges—operational, financial, even existential. But alongside these challenges, the Pandemic may also offer opportunities to re-imagine humanitarian assistance itself. Is this the time to lever change and create a new humanitarian business model? If so, what is possible?

This Meeting offers an opportunity for different humanitarian constituencies – donors, United Nations agencies, NGOS, the Red Cross/Crescent Movement, networks and academics – to come together not only to navigate the current moment, but also to pool experiences and work towards a shared understanding of what we want to do differently in the future.

To help us achieve this aim, we have developed three break-out sessions which will focus on how to manage operational uncertainty in real time; how to plan and make best use of financial and staff resources under uncertainty; and how to capitalise on opportunities for future change and improvement. Each one will be facilitated in an interactive workshop style, with short interventions from experts and practitioners, providing an opportunity to share learning in small group discussions.
Managing operational uncertainty

Facilitator
Charlie Dalrymple (Independent consultant)

Description
The Pandemic has meant that humanitarian need has increased and has become compounded. At the same time, access to emergency situations has been restricted. As a result, agencies have already been forced to adapt and modify standard programming and operational models. Yet, the impacts of the Pandemic have yet to be fully realised, raising numerous questions about impending needs and whether response models are equipped to handle likely overlapping mega-crises. How can we prepare ourselves operationally to manage the uncertainty that lies ahead?

Today, leaders are being forced to take operational decisions with limited to no information about the rapidly evolving situation around them, nor a clear understanding of the consequences of different potential options. These decisions include how to best adapt programming under COVID-19 restrictions, how to programme for compounded risks, and how to strengthen or overhaul partnership models, as agencies explore new operational modalities.

Tools and methods such as scenario planning, adaptive management, and anticipatory approaches can be useful in managing uncertainty in humanitarian operations. Through examples from field practitioners and expert-guided discussion, the session will explore how these techniques have been applied to date, what they offer for an improved understanding of the current situation, and how they can help actors ready themselves to respond to the challenges of tomorrow.
Resourcing for uncertainty

Facilitator
Juliet Parker (Deputy Director, ALNAP)

Description
COVID-19 has brought a high degree of uncertainty to the already difficult decision-making area of humanitarian resourcing, both in terms of staffing and finances. Restricted access in emergency situations and the inability to travel internationally has forced agencies to adapt on the staffing front and modify basic ways of working. What does surge capacity look like over Zoom? How do we support staff at risk of increased stress and compromised wellbeing resulting from the Pandemic?

COVID-19 is also certain to bring a tighter fiscal environment for humanitarians, as Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) is predicted to decrease by 15% this year. With unemployment rising, private contributions are set to decrease as well. How can humanitarian organisations manage this uncertainty? Will shrinking budgets lead to a re-prioritisation, and if so, what will stay and what will go? Will this mean that small organisations who cannot weather the storm are wiped out? Will there be a consolidation of organisations to reduce inefficiencies?

One of the big challenges is how to understand the options that lie ahead and be more confident about making good decisions. Through examples from field practitioners and expert-guided discussion, the session will look at methods such as flexible financing, forecasting, and naturalistic decision-making, as well as ways to navigate uncharted territory and manage resourcing more effectively.
Transforming uncertainty: Finding opportunities for change and improvement

Facilitator
Jessica Alexander (Independent consultant)

Description
Humanitarian organisations are no longer in a position to continue ‘business as usual.’ This can cause anxieties but at the same time it may also open a window of opportunity for change and improvements. Some people have suggested that there will be a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ COVID-19; as this could be a turning point bringing the kind of transformational change that has eluded the sector. But what does this look like? There are signs already that the Pandemic is accelerating commitments and aspirations that up to now have not been fully (or even partially) realised. These include a more decentralised approach that puts local actors at the centre; a breakdown of the artificial division between humanitarian and development sectors; sustaining new models of solidarity and mutual aid; getting ahead of crises that are predictable or recurring; and ushering in higher degrees of donor flexibility.

The current moment presents possibilities to test new ways of working and shape the humanitarian sector for tomorrow. This session will explore these opportunities for change – how we can seize, maintain and scale up what enhances our effectiveness, and discard what holds us back.