MORE RELEVANT?

10 ways to approach what people really need

ALNAP

32nd Annual Meeting Study
ALNAP is a global network of NGOs, UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/Crescent Movement, donors, academics, networks and consultants dedicated to learning how to improve the response to humanitarian crises.

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INTRODUCTION

Why relevance?

It seems obvious that relevance should be a basic test of humanitarian assistance. If people don’t receive what they really need in a crisis, something is going wrong. We know that in many cases – from Yemen to Somalia – humanitarian assistance is reported to be relevant to people’s most urgent needs, especially in the initial phase of acute crises (ALNAP, 2018). Yet we also regularly hear stories of irrelevant aid: people receiving food they can’t eat, services they can’t access, technologies that they can’t use – while their real priorities go unmet. In Tanzania and Ukraine, we’ve heard how basic health needs of vulnerable groups are overlooked (Sheppard et al., 2018). In Palestine, we’ve heard how people are eschewing international assistance in favour of crowdsourced solutions because ‘international aid organisations’ priorities were not the priorities of the people on the ground’ (Hatuqa, 2019). In Bangladesh, we’ve seen how refugees are selling on aid to generate income to meet basic requirements (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018a): one participant at ALNAP’s 32nd Annual Meeting described how ‘Rohingya people are selling so many items to the market – like agency-branded knives and forks that they never needed or use. It’s wasted resources’ (Programme design session, 1.3).¹

So, what’s happening, and what needs to change? At its simplest, relevance appears to be an uncontroversial concept. No one would deny that it is important to provide people with what they most need, and irrelevant aid is bad: it’s central to humanitarian principles and standards. But when we look deeper, putting need-centred relevance into practice becomes profoundly difficult and potentially disruptive. Realigning the humanitarian offer with the priorities of people on the receiving end presents radical opportunities to do things differently, but in so doing it poses dilemmas and challenges to the way in which humanitarians currently think and work.

The relevance test raises fundamental questions of knowledge, power and culture. How best to understand what’s most relevant when people’s needs are diverse, dynamic and sometimes at odds with the views of external experts? Who gets the power to decide what’s relevant and how? To what extent can humanitarian aid be culturally and contextually relevant, while upholding principles and delivering on time and at scale? Indeed, is it possible for the Western-bred humanitarian system to transcend its origins in order to do so? The relevance test also raises inevitable questions about humanitarian politics, structures and the resources behind the response. Are current systems getting it in the way? What kinds of collaboration are possible? And what kinds of funding, staffing and expertise would be required to do things better?

¹ For further information about the various sessions and panels at the 32nd ALNAP Annual Meeting, see (ALNAP, 2019a). Videos of the ‘Stories in 5’ sessions, high-level panels and keynote and welcoming addresses are also available on the 32nd Annual Meeting page of the ALNAP website (ALNAP, n.d.).
The 32nd ALNAP Annual Meeting

The 32nd ALNAP Annual Meeting, held in Berlin in October 2019, brought together 200 stakeholders from across and beyond the humanitarian sector to address these questions and to explore what relevance means in practice. The Meeting provided a rare opportunity to unpack this fuzzy and far-reaching concept and provoke fresh thinking on a topic that is often encountered but rarely discussed. Although relevance is implicit in many current agendas – from accountability to cash assistance – there has been very little direct consideration of it. Rather, it has been ‘hiding in plain sight’ (High-level panel, pt.1).

The background paper for the 32nd Annual Meeting presented a new framework for thinking about relevance, as a starting point to inform and structure discussions (ALNAP, 2019b. It set out 10 dimensions (see Figure 1), five for understanding people’s priority needs - inclusive, comprehensive, holistic, dynamic and polyphonic; and five for providing what’s most relevant to meet these – choice; tailoring, co-design, adaptation and complementarity. It explored the state of play of each of these and identified the constraints to doing better. It also identified the deep dilemmas and challenges that a real commitment to relevance implies for the humanitarian endeavour.

Figure 1: The 10 dimensions of a relevant response
Figure 2: Sliding scales of the 10 dimensions of a relevant response
The Annual Meeting took these dimensions and dilemmas as the starting point for two days of facilitated conversations – workshops, presentations, panels, roundtable discussions and practical showcases. Some of these conversations focused on aspects of programming, from identifying priority needs, to designing and tailoring responses, and monitoring and evaluating relevance. Some examined shifts in approaches which speak directly to the relevance question – particularly cash-based programming, protection and localisation – as well as shifts in contexts – protracted situations and new types of humanitarian crises. Crucially, some sessions provided a forum to honestly confront the power dynamics, prejudices and inequalities that shape the way we listen, decide and respond, and which get in the way of becoming more relevant.

This study draws on these rich discussions and on the conceptual groundwork of the background paper, weaving together a review of the literature with an analysis of the Annual Meetings' transcripts and interviews with experts and practitioners. This study is intended to be neither a comprehensive summary of everything discussed at the Annual Meeting in Berlin nor the definitive word on relevance. Instead it aims to capture the major issues, examples and ideas that emerged, and to provide a clear analysis and framework to enable everyone – whether present at the meeting or not – to reconsider relevance and lay the groundwork for practical applications.

What is the relevance problem?

Definitions and redefinitions

Simply put, being relevant means being closely connected to what’s important, being related to the main issue at hand and to what people really want or need. It is the ultimate prize for everyone from search engine developers, to political candidates and grocery stores. Relevance is part of our normal vocabulary, judgement and experience, not just our professional jargon. But relevance can be hard to pin down: we know it when we feel it and when it’s missing, but we have trouble describing the rules.

There is an official definition: relevance is one of eight core criteria for evaluating humanitarian action2 and is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) as 'the extent to which the intervention objectives and design respond to beneficiaries’, global, country and partner/institution needs, policies and priorities and continue to do so if circumstances change’ (OECD DAC, 2019: 7).3 When the standard criteria for evaluating development assistance were customised for humanitarians, relevance acquired a twin principle – appropriateness – defined as ‘the tailoring of humanitarian activities to local needs’ (Beck, 2006: 21). These twin principles are often referred to interchangeably but they are not identical: relevance is more about the overall purpose – the ‘what’, while appropriateness is more about the activities – the ‘how’. According to the guidance, it is possible to be relevant without being appropriate. For example, the purpose of a nutritional intervention might be relevant in a famine, but the activity of food distribution inappropriate to the situation (Beck, 2006).

But this definition of relevance only takes us so far. It has in-built tensions and questions, most fundamentally relevant to what and to whom? Although ‘partner/institutions’ policies and priorities’ should be guided by need (Good Humanitarian Donorship, 2003), the two are not always aligned. So, when relevance to aid recipients and to institutions are contradictory, how does one assess which is privileged as the touchstone? Fixation on alignment to donor or government policy risks skewing attention away from relevance to people’s needs (Chianca, 2008). And how much weight should

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2. The others are: effectiveness, efficiency, impact, connectedness, coverage, coherence and coordination.
3. The original DAC criterion for relevance read ‘concerned with assessing whether the project is in line with local needs and priorities (as well as donor policy)’ (OECD DAC, 1999: 22).
4. Other evaluation and measurement tools either use ‘appropriateness’ and ‘relevance’ synonymously, while others draw a clear distinction and consider them complementary (see Abdelmagid et al., 2019).
relevance have in an overall measure of humanitarian performance? According to some, relevance should trump all other factors in judging the quality of design or implementation of assistance: if a project isn’t relevant to peoples’ needs it can’t be successful (Sagmeister, 2016). De-prioritising relevance in relation to other evaluation criteria such as efficiency means that it is possible to have ‘successful’ projects that miss the mark completely (Anderson and Olson, 2003), busily doing ‘the wrong thing right’ (Ackoff in Ramalingam, 2013). The recent revision of the original 20-year old DAC criteria recognises this and now frames relevance in terms of ‘Is the intervention doing the right thing?’ (OECD DAC, 2019: 7).

Rethinking and putting the spotlight on relevance allows us to reframe how humanitarian action is judged, and by whom. It presents an opportunity to shift perspective to the affected person, to examine whether the humanitarian assistance provided aligns with what they most need. From this person-centred perspective, this study doesn’t draw a strong distinction between appropriateness and relevance – for someone receiving food that they can’t eat or services that they can’t access, then the intervention will be irrelevant to them no matter how great a priority need hunger is. ALNAP’s 32nd Annual Meeting therefore took as its working definition relevance is being in-line with the priority needs of affected people. But within this simple definition are many difficult challenges.

Critiques and catalysts

Humanitarian action has always been haunted by the problem of being mismatched with what people really need. History is full of stories of irrelevant aid – from the ‘imposed aid’ provided to Ugandan refugees in the 1980s (Harrell-Bond, 1986), to the ‘second tsunami’ of relief following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, including a surfeit of prosthetic limbs (Cosgrave et al., 2007), to more recent misjudged high-tech handouts in the Syrian refugee response (Williams and Sweis, 2017).

Some of this irrelevant assistance might be put down to the misguided actions of certain aid organisations, but well-established critiques suggest that something is more fundamentally and structurally awry. Two sets of arguments stand out: the ‘Western-driven’ critique and the ‘supply-driven’ critique. The first looks at how the origins of the humanitarian system have shaped its models and culture; the second looks at how the current incentives and structures of the system shape what it provides. Both arguments are about power, provenance and politics. In different but clearly connected ways, they both offer answers to the question: in what ways is the humanitarian system hardwired against providing relevant aid? Both critiques resurface throughout this study.

The Western-driven critique includes diverse arguments, but essentially claims that the humanitarian system is rooted in the privileged Western perspectives of those who laid its foundations in the early and mid-20th century and continued to shape its direction (see, e.g., Duffield, 1996; Davey, 2014; Bernard, 2015; Bennett, 2016). It has taken many incarnations through the 20th century (see, e.g. Walker and Maxwell, 2009, Barnett, 2011; Davey et al., 2013). Some see it clearly as a ‘continuation of the colonial project’ (Jayawickrama, 2018) or the ‘perpetuation
of colonial power relations' (Rutazibwa, 2019), an imposition of a ‘superior’ Western rationality.

Paternalism runs deep in this Western critique: according to one Annual Meeting participant, it is ‘the beating heart of humanitarianism’ (Legacies of power and inequality session). Predicated on care and good intentions, paternalism is the ‘substitution of judgement by one actor for another, on the grounds that it will improve the latter’s welfare and happiness, needs or interests’ (Legacies of power and inequality session).

The upshot, in relation to relevance, is a humanitarian system that is driven by its own culture, values and purposes rather than those of the people it seeks to serve. Critics argue that a rigorous and honest look at the ingrained unequal power relations that ‘make the system tick’ (Atlani-Duault and Dozon, 2014: 10) is essential to understand – and to challenge – ‘the relevance of the good intentions of humanitarians to the aspirations of their intended beneficiaries’ (Rutazibwa, 2019: 66). The 32nd Annual Meeting provided a rare space in which to begin confronting some of these uncomfortable issues of power and privilege, but participants recognised that this has to be part of a continual process for individuals and their organisations (Legacies of power and inequality session). Facing up to the Western-driven critique means facing up honestly to the question of who knows best.

This leads us to the second set of critiques – that the present system, which grew from these Western origins, is fundamentally ‘supply driven’, dictated by the mandates and missions of agencies and their donors, calcified by the architecture of the system and reinforced by competitive territoriality (see, e.g., Darcy et al., 2013; Scott, 2014; ALNAP, 2018; IFRC, 2018). Being supply-driven arguably runs deep in the power dynamics of all philanthropy (Stirrat, 2006), but it is also particular to the imperatives, structures and politics of the humanitarian endeavour (Otegui, 2019). The imperatives of scale, speed and efficiency favour a defined supply-chain model (Anderson et al., 2012 Obrecht, 2018), the structures of sector-based coordination pre-set the response (ACAPS, 2016a) and the politics of funding disincentivise agencies from transcending their ‘offer’ (Konyndyk, 2018). In this model, humanitarians are answerable only to their donors; affected people ‘are not shareholders in a supply-driven market’ (de Torrenté, 2013: 612) and the incentives for donors to be truly accountable to them are limited (Feedback and closing panel). System reforms are dominated by improving the efficiencies of supply, not on being more relevant to recipients (Debate on priority needs).

So, what’s the alternative? If we follow this language of markets and focus relevance on what people need and want, then the obvious and often called-for opposite is a ‘demand-driven’ model (see, e.g., Konyndyk, 2018; Metcalfe-Hough and Poole, 2018; Sanderson, 2018). Such a model is critical to any business where the ‘client’ or ‘customer’ satisfaction is essential to shareholder happiness (de Torrenté, 2013). Some agencies have adopted ‘client’ language (see Narayanan et al, 2019; High-level panel, pt.1). However, participants at the Annual Meeting noted that this also means adopting a radically different mindset: ‘Imagine if we took “the customer is always right” as a principle for humanitarian design!’ (Cash-based aid workshop, 3.2).

Being ‘demand driven’ is clearly easier said than done – and defined. Even Mary Anderson, one of the most eloquent critics of the supply-driven system, stopped short of giving this label to the alternative (Anderson et al., 2012). As we explore in section 2.3 on co-design, one model is to work with the push and pull of supply and demand but to aim to increase the force exerted by demand (Obrecht, 2019). However, the supply–demand paradigm is limited. Humanitarian action, despite

8. The ‘hydra heads’ of privilege (Arcaro, 2019) that formed the basis of discussion at the 32nd Annual Meeting were classism, racism, colonialism, sexism and heteronormativity.
9. Drawing on literature on the politics of philanthropy in his examination of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, Stirrat argues that ‘whilst philanthropy may involve a rejection of the world of competition and the market, it inevitably becomes a part of that world. What starts out as a gift becomes a commodity’ (2006).
10. In a study on the continued relevance of international non-governmental organisations, furniture retailer IKEA is cited saying: ‘listen to and involve your clients/customers, they will tell you what they need – you just have to find creative ways of delivering it with them’ (Lawrence, 2018).
existing in a market and aspiring to commercial efficiencies, is not a business. Perhaps, in keeping with a new era of overturning outdated ideas of fictional ‘Homo economicus’ behaviour (see, e.g., Raworth, 2017), the relevance challenge should prompt a search for a different way of describing peoples’ relationship to aid, in terms that are not so simplistically transactional.

The Western-driven and supply-driven critiques of the humanitarian system might not be resolved, but neither have they been ignored: there have been significant attempts to realign humanitarian action with people’s needs. The evolution of protection, participation and cash-based approaches can all be seen, in different ways, as aiming to do this. More recently, work on gender, age and disability have raised the bar on inclusion, and moves towards localisation have reopened old questions about cultural proximity and who holds the power in humanitarian response.

Just as the Rwanda Genocide, the Indian Ocean Tsunami and Syrian Refugee Crisis were defining moments for the evolution of protection, participation and cash, other recent crises have brought relevance issues to the fore. More humanitarian response is taking place in urban settings and in middle-income countries, and there is an imperative to cover both more anticipatory and protracted action. Together, these are prompting a rethink about what’s most relevant in these contexts.

Both the Ebola Outbreak (in West Africa 2014–2016) and now in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (since 2019) and the refugee crisis in Europe jarred with the familiar humanitarian models, forcing agencies to recognise and respond to unfamiliar needs and unfamiliar contexts (non-traditional crises roundtable). And we can imagine that with future threats, geopolitical shifts, and reconfigurations of the humanitarian ecosystem, humanitarians will need to continually re-ask the relevance question and continually and intelligently iterate the approaches and tools to do so.

The relevance challenge should prompt a search for a different way of describing peoples’ relationship to aid, in terms that are not so simplistically transactional.

Performance and shortfalls

It will always be challenging to judge how the humanitarian system as a whole is doing on something as subjective and context specific as relevance. Writing about evaluating relevance in peacebuilding programmes, Mark Rogers notes that:

Context is central to the notion of relevance and understanding of context is largely derived from [...] a range of perspectives. Different points of view matter. In considering the same intervention in the same context, people will judge the degree of relevance differently. (Rogers, 2012: 2)

And then there is the problem of what constitutes success – can a benchmark for ‘relevant enough’ aid be sensibly set, given not only the ethics of such compromise but also the constraints of providing and the difficulties of measuring it? In the absence of common guidance and definitions to navigate these issues, evaluations of relevance are often divergent, ambiguous and biased (Abdelmagid et al., 2019).

Attempts to take the temperature of the system on relevance have found a mixed picture of health. The first commitment of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) is that ‘Humanitarian response is appropriate and relevant’. The CHS Alliance’s 2018 scorecard shows that against this commitment, agencies fell short of the mark: based on a set of verified evaluations, the average score against the ‘appropriate and relevant’ commitment was 2.7 of a possible 4.12 This is better than the score for some other commitments but still fails to meet the ‘fulfilment’ threshold score of 3 (CHS Alliance, 2019).
The State of the Humanitarian System 2018 report (SOHS) analysed the findings of a much wider set of evaluations, interviews with and surveys of aid providers and affected people and it found cause for both optimism and concern (ALNAP, 2018). From the perspective of the humanitarian aid-providers, evaluations suggested that – in line with the humanitarian imperative – interventions were generally successful at addressing people’s most urgent basic needs. Face-to-face interviews and a mobile survey of 5,000 aid recipients also found that, in the immediate aftermath of a displacement or crisis, people found the aid they received to be relevant to their priority needs – even if insufficient to fully meet these needs. And, strikingly, practitioners felt that relevance was the strongest aspect of their performance. But this positive finding came with major caveats: beyond a basic ‘standard package’ of life-saving assistance in the acute phase of emergencies, interventions were judged less relevant to people’s priority needs – they struggled to provide what people needed in protracted or unfamiliar crises. Evaluators and practitioners also reported that humanitarians fell short of meeting the needs of specific groups, particularly women, older people and people with disabilities, and were not strong on understanding, prioritising and responding to people’s protection needs (ALNAP, 2018). At the same time, evaluations can be limited in assessing relevance only in terms of whether the aid provided was relevant to most people; many do not question whether it was relevant for marginalised groups or appropriate to the context (Dillon, 2018).

Compared with what evaluations and practitioners tell us, how do affected people generally rate the relevance of humanitarian efforts? Tying to derive a global overview from snapshots of wide-ranging individual experiences is of course problematic, but the SOHS survey of aid recipients did reveal a general and significant perception gap between those giving and receiving aid. Unlike aid workers, recipients felt that performance in terms of relevance was poorer than in other areas, and 30% felt that providing the type of aid most needed was the area requiring most work (ALNAP, 2018). In their surveys, Ground Truth Solutions (2018b) asked different questions in a different way and, unsurprisingly, revealed different findings: they were markedly more negative. When they asked 8,400 people in person across seven countries whether the aid they received covered their most important needs, only 26% answered ‘completely’ or ‘mostly yes’. It is, however, hard to disentangle the problem of sufficiency or coverage from the problem of relevance here: people’s experience of unmet needs could be due to either or both.

Ultimately, people on the receiving end of aid are the best judges of whether it was relevant to their priority needs. This is not a controversial idea, yet humanitarian actors have been consistently poor at building this into how they evaluate success. Measuring how people perceive relevance is certainly never straightforward – judgement will be affected by who is asked what, where and how, and by the power dynamics and relationships to aid – but there are sophisticated consultation methods available to mitigate these issues. Despite this, evaluations still tend to be self-referential: they measure relevance against the priorities of the project and don’t routinely ask recipients for their views. According to the 2018 SOHS, affected people were asked their opinion on relevance in just 19 out of the 121 evaluations reviewed. This runs counter to commitments to accountability, and the Annual Meeting noted the need for a ‘deep cultural shift’, towards ‘clients, users, affected populations being the ones who determine the relevance of our work’ (High-level panel, pt.1).

12. This was based on average performance from 74 assessments (validated self-assessment or external reviews). Full methodology can be found in the 2018 Humanitarian Accountability Report and on the CHS website.

13. For the 2018 SOHS report, ALNAP commissioned GeoPoll to carry out mobile phone surveys with aid recipients in Afghanistan, DRC, Ethiopia, Iraq and Kenya. When asked if the assistance they received met their most important needs, of the 5,000 respondents across five countries, 39% answered ‘yes’ and 48% answered ‘partially’, an improvement on previous years.

14. This is perceptions gap is also evident in recent surveys by Ground Truths Solutions. For example, in Afghanistan in 2019, 77% of humanitarian staff responded positively to the question ‘Does the aid provided cover the most important needs of affected people?’, while only 47% of affected people responded positively (Ground Truths Solutions, 2019).


16. This global figure would have been much lower if a particularly positive score from Haiti were excluded.
1. HOW TO UNDERSTAND WHAT PEOPLE NEED? ASSESSING AND UNDERSTANDING

Understanding needs is the touchstone of relevance. To provide what people really need, you first have to know what that is. Humanitarian action should be based on needs (and on the most urgent and life-critical ones first) – this is a central tenet. The CHS calls for agencies to achieve relevance by acting on ‘objective and ongoing analysis of the context and stakeholders’, and ‘an impartial assessment of needs and risks’ (CHS Alliance, 2014).

However, there is no fixed definition of what a ‘humanitarian need’ is, beyond being something to do with human suffering related to crises and disasters (Good Humanitarian Donorship, 2003). Like humanitarianism itself, ‘need’ is a fluid sociopolitical construct under continuous renegotiation (Davey, 2014; Gordon and Donini, 2016; IFRC, 2018); it shape-shifts with the scale of ambition, the availability and ‘business model’ of the response, and the context of the crisis and the affected person. Even life-saving is open to interpretation (Swithern, 2018). Defining humanitarian need is beset with the basic question of whether we can know the needs of others (Ignatieff, 1984). Given how central it is to the humanitarian endeavour, some say it is surprising how little discussion there is on the concept of needs (Binder et al., 2013). The Annual Meeting heard a robust call to reopen this discussion by shifting from a preoccupation with needs to a focus on rights (High-level panel, pt.1). This could move the emphasis to people’s entitlements and providers’ obligations. And it could shift mindsets from a paternalistic and discretionary ‘framework of charity’ to a transformative and universal ‘framework of justice’ (Power and privilege session). Others argued, however, either that rights were already implicit in humanitarian principles and approaches to assessing needs (High-level panel, pt.1; see also ECHO, 2016) or that meaningfully pursuing structural justice was beyond the humanitarian scope.

Definitional uncertainties and debates about rights and needs haven’t stopped humanitarians investing significant effort in the important practicalities of understanding what people need in a crisis. Over the past decade, there has been progress in improving tools and methods to ensure that when a crisis happens, humanitarians have a more accurate and better coordinated picture of who needs what, where (Mowjee et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2017). In the past five years, needs overviews have become a separate phase in the coordinated Humanitarian Response Plan process, new models of multiagency and multisector assessments are in common use, and there are many examples of increasingly sophisticated techniques for gathering and analysing information (ACAPS, 2016a).

Yet despite these efforts, understanding of needs is still widely felt to be partial and flawed, riddled with ‘blind spots’ (see, e.g., ACAPS, 2016a; IFRC, 2018). This is partly inevitable and partly avoidable. Inevitably, humanitarians have to settle for ‘good enough’ given the environments and scale in which they are working; a ‘good enough’ that will change – on a sliding scale from possible to ideal – depending on the stage of the response (UNHCR, 2017) and the constraints of the context.
More avoidably, perhaps, it is a result of cultural, structural and technical shortcomings in how humanitarians work. According to the critiques we’ve seen above, who is offering what shapes which needs are assessed and how.

What does all this mean for our question of needs-based relevance? The 32nd Annual Meeting discussed five recurring aspects that are wrapped up in this problem of understanding needs as the basis for relevant response. These were: (1) how to get a comprehensive understanding of all the types of needs people face; (2) how to get an inclusive understanding of what these mean for different sections of the population; (3) how to get a holistic understanding of people's capacities and contexts; (4) how to get a dynamic understanding of changing needs; and (5) how to make sense of the polyphony of different versions of what’s needed.

### 1.1 Comprehensive understanding: all the priority needs

‘If you ask me what my priority needs are and I tell you, but then you bring me other things instead, I will take them, but you did not help me.’

Farmer near Timbuktu, Mali (Anderson et al., 2012)

#### 1.1.1 The issue and the challenge

Are humanitarians understanding the full range of greatest needs, according to what people themselves consider most relevant, rather than only those that agencies are conditioned to see? According to the supply-driven critique, they are not: understanding of what people most need is blinkered by a predetermined humanitarian offer. Armed with hammers, humanitarians only recognise nails (ACAPS, 2016a: 3); pre-programmed to respond to Ebola, they fail to see a measles epidemic (Debate on priority needs).

This may be partly due to technical competence (ALNAP, 2018; Obrecht, 2018). However, critics point to a deeper problem – governments and agencies 'straightjacket' (Anderson et al., 2012) what is considered a ‘humanitarian’ need, according to their own business models, resource constraints and world view (Darcy et al., 2013; IFRC, 2018; Konyndyk, 2018). In long-term aid settings – where the bulk of humanitarian response takes place – this becomes an entangled reciprocal dependence (Anderson et al., 2012), which can warp what the intended recipients of assistance see and say their priority needs are. As one Annual Meeting participant reflected, ‘There’s a strong familiarity bias because people don’t know all the options out there’ (Programme design session, 1.3).

The sector model bore much of the blame for the inability to change. Responders were seen to be blinkered by the scope, rigid delineation and implicit hierarchy of the sector-based approach. This includes needs that fell outside or cut across the sectors such as the need for documentation (High-level panel, pt.1; Saieh and Petersohn, 2019) as well as needs that were considered to be less life-saving within the sectors, such as education (Debate on priority needs). Local organisations showed how the real needs that they observed were shoe-horned into the siloed priorities of the international system (High-level panel, pt.1), with examples of civil society organisations' proposals being fundamentally changed to fit them, thus undermining their relevance (Al-Abdeh and Patel, 2019).

17. Almost three quarters of international humanitarian assistance goes to long-term recipient countries according to the Global Humanitarian Assistance report (Development Initiatives, 2018).
But there is clearly more to it than this. Even without the sector-based blinkers and straightjackets, there are reasons why certain needs go unseen. Blind spots arise not only because of the limits of which needs humanitarians are looking for, but also who looks for them and how. So-called ‘objective’ needs are in fact rooted in assumptions that are far from ‘value-neutral’ (Field, 2016), often disregarding requirements which are central to people’s recovery, dignity and social function (Protection roundtable, 3.4). Issues of culture and power resurface here. Language can be a specific barrier: in the response in north-eastern Nigeria, local enumerators hired to undertake surveys did not understand the English-formulated terms they were using – entire types of needs, including protection, can be literally lost in translation (Translators Without Borders, 2018). This is symptomatic of a wider cultural mismatch between those assessing and those experiencing needs.

Social factors can also prevent people from raising their priority needs. We know that fear and stigma lead to hidden needs around sexual and gender-based violence (IFRC, 2018). Studies have also shown how, for example among Rohingya refugees, stigma and shame mean that people do not express even serious mental health needs, and that families with malnourished children do not ask for assistance (Tay et al., 2018).

Calling for a comprehensive understanding of needs inevitably leads to questions about humanitarian parameters and concerns about ‘mandate creep’. It sets up the long-standing debate between those who fear that the necessarily narrow conception of emergency aid will face distraction, dilution and diversion of scarce resources (Rieff, 2002; DuBois, 2018) and those who say it must expand to reflect emerging realities (Ban Ki-moon, 2016; Fal-Dutra Santos, 2018).

Beyond mandate creep, comprehensive understanding creates two dilemmas: expectations and equity. The expectations dilemma is a recurrent one: how, when resources are stretched, to ask people about all their needs in the full knowledge that delivery is unlikely. This may be easily dismissed – provision won’t change if needs aren’t known. Harder to square is the equity dilemma: how to ensure global fairness (Binder et al., 2013) when people experience very different baselines of well-being and prioritise very different needs in different contexts.

1.1.2 Progress and the way forward

Knowing all this, what are humanitarians doing to address these blind spots and achieve a more comprehensive understanding? They are certainly recognising more types of needs. The evolution of protection is one example. Learning from the failures of the international response to the Rwanda Genocide and the Srebrenica Massacre, protection was premised on the fact that people needed safety and dignity as much as basic goods and services – and that humanitarians had a role in ‘seeing’ and responding to these needs (Slim and Bonwick, 2005). Early protection advocates cited the young girl in an Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs) camp wearing a sign which read: ‘We don’t need food. We need safety’ (Roberts, 1996).

Attempting to overcome the straightjackets of sectors and mandates, agencies have over the past decade been undertaking more and better multisector needs assessments. According to one review, the quality of the information in assessments has improved considerably (ACAPS, 2016b). However, this review measures the quality rather than the scope of what is included. Some raise the concern that these cumbersome multisector processes merely aggregate, rather than transcend, the views from the sector silos or impose simplicity on complexity.

18. In her book on ‘Invisible Women’, Criado Perez uses the social psychology term ‘projection bias’ to describe the tendency of a group in power to think that their experience is neutral and typical (Criado Perez, 2019: 271).
Lessons are also starting to be learned from beyond the humanitarian world. A wider conception of the requirements for well-being is rooted in many domestic welfare and international poverty approaches including multidimensional measures and basic necessities surveys (Benini, 2018). Similar approaches have been recently adapted and trialled in some humanitarian settings. The Humanitarian Emergency Settings Perceived Needs Scale is one quick way to measure a wide range of problem areas as perceived, expressed and prioritised by affected people themselves (WHO, 2011; Benini, 2018). The scale includes both needs which fit humanitarian sectors such as food or health and those which go across and beyond them such as information and respect. It can be part of an approach that starts by with the underlying need, not the predetermined material or technical solution: as one participant noted, ‘people don’t need energy. People need conversations with their loved ones, and for that, they need a mobile, and for that, they need electricity to charge it’ (Life-saving panel, 2.1).

1.2 Inclusive understanding: all the most affected people

‘Answer this question: is this program inclusive of all persons? Does it consider the particular characteristics of each vulnerable sector?’

Disabled persons organisation representative from the Philippines (Humanity & Inclusion, 2015: 19)

1.2.1 The issue and the challenges

Relevance is closely bound up with inclusion. Missing or misunderstanding whole sections of the population leads to misguided design and irrelevant action. This isn’t just a humanitarian problem, it is a global one: consider Caroline Criado Perez’s bestselling account of how a male-biased world view shapes a world full of products that are ill-suited or irrelevant to women (Criado Perez, 2019).

In the humanitarian world, we regularly hear about insufficient understanding of how crises affect different demographic groups – the very groups that are often most vulnerable in a crisis and the most pivotal in primary response. The 2018 World Disasters Report spelt out how ‘millions are left behind’ because of failures to take them into account (IFRC, 2018). By rendering their needs invisible, organisations are less driven to provide, and less accountable for providing, relevant and appropriate services. This goes to the heart of the principles of humanity and impartiality, which involve non-discrimination on the basis of identity and proportionately prioritising those in greatest need (Programme design session).

Missing or misunderstanding whole sections of the population leads to misguided design and irrelevant action.

There have long been concerns about how women and girls, older people and people with disabilities are excluded from the picture of needs. Necessary disaggregated data on sex, age, and disability is often missing (see, e.g., Williams, 2011; ACAPS, 2016a; ALNAP, 2018; IFRC, 2018). There is also growing awareness of failures to consider sexual or gender minorities with the continued use of gender binary markers on forms or household surveys that make assumptions about family composition, for example. The result, as case studies in Pakistan, the Philippines and Nepal show, may be harassment or exclusion from assistance (Devakula, 2018).

20. This study uses the term sexual and gender minorities to refer to what other papers variously refer to as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) or Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC), following the term used by the Humanitarian Advisory Group paper (Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2018).
Inclusion involves decisions about whose needs to understand, and how to understand them. These can be politically and culturally loaded and practically tricky. Impartiality can come up against cultural and legal hurdles (ALNAP, 2018). Power relations and social marginalisation within communities can make representativeness hard to navigate. Even in the most stable and accessible of humanitarian settings, seeing the needs of the most vulnerable groups of society is hard; with the added constraints and disruption faced in most emergencies, it is much harder – but not insurmountable. Humanitarians should be able to enter a response with an awareness of pre-existing marginalisation, as part of their locally grounded contextual understanding (Dwyer, 2019; see also section 1.3), and with an active approach to challenging marginalisation.

1.2.2 Progress and the way forward

There doesn’t seem to be a shortage of tools for considering gender, age and disability in assessments of humanitarian need. Gender tools and guidelines exist for most individual agencies and at the system-level; and the recent Humanitarian Inclusion standards for older people and persons with disabilities (Age and Disability Consortium, 2018) was followed by Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) guidelines on disability. It has taken much longer for sexual and gender minorities to be considered by humanitarian agencies, arguably due to a persistent heteronormative and gender-binary mindset (Dolan, 2014; Hagen, 2016) but this is starting to be incorporated into gender guidelines (Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2018). So why, despite this institutional awareness, is application so patchy? Discussions during the Annual Meeting surfaced three limitations – data, divisions and diversity – and suggested ways to overcome them.

In terms of data, at a technical level, some cite a problem of insufficient data and others an over-fixation on data that distracts from what can’t be counted (e.g. power dynamics) or what can be too risky to record (e.g. sexual orientation). But the Annual Meeting heard how waiting for better data and information shouldn’t be an excuse for inaction: as one participant put it ‘inclusion often seems to be premised on assessing everything, but we know enough to be inclusive and sensitive from the start’ (Feedback and closing panel). CARE’s Rapid Gender Analysis toolkit, for example, pre-positions secondary information, tools and data on demographics and social context (Bringing it all together discussion). Working assumptions can be made about the proportion of people who for example, have a disability or identify as gender non-binary (Legacies of power and inequality session pt.1; Tailoring services session, 1.1) Information about languages can also be part of a readily available data set (‘Story in 5’: Language) This is the start of an iterative process of purposive and participatory information-gathering.

Diversity within humanitarian organisations is central to building an inclusive worldview.

The division of inclusion into different ‘special interest’ groups, can be necessary to raise awareness, but it is also fundamentally problematic. The obvious danger is of a reductive ‘checklist’ approach to inclusion, which pre-selects and segregates people into ‘vulnerable’ groups – women, older people, people with disabilities – and pre-defines ways of counting and considering them (Cash-based aid workshop, 3.2). Indeed, as one participant put it, ‘we’ve looked at achieving equality as a tick-box exercise and divorced this from the broader goals of achieving a fair and inclusive response’ (Tailoring services panel, 1.1). This risks not only excluding people, but also harmfully stereotyping.

21. The Humanitarian Advisory Group advises that a rule of thumb should be used ‘assume at least 5% of the affected population are sexual and gender minorities, and likely to be among the most vulnerable. Don’t collect data on sexual and gender minorities directly from the community unless it is safe to do so’ (Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2018).
22. For example, one participant suggested that in general 15% of any given population has a disability, and that they tend to be disproportionately affected by crises, so that this could be used a reasonable starting point for programme design, ahead of more detailed assessments.
them (Hyndman, 2010; Ahmad and Eckenwiler, 2018; Hilhorst et al., 2018) – replacing one ‘cookie-cutter’ approach (IFRC, 2018) with three others. And of course, it creates inclusion-overload: too many vulnerable groups to survey and too little time, skills and support to include them all (WaterAid et al., 2016; CHS Alliance, 2019). A review of the global shelter cluster’s mainstreaming of disability inclusion found a lack of basic understanding, dedicated guidance, staff time and resources (Tailoring services panel, 1.1). How, then, to take differences into account without falling into this trap? One solution is to take an ‘intersectional’ approach, which considers the multiple ‘personal, political and social dimensions which intersect our lives and shape our experience of power’ (Slim, 2018). Intersectionality is now included in IASC disability guidelines (IASC, 2019) and is cited in ICRC’s approach (High-level panel, pt.1). Shortcuts may be necessary and inevitable in the early stages of crises, but nuanced social analysis should be the aim.

Diversity within humanitarian organisations is central to building an inclusive worldview. Many argued that it is a structural and cultural issue, a humanitarian sector which defaults to seeing heterogenous ‘communities’ (IFRC, 2014), that is rooted in predominantly Western (Rao, 2019), male, hetero- and cis-normative experience (Power and inequality session). This is linked to poor diversity in the profile of humanitarian staff – among leadership and in the field (CHS Alliance, 2018; IFRC, 2018; HPNW, 2019) – and arguably to the sexism and racism challenges that #AidToo, a public conversation about harassment, has highlighted. The way forward is self-evident. At the level of senior leadership, one participant was clear:

If we’re not diverse, we can pretty much guarantee that our actions are going to fail. If humanitarian leadership is not made up of people who genuinely understand the need to advance equality and why this is critical to relevant response, maybe it’s time for us to look for new leaders. (Tailoring responses session, 1.1)

At the level of field staff, it extends to the inclusion of minority ethnic groups – giving the example of the Dalit in the Indian Ocean Tsunami response, one participant noted that responses are bound to be biased if frontline workers are all from dominant groups (Power and marginalisation roundtable 1.4). Research in the Philippines and Jordan suggests that ‘legitimizing the work that women already do as frontline humanitarian responders and increasing their formal involvement in agencies’ will lead to better outcomes and challenge perceptions of victimhood (UNHCR, 2019).

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23. The ISAC Guidelines define intersectionality as an ‘analytic framework that demonstrates how forms of oppression (such as racism, sexism, ableism) overlap, defining unique social groups. An intersectional approach assumes that harms and violations associated with disability, race and ethnicity, gender, or other identities cannot be understood sufficiently by studying them separately’ (IASC, 2019: 8).

24. Cisgender (or cis) is a term for people whose gender identity matches the sex that they were assigned at birth. Cisnormativity is the assumption that all, or almost all, individuals are cisgender.
1.3 Holistic understanding: the whole person

‘They have never allowed me to express my ideas. I just go and collect the aid if they have something for me.’
Female refugee, 22, in Puntland, Somalia (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018)

1.3.1 The issue and the challenge

Defining people solely in terms of their needs is fundamentally problematic. First, it is dehumanising, reducing people to needy and passive victims, rather than rounded and active stakeholders and rights holders (High-level panel, pt.1; see also Harrell-Bond, 2002; Grünewald and de Geoffroy, 2008; DuBois, 2018). Second, it fails to understand the whole person, their capacities, culture and context. It also reduces the odds of designing support that is relevant and appropriate to them and increases the odds of doing harm (High-level panel, pt.1). Despite this, the entire needs-based premise of the humanitarian endeavour is assessing what’s lacking (Darcy and Hofman, 2003), not forming a holistic view of what’s there. According to Anderson, it is far from what is really required – an approach that ‘starts from what people have, not what they need’, where ‘outsiders’ integrate the ‘assets and capacities of insiders to develop contextually appropriate strategies’ (Anderson et al., 2012: 137).

We see consequences of a default ‘deficit-needs’ understanding (Life-saving panel, 2.1) in many humanitarian situations. In terms of capacities, for example, assessments often fail to consider the livelihoods, societal roles and even technical savvy of older people (Cash-based aid workshop, 3.2), assuming dependency of all over-60s (IFRC, 2018). There is also the problematic tendency to equate ‘women’ with ‘vulnerability’ (Hilhorst et al., 2018). As Al-Abdeh and Patel note, agencies need to stop defining them solely as victims and understand their agency: ‘it is essential women, and broader local civil society, are recognised as active agents in their own lives who have aspirations, ideas, and thoughts for the post-conflict societies they want to build’ (Al-Abdeh and Patel, 2019: 248).

In terms of context,25 a lack of understanding complex urban environments has compromised many responses including the West Africa Ebola Outbreak response (Campbell, 2018). In terms of culture,26 the spread of the Ebola virus in Sierra Leone in 2014, has been partly attributed to an initial failure to understand the cultural importance of local burial practices (IFRC, 2014) and sociocultural understanding continues to be a major challenge in the fight against Ebola misinformation in DRC (Leach and Bedford, 2019).

Shifting from a needs-only understanding to a holistic understanding raises inevitable questions of how to do this and how far to go: the stage, scale and nature of different crises will mean setting the parameters in different places. It also raises questions of gathering the right information and and considering what is usefully, feasibly and ethically enough to know.

25. ALNAP defines context as ‘The environment and circumstances within which something happens and which can help to explain it’ (Campbell, 2018). It includes six elements: economy and livelihoods; politics and governance; services and infrastructure; social and cultural; space and settlements; and stakeholder dynamics.

26. In the 2014 World Disaster Report on the theme of culture and risk, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) offers the definitions: ‘Culture consists of beliefs, attitudes, values and their associated behaviours, that are shared by a significant number of people in hazard-affected places. Culture in relation to risk refers to the ways that people interpret and live with risk, and how their perceptions, attitudes and behaviour influence their vulnerability to hazards’ (IFRC, 2014).
1.3.2 Progress and the way forward

As humanitarians respond to unfamiliar crises in unfamiliar settings, they are less able to rely on familiar assumptions and may be learning to look around more at context. With more responses in urban settings, including in middle-income countries, there are now more contextual analysis tools than ever before – ranging from rapid perception-based assessments to longer in-depth approaches (Campbell, 2018). The rise of cash-based programming (see section 2.1) is also bringing more awareness and analysis of local market dynamics (Juillard, 2018). But routine application appears to be a long way off: the existence of tools doesn’t automatically mean uptake, and uptake doesn’t mean automatically mean quality analysis (Campbell, 2018). As we’ve seen in section 1.2 on inclusion, staff in high-urgency, low-resource humanitarian responses already feel overwhelmed by a ‘dusty stack’ (ibid.) of guidelines – making ‘holistic’ seem like a very tall order (see Meaux and Osofian 2016; Goddard and Annaraj, 2017).

Understanding people’s capacities doesn’t appear to come with a standalone set of guidelines and approaches. Instead, it is most commonly integrated into the vulnerabilities and capacities assessments used by many agencies, with capacities understood as being part of assessments (see, e.g., ACAPS, 2014) and of an inclusive and participatory approach (Brown and Donini, 2014; Humanity & Inclusion, 2015). However, the findings from such capacity assessments rarely feature in situation or needs analyses. In these, analysis of capacities tends to refer to national or local organisations’ or institutions’ capacity to respond to the crisis, rather than to people’s capacities and active roles in their societies.

People have resources and strategies for survival and resilience, yet these are not routinely on the ‘needs-extractive’ assessment radar

There was a strong sense among participants at the Annual Meeting that being more locally led is critical to generating a more holistic understanding of context. Employing more anthropologists would no doubt help international organisations to develop a more complete picture (Colson, 2011; Mosel and Holloway, 2019), but this doesn’t overcome the problems of a largely foreign-led workforce with limited knowledge and high turnover. The partial attempts of internationals to make sense of snapshots of peoples’ culture, history and experience cannot substitute for the linguistic and contextual knowledge of local staff. Of course, local knowledge is not without its prejudices and blind spots and so it must go hand in hand with a framework of ‘appreciative enquiry’ that considers the solutions, processes and resources that already exist (Protection roundtable, 3.4).

Finding out about self-recovery is an obvious place to start. Humanitarians are not the first responders; in fact, they are usually ‘bit players’ in people’s lives (Life-saving panel, 2.1; Programme design session, 1.3) and any crisis may have begun long before internationals labelled it as such. People have resources and strategies for survival and resilience, yet these are not routinely on the ‘needs-extractive’ assessment radar: ‘We don’t go as often asking, “Okay, how do you deal with it?” or, “What do you think that are your strengths, and how they could help deal with this particular problem?”’ (Protection roundtable). Lessons can be drawn from shelter and protection programming where recognising people’s self-recovery and self-protection is an accepted part of the lexicon, if not always part of practice (Life-saving panel, 2.1; Protection roundtable). And as we heard throughout the Annual Meeting, here too local partnerships are essential to understanding strategies and structures. As one participant explained:

We can predict where you could go in and support that local response which will happen anyway, with or without or support [...] it’s quite easy if you have good national colleagues – they would know which are the small civil society structures you can plug into. (Power and inequality session)
People have resources and strategies for survival and resilience, yet these are not routinely on the ‘needs-extractive’ assessment radar.
1.4 Dynamic understanding: for the duration of the crisis

‘We need to develop our own means to feel more comfortable. Giving us something after each disaster is not the solution. You need to accompany us in agriculture.’

58-year-old male resident in Haiti (South department)

1.4.1 The issue and the challenge

Humanitarian action takes place in volatile settings, usually over many years. The revised DAC criterion for relevance now explicitly includes a time dimension – looking at the extent to which interventions continue to be relevant ‘if circumstances change’, noting that it ‘requires analysing any changes in the context to assess the extent to which the intervention can be (or has been) adapted to remain relevant’ (OECD DAC, 2019: 7). So, how can humanitarians ensure that their understanding keeps pace with changing requirements so that their support stays relevant?

We know that crises change over time – whether this is the escalation of a civil war, the patterns of a drought or the spread of disease. We know that people’s situations change over the course of a crisis - this includes changes in material needs, such as moving from shelter and food to housing and seeds, but also includes changes in non-material needs. For example, World Health Organization guidelines assume that mental health disorders will increase over time in complex emergencies, with the chronic and cyclical stressors of protracted crisis (Tay et al., 2018). We also know that people’s relationships to aid are dynamic, often becoming more negative as frustrations build and priorities shift from immediate provision to concerns about how they are treated and what the future holds (Anderson et al., 2012). Surveys reveal how the top unmet needs change from one year to the next (Ground Truth Solutions, 2019a).

However, the SOHS 2018 reveals that humanitarian action does better at relevance in the immediate than the long term, better at the early acute stages than during protracted emergencies (ALNAP, 2018). This, it suggests, is partly because of an entrenched approach that sees understanding needs as something to be done upfront in one-off, intensive assessments. It is a rigid linear approach to the programme cycle embedded in the coordination process for humanitarian requirements that, according to Obrecht, is based on the mistaken assumption that ‘good quality assessments at the outset of a project will ensure the relevance and effectiveness [...] throughout its lifespan’ (Obrecht, 2018: 48). The result is a set of resource intensive snapshots (Campbell and Knox Clarke, 2018) rather than a dynamic learning process.

Staying relevant therefore demands a more continuous approach to collecting information and updating our understanding of what people want and need, as part of an adaptive approach (see section 2.4). It involves thinking of assessments as one of a set of ways of understanding peoples’ experiences, needs and views, alongside ongoing monitoring, feedback and accountability processes. The evidence suggests that, beyond regular situation reports, there is considerably less

28. The explanatory notes to this 2019 revision say that ‘We make the time dimension explicit in the definition, because relevance can be evaluated both at the time of the intervention design and later. This is useful to include because adapting and responding to complex or changing circumstances is important for effectiveness. The previous version of relevance was often used as a one-off assessment against policy priorities.’
29. For example, in Afghanistan in 2017 people reported that their most important unmet needs were shelter, energy and food. In 2018, these unmet needs had changed to food, protection and cash. Changes in unmet needs from year to year is visible in all six countries in which Ground Truth Solutions collected data during 2018 and 2019 to track the Grand Bargain commitments through the perspective of aid recipients (Ground Truth Solutions, 2019a).
institutionalised effort invested in this ongoing understanding. Assessments are privileged over monitoring at a system-wide level and at a project level (see, e.g., Warner, 2017) and what monitoring there is tends to be focused on checking quality of outputs, rather than evolution of needs (Turnbull, 2016, in Obrecht, 2018).

Many of the practical constraints to dynamic understanding are familiar. Agencies have created separate functions for ‘monitoring’ and ‘doing’, which can make it challenging to use monitoring data for iterative decision-making during implementation (Dillon, 2019). When combined with a shortage of resources, agencies feel compelled to make investment trade-offs between ‘monitoring’ and ‘doing’, which only exacerbates the problem. A lack of specialised skills, access or tools mean that staff are ill-equipped to listen to and understand needs on an ongoing basis. The constant flux in crises means agencies feel overwhelmed and unclear as to how often is often enough when it comes to monitoring. Ethical considerations also prompt questions about how much to intrude on people with repeated surveys – striking the right balance is critical. Involving people in constant monitoring may well worsen their relationship with aid over time, unless agencies communicate back to them and act on what they learn by providing more relevant assistance. One participant recounted the words of a woman in Ethiopia who had been the subject of repeated surveys: ‘Okay, you guys again with your book? Isn’t it full by now?’ (Programme design session, 1.3).

1.4.2 Progress and the way forward

Good practice is emerging with renewed attention to accountability and adaptive management, new approaches and new examples. Through the CHS on quality and accountability and the Grand Bargain’s ‘participation revolution’ workstream, there is a clearer expectation that agencies will proactively collect solicited and unsolicited feedback throughout the project lifespan (Programme design session, 1.3) and build in two-way communication in all phases of aid programmes (Tamminga et al., 2019). Agencies have implemented a wide range of initiatives to make this happen (Metcalfe-Hough and Poole, 2018). In separate developments, evolving approaches to risk-based or early-action approaches are bringing more sophisticated tools for ongoing monitoring of indicators of risks and threats (Tozier de la Poteria et al., 2018) and moving towards a more phased approach over the duration of a crisis (Hailey et al., 2018).

These various initiatives and commitments have yet to add up to a shift in the balance from upfront assessments to ongoing understanding. This may be partly because there are few incentives to make this shift: donors do not routinely demand or resource ongoing monitoring and may indeed encourage a fixed trajectory. There is also no institutionalised approach to monitoring in the UN-coordinated humanitarian response cycle to mirror that for upfront needs overviews (Switherm, 2018). Part of the solution, suggested at the Annual Meeting, is for donors and agencies to move away from the linear tyranny of the log frame approach to programme management and to embrace iteration and uncertainty (‘Story in 5: Decolonising project management): adaptive management approaches can help with this (see section 2.4).
Part of the solution, suggested at the Annual Meeting, is for donors and agencies to move away from the linear tyranny of the log frame approach to programme management and to embrace iteration and uncertainty.

Committing to continual listening and monitoring involves being both braver and smarter in capturing information – braver as in not fearing negative or ‘wrong’ feedback (the worry characterised by one participant as ‘but what if they ask for something we don’t have?’ (Life-saving panel, 2.1); and smarter as in being more thoughtful about what, how and why to monitor (Programme design session; Obrecht, 2019). The ‘how’ has to involve the sustained presence of local responders: protracted crises offer the opportunity to support strong partnerships with local organisation who are in the right places, with the right skills and languages and over the right-times frames to monitor changes and maintain two-way communication (Feedback and closing panel; Bringing it all together discussion). The ‘why’ has to involve collecting information that is actively useful for affected people, a reminder that assessing and assisting are not distinct. As a presenter in the programme design session suggested, the right information can support sustainable and self-directed solutions:

We must make sure that what we are monitoring, investigating, evaluating is culturally relevant not just to the donors but to the individuals that are most affected. If this information is accessible to those who need it on the ground, they can then use it in the self-directed advocacy they’re doing on a more long-term basis, to bring about systemic change even after humanitarian actors have left the scene. (Programme design session)
1.5 Polyphonic understanding: all the narratives

‘They only interview the IDP camp administrator, but not us beneficiaries directly.’

60-year-old male IDP in Puntland, Somalia

1.5.1 The issue and the challenge

Each of the dimensions of relevance involves listening to multiple perspectives in complex, dynamic situations. How then do humanitarians manage this? How can they listen to these many coexisting and sometimes competing narratives from institutions and affected people in order to hear what is most relevant? Can it be a polyphony\(^\text{31}\) – wherein different voices each have their part – rather than a cacophony or single dominant voice?

There are two levels to this problem. First, how do decision-makers make sense of the multiple narratives and sources of information about needs? Second, how do those information sources manage the multiple narratives they hear from affected people? Both levels raise the critical issue of who gets to be the dominant ‘expert’ on what’s most relevant – a recurrent theme throughout both the Annual Meeting and this study.

Making sense of multiple narratives is hard, particularly for a system geared towards singular, decisive action. The politics of the system clearly make it difficult to listen to multiple perspectives, the imperative from donors and agencies is to establish a single, dominant version of events. There are practical and skills constraints too, not only the obvious issue of speed and efficiency, but also the fact that the analytical capacity of donors and agencies is clearly limited. It is easy to see how simplicity is the default mode.

But instead of confronting this, aid agencies tend to ‘edit their understanding of reality to suit narrow purposes’ (Ramalingam, 2013, in Obrecht, 2018: 26). So, as well as imposing a ‘myth of community’ on the heterogenous populations they encounter (IFRC, 2014), aid workers default to an over-simplified narrative that can often close off problems as we’ve seen in the ‘comprehensive understanding’ section. One Annual Meeting participant referred to the social science concept of ‘bounded rationality’ in discussing humanitarian decision-making – where, for example, managers who are under pressure to solve complex problems default to simply satisfying the most powerful stakeholders. This in effect means satisfying donors and internal management and leads to ‘blunders in programme delivery’ (Power and marginalisation roundtable, 1.4).

1.5.2 Progress and the way forward

The humanitarian system is not short of descriptions of situations and needs, and the range and methodological sophistication of these appears to be growing. In any given crisis there is a proliferation of information generated: data on different aspects of population, risk and crisis impacts; single, joint and coordinated assessments. For example, the needs overview for the 2017–2018 Haiti Humanitarian Response Plan, noted 100 needs assessments, and the one for Chad in 2019 noted 29 multisector assessments alone.

A complicated array of documentation does not equate to a complex understanding. The problem, many argue, is not quantity but quality and comparability. Grand Bargain signatories committed

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31. In music, polyphony is the ability to simultaneously combine a number of distinct parts or notes in a single piece.
to ‘coordinate and streamline data collection’ to ensure this, but there has been limited evidence of progress on this front (Metcalfe-Hough and Poole, 2018). As the SOHS 2018 notes, there is a lack of convergence in the current, ‘highly atomised system’ (ALNAP, 2018); there are too many divergent approaches and not enough investment in enabling the connections. As the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS) argues, the effort put into generating assessments is disproportionate to the effort put into making collective sense and use of them (ACAPS, 2016a).

The same is true in other areas of data collection, in particular from the proliferation of hotlines and other feedback mechanisms. More feedback is only a good thing when it leads to better – and, as we have seen, more dynamic – understanding that is used to deliver a better response: one agency noted that their community feedback had generated over 400,000 data points but observed there was an ‘obsession with pushing people to collect data but less obsession in using the data that’s right on the table’ (Decision-making roundtable, 2.4). Another Annual Meeting presenter reflected on how the power asymmetry with local staff meant that the feedback they gathered was edited out, with negative feedback on exclusion and inappropriate response ‘filed away’ (‘Story in 5’: Local aid workers).

At the same time, there is an urge to overlay a single narrative onto the multiple assessments. Some Annual Meeting participants noted the need for a standard, comparable data set and narrative in order to prioritise impartially and equitably between crises (Debate on priority needs). The Grand Bargain called for a single overall assessment of needs for each crisis. But this has proven to be both controversial and intractable (Metcalfe-Hough and Poole, 2018), which is perhaps inevitable in a system where who controls the needs narrative is tied up with who controls the market share of the response (Konyndyk, 2018). A single overall assessment of needs is also practically difficult in contexts where there is high uncertainty and little consensus on what the needs are. ACAPS argues that the way forward lies in a two-fold solution: first, independent needs assessments should be conducted by those who are not involved in delivering the response; and second, an ‘assessment ecosystem which can give contrasting and complementary perspectives to decision-makers’ should be cultivated (ACAPS, 2016a).

Perhaps this relies too much on the current mode of assessments. Juxtaposing multiple assessments won’t automatically mean that multiple voices are heard within them. Adding up limited narratives doesn’t equate to a picture of the complex whole. Many argue that it demands a fundamentally different model of engaging, listening and analysing – one which is less reliant on extracting pre-defined information from people and then analysing it externally (CDAC Network, 2017; IFRC, 2018; IFRC and Ground Truth Solutions, 2018). As Farida Bena notes in her blog on ‘who is the expert?’ (Bena, 2019), even perception surveys have a limited and top-down agenda: the researcher defines the parameters, decides what’s valid, edits what gets heard and has the last word. Bena questions the very premise of the interview format, suggesting that ‘a more just world is also one in which we can simply have a dialogue between peers’ (ibid).

Following this line of thought, Annual Meeting participants discussed a range of monitoring and evaluation methods that aim to move beyond collecting information against pre-defined indicators. Approaches such as realist evaluation, critical systems heuristics and agent-based modelling are explicitly designed to incorporate multiple conflicting answers to the question ‘does this work for you?’ (Dillon, 2019). Likewise, the use of in-depth and open-ended enquiry methods has been piloted by organisations such as CARE Canada, who have developed a ‘rolling profiles’ methodology to guide qualitative data collection from affected populations. Although use of these methods is nascent, they demonstrate an attempt by some agencies to move beyond constructing single narratives about people’s experiences and towards understanding the multiple perspectives within the communities they seek to serve.
2. HOW TO PROVIDE WHAT PEOPLE NEED? DECIDING AND DESIGNING

If relevance is about being in line with people's priority needs, all the aspects of understanding outlined in section 1, must be translated into decision-making, design and action. So, how do agencies and donors decide what the most important needs are and how best to meet them in the most relevant way? Opaque and obliquely according to the literature on humanitarian decision-making, which argues that the relationship between needs assessments and programme design is unclear, indirect and inconsistent, and more influenced by existing preferences and biases than a clear process of engaging with the evidence (Darcy et al., 2013; Maxwell et al., 2013; de Geoffroy et al., 2015).

The word ‘priority’ in the DAC definition of relevance is loaded: prioritisation is a live problem, inherent in assessment as well as in action. The clear logic and imperative of humanitarian action involve triage, responding first and foremost to immediate, life-saving needs. But this is by no means clear-cut. Discussions at the Annual Meeting questioned many assumptions about priority action: emergency shelter might save fewer lives than reducing smoke-inhalation from stoves; psychosocial support can be critical where trauma drives up suicide or malnutrition rates (Life-saving panel, 2.1).

Humanitarians continue to grapple with these prioritisation questions. In the face of overstretched resources, there are some initiatives to introduce greater transparency and better tools into the processes of deciding what and where the priorities lie. New severity metrics have been developed and some Humanitarian Response Plans are starting to introduce phased prioritisation (Swithin, 2018). To open the black box of decision-making between assessments and action, more agencies are using response analysis frameworks (Mohiddin and Smith, 2016: 7; CaLP, 2018).

Yet however clear the methodologies, prioritising and deciding what to do is still fraught with trade-offs and dilemmas. There are trade-offs between meeting immediate and longer-term needs and between meeting the needs of the few and the many – the people in the most extreme need and the most people in need – what Binder et al. term the ‘principled’ and ‘utilitarian’ approaches (Binder et al., 2013). Advocates of ‘effective altruism’ (see, e.g., MacAskill, 2015) may present an attractive path out of these dilemmas by spending aid on qualitatively measurable outcomes, but arguably don’t tackle the question of how this relates to what’s most relevant from the perspective of affected people – especially when this is as hard to quantify as, for example, safety.

Who gets to decide is central to how decisions are made. As we’ve seen, there is concern about the dominance of large agencies in determining sector-wide responses. And, at the other end of the power ladder, there is also concern about participation with ‘needs being determined and programme design shaped by donor priorities and the perspectives of aid professionals, rather than by the views of affected people’ (ALNAP, 2018: 163). There are bound to be genuine tensions between people’s experience and external expertise, but a lack of engagement is bound to result in responses that are and feel less fair, relevant and appropriate (Anderson et al., 2012).
The lines between assessing, deciding, designing and doing what’s relevant, although a helpful structure for this study, are blurred in reality. Assessments can be done in such a way that fulfils people’s priority requirements for dignity and solidarity. Assistance can be provided in such a way that it enables people to decide how best to direct it, and in a way that iteratively learns what changing priorities are. As humanitarians grapple with how to best design and provide relevant assistance, five aspects emerge from the practice and the literature and formed the basis for discussion at the Annual Meeting: providing choice of assistance; tailoring assistance; and providing assistance in a way that is co-designed with recipients, that is adaptive to changing needs, and that is complementary to other efforts to address complex needs.

2.1 Choice of assistance: repertoire of provision

‘It feels like whatever they bring is compulsory. If you don’t like it, you will be starving.’

22-year-old female refugee from South Sudan in Uganda

2.1.1 The issue and the challenge

If people’s needs are wide-ranging, diverse and – as we have seen in section 1.4 – dynamic, then the repertoire of assistance on offer must be too. However, the humanitarian system tends to default to a basic ‘standard package’. While of crucial importance to many people in many crises, this standard package can be of limited relevance to many others (ALNAP, 2018). This is seen within archetypal humanitarian settings – for example, of shelter programmes ignoring health needs (Mutunga et al., 2015, in Obrecht, 2018). It is also seen in recent crises that challenged the templates of humanitarian needs and response – from the treatment for non-communicable diseases in urban conflicts to communication and legal support for refugees and migrants in Europe (DeLargy, 2016).

Ultimately, broadening the choice of support available is important. But there are obvious barriers to agencies being prepared to consider a wider set of solutions. These barriers go beyond habit and mandate and involve the practicalities of having the expertise to provide new types of assistance, or the resources to grow this. There are also deeper conceptual dilemmas that relate to setting the parameters of this choice – what types of assistance, particularly in protracted crises, should be considered ‘within scope’ (IFRC, 2018) of the humanitarian endeavour, rather than the responsibility of others.

There are two approaches to increasing choice. These are not mutually exclusive, and both challenge the ‘standard package’. The first approach is to expand the humanitarian repertoire to include modalities that allow people to make choices themselves; and the second is to expand the humanitarian repertoire to include new types of specific support. The latter involves ‘strategic flexibility’ – being open to responding to a wider set of problems – and ‘service or product flexibility’ – being open to providing a wider set of goods or services (Obrecht, 2019).

2.1.2 Progress and the way forward

Cash-based programming is one way of broadening choice. It aims to speak directly to the question of relevance, to ‘better link the responses that humanitarians deliver with the needs that people face’ (High Level Panel on Cash, 2015: 13). In its most unrestricted form, cash can offer the potential to relocate choice to affected people, giving them the means to decide which of their market-based needs to meet first and what is the most appropriate way of meeting them (Julliard et al., forthcoming). Cash is now far from the outlier experiment it once was: it is now a mainstream part of most major responses.

Yet, offering choice through cash still encounters resistance in a sector-based system (Steets et al., 2016; Bailey and Harvey, 2017), which has variously been attributed to the territoriality of agencies and a lack of trust in people to decide what is best for them (CaLP, 2018). The fact that ‘multipurpose cash’ – what would simply be called ‘money’ in other contexts – proves contentious (CaLP, 2018), is arguably a result of the clash between the principle of enabling choice and the engrained model of delivering discrete packages of assistance towards fixed measurable outcomes.

Humanitarians will of course always need to provide a wider set of support options beyond cash. Every situation requires a sophisticated response analysis of the context, needs, markets and options (McHattie, 2012; Maxwell et al., 2007). Clearly, cash programming is not suitable for all needs in all settings and nor was it ever purported to be: it doesn’t automatically address marginalised people or needs, often failing to consider them (Browne, 2014; Berg and Seferis, 2015; Julliard et al., forthcoming; Cash-based aid workshop, 3.2); not all crisis settings have markets to support it, and not all essentials can be cash bought – for example communal facilities (Smith and Mohiddin, 2015; Gentilini, 2016; Global Shelter Cluster/Global WASH Cluster, 2017). And of course designing cash allocations is not free from judgements about needs: amounts are calculated according to minimum expenditure baskets of essential, universal basics, and these are contestable – for example SIM cards might be regarded as a life-saving basic by recipients but not by agencies (Power and inequality session).

So, in parallel to cash, to what extent is the repertoire increasing beyond the ‘standard package’ of goods and services? The range of assistance available does appear to have expanded. Tracing the evolution of protection (Niland et al., 2015) and education towards the wide acceptance today that provision of both is a core part of the humanitarian response shows how far these have progressed in the past 20 years. Recent crises have also pushed the boundaries – for example, in the response to the Rohingya refugee crisis, where psychological support is increasingly part of the package of essential health services (Tay et al., 2018). While these innovations are promising, many Annual Meeting participants noted how far the sector still has to go in routinely offering alternatives to the standard package. The rise of cash brings lessons for the full repertoire of humanitarian assistance. It challenges agencies to rethink how they decide what to do, rather than sticking to the default. The high bar that has been set on deciding whether and how to ‘do cash’ has brought renewed focus to response analysis and response design approaches. If the general humanitarian tendency is to offer the same solution whatever the problem, then these approaches offer ways to decide what the best solution might be and how to overcome practical constraints to offering it. Starting with an open mind to the problem, rather than a closed set of solutions, might lead to

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33. For example, in Lebanon in 2014, more than 30 different aid agencies provided cash transfers and vouchers for 14 different objectives, ranging from winterisation and food to legal assistance (High Level Panel on Cash, 2015).
34. At the extreme end of this, there are examples of using cash as a diagnostic tool – cash experts have reported agencies seeing what people spend it on with a view to then delivering these goods in-kind.
35. For a timeline of the evolution of education in emergencies, see https://timeline.ineesite.org/#event-education-in-emergencies-then-and-now
36. However, while there is innovation, the standard package still dominates. One review of urban programming in Lebanon and Jordan concludes that it falls short of responding to the ‘new urban reality’, ‘failing to meet the needs of both displaced persons and host communities’ (Saliba, 2016). At the same time, a system review of protection revealed widespread frustration, noting how in the face of political, access and resource constraints there remains a default to ‘ready-made approaches’ (Niland et al., 2015).
what one participant called ‘an ethics of refusal’ that guides humanitarians through deciding and explaining when what people ask for falls outside what they can feasible, responsibly, competently or ethically deliver (Life-saving panel, 2.1).

The cash question also prompted discussion of informed choice, which extends to all forms of support. People can’t make real choices unless they are properly informed (Monitoring and evaluating session, 2.3). For example, surveys revealed that many recipients were unable to plan how to meet their needs because they were given no information about why, what for, or how long they would receive assistance (cash-based aid workshop, 3.2). Armed with the right information, people may choose to prioritise differently. For example, in earthquake-prone settings, people may have very rational reasons for prioritising education over seismic banding for their homes (Bringing it all together discussion).

Starting with an open mind to the problem, rather than a closed set of solutions, might lead to what one participant called ‘an ethics of refusal’ that guides humanitarians through deciding and explaining when what people ask for falls outside what they can feasible, responsibly, competently or ethically deliver.

The way forward for actively enabling choice therefore involves sharing information, knowledge and expertise in ways that best support people’s agency to decide. In the case of drinking water, for example, this might mean sharing expertise and jointly exploring alternatives to imposed water chlorination; in the case of cash, CARE shared the model of ‘labelled cash’, which supports people to budget but doesn’t dictate or enforce spending priorities (Cash-based aid session, 3.2). This implies a radical shift in the humanitarian role ‘from the provider of goods to the provider of information’ (Life-saving panel, 2.1), or the facilitator of choice.
Starting with an open mind to the problem, rather than a closed set of solutions, might lead to what one participant called ‘an ethics of refusal’ that guides humanitarians through deciding and explaining when what people ask for falls outside what they can feasible, responsibly, competently or ethically deliver.
2. Tailored assistance: shaping provision to people

‘Women cannot go to where the aid distributions are. Also, when orphans are not present, they are left out from receiving aid and no one considers them later.’

Male returnee, Afghanistan

2.2 The issue and the challenge

Tailoring assistance is central to the DAC definition of relevance and appropriateness (Beck, 2006: 21). Whatever the type of assistance on offer, and no matter how wide the choice, ‘blanket delivery’ to populations based on default assumptions will mean that it misses or is irrelevant or inappropriate for many, including the most marginalised people. One study on the continued blanket provision of food, non-food items and cash after the 2015 Nepal Earthquake showed how it excluded many marginalised people including Dalit and female-headed households (Barber, 2016a). These groups were missed for several reasons: they went unseen in assessments; the distribution of assistance was on the basis of home ownership and proof of citizenship, which they did not hold; and standard payments and packages didn’t take additional needs into account.

Assessing humanitarian performance in meeting the needs of different population groups, the SOHS showed that tailoring remains a challenge for humanitarians. It found marked improvement in tailoring programmes for women and girls, but it also found that humanitarians still often fail to ‘get the basics right’ and are much worse at ensuring access to relevant assistance for older people and people with disabilities (ALNAP, 2018: 141). One Annual Meeting participant summarised that in relation to gender, the errors still outweigh the achievements, with a long list of ‘examples where we’ve failed shamelessly to take roles and dynamics into account, wasted money and made problems worse’ (Tailoring services panel, 1.1). An indication of how far we have to go is that something as normal as menstrual hygiene often falls under the heading of ‘innovation’ rather than investment in basic good programming.

This chimes with the findings of the World Disasters Report, which highlights examples of how untailored responses leave older people with food that they can’t eat, healthcare that doesn’t treat their conditions, and livelihoods options they can’t access (IFRC, 2018). It cites data from a survey of people with disabilities, which revealed that targeted services were only available to between 24% and 31% of respondents (Humanity & Inclusion, 2015). Other studies have shown how assistance is not designed to be sensitive to the needs of sexual and gender minorities can cause them to avoid accessing it altogether (Devakula et al., 2018).

As one Annual Meeting participant asked, ‘Look at the private sector – it is tailoring at scale all the time, so how come we can’t?’ (power and inequality session). From an operational perspective, it comes back to the supply model. According to ALNAP, the humanitarian supply chain is designed for speed and scale and therefore ‘not geared towards supporting more bespoke solutions’ (Obrecht, 2019: 29) and in resource-constrained responses, efficiencies and economies of scale are a very real consideration, favouring the many over the few. And unlike other business models that would

37. Unpublished quote from our research on perceptions of Afghan aid recipients on a response-wide level (monitoring Grand Bargain commitments). The research was conducted in 2018, the full report was published in 2019 and can be found here: https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Grand-Bargain_Afghanistan_032019.pdf
38. Indeed, according to the surveys of aid recipients by Ground Truth Solutions and the SOHS, there was not a significant difference in responses from women and men to the relevance questions.
39. For example, the study found that in India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Nepal, transgender communities were harassed, mocked and ridiculed or excluded entirely from aid distribution due to lack of identification that matched their gender identity and expression (Devakula et al., 2018).
have to customise their products in order to be relevant to their consumers’ needs, the lack of recipient agency – or what DuBois calls the ‘yawning accountability gap’ – means that there is little incentive to alter the standard model (Anderson et al., 2012; DuBois, 2018) beyond donor tick-box requirements for gender-sensitivity.

2.2.2. The progress and the way forward

The purpose of tailoring is, arguably, to achieve equity – which one Annual Meeting participant defined as being ‘achieved when outcomes are no longer defined by your personal identity’ (Programme design session). This is clearly linked to the question of rights. A rights-based approach frames equity differently to a purely needs-based approach. It can shift thinking away from often stigmatised ‘special needs’ towards the fulfilment of universal human needs; it can then inform programming that ensures equity of access and re-frames accountability to ask not ‘are we leaving people behind’, but ‘are we guilty of discrimination?’ (Pla Cordero, 2019).

There are many positive examples of efforts to tailor assistance in mainstreamed or discrete programmes (see IFRC, 2018), although these are not the norm.

Two models for addressing shortcomings were raised at the Annual Meeting: universal design and user-centred design. Universal design aims to build inclusion from the outset – a conscious approach to ensuring that products and systems are accessible to all without the need for specific adaptations or to target only certain users (Steinfeld and Maisel, 2012). For example, latrines constructed by Handicap International in an IDP camp in Iraq were designed so that everyone, including people with injuries, disabilities and functional limitations, could safely access and use them (Handicap International, 2018). From the supply end, universal design has clear scalability benefits and, from the recipient end, reduces stigma. However, like all other design approaches, it isn’t a panacea nor can it be expected to be feasible for all types of assistance in all places; it also needs to be supported by processes of co-design and adaptiveness (Bringing it all together discussion).

User-centred design involves creating sets of different user profiles, based on long open interviews which gather the experiences of purposively sampled members of the community – it is a ‘creative problem-solving approach [...] that puts the needs and experiences of intended end-users at the centre of the design process’ (Bourne, 2019, in Obrecht, 2019). It is an approach that has been imported from other private and public spheres and, as one Annual Meeting participant noted, ‘There are lessons to be learned from how other systems that are big taxpayer funded bureaucracies are navigating this process’ (Programme design session, 1.3). Pilots of this approach have found that these composite profiles can be more powerful than datasets in catalysing mindset and design changes (Tailoring services panel, 1.1; Programme design session, 1.3). It is, however, not automatically participatory and can be just as extractive as other forms of assessment and decision-making. And like any form of selective or differentiated provision, customised solutions must be situated in local knowledge: the response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines showed how targeted approaches can actually create social exclusion and ‘extremely socially disruptive to social cohesion and norms which are essential to for everyday coping, survival and prosperity’ (Ong et al., 2015).

40. Although one participant noted that this may well be a false economy: ‘The cost of failing to consult and tailor is astronomical – higher than the cost of basic good consultative programming’ (Tailoring panel).

41. One participant suggested that in some cases this is a false choice: ‘We go for quality over quantity. Every organisation I know defines their success by the size in the sector. It’s a difficult trade-off, a difficult balance to find because you want to help as many people as possible, but there are cases where it just becomes irrelevant or the quality becomes so poor that people say, “Thank you very much, we’d rather help half as many people but actually help them”’ (Programme design session).

42. This echoes discussions about how we balance individual, household and community-based approaches. As one Country Director noted, ‘Organisations tend to work with individuals or households, but in the South Sudan context, everything is communal. Aid actors need to shift our western notions of individual and household vulnerability to consider our response from a collective perspective’ (Rao, 2019). The question of communal needs is also highlighted in urban responses including to Syrian refugees and their host communities (Twose et al., 2015).
2.3 Co-designed assistance: involving affected people

‘The aid providers trust their own opinions more than the refugee’s opinions’

46-year-old female refugee from South Sudan in Uganda

2.3.1 The issue and the challenge

Participation is critical to relevance. If assistance is to be relevant to affected people, then they must be actively engaged in its prioritisation, design and delivery. If we consider that people see dignity and solidarity as priorities alongside material needs (Anderson et al., 2012; Mosel and Holloway, 2019) then being an active agent becomes not just a means to relevant response, but an end in itself (Brookings Institution, 2008, in Brown and Donini, 2014: 20).

The case for participation is well accepted in principle and enshrined in many commitments, from codes of conduct to the CHS and IASC guidelines. But it appears to be easier said than done, and performance falls short of principles. As one Ecuadorian grassroots activist famously said: ‘This is how the verb to participate is conjugated: I participate. You participate. They decide’ (Anderson et al., 2012: 68). The failure to involve affected people is a charge levelled at the whole aid effort, but it raises particular questions for humanitarians in the rushed, constrained and politicised settings in which they work. People are primarily consulted in the assessment and monitoring stages but are not sufficiently involved as partners in the implementation of responses (Grünewald and de Geoffroy, 2008; ALNAP, 2018; Obrecht, 2019).

The many organisational constraints to participation are well-documented (Brown and Donini, 2014). Meaningful participation implies a radical ‘upending’ of the system and there is a ‘constellation of interests’ that stand in the way (Steets et al., 2016: iii). From participant perspective there are multiple constraints around having the time, inclination, culture and power to engage (ALNAP, 2018). Inclusion and representation to avoid elite capture are essential, but fraught with difficulties (IRC, 2017). There is, arguably, a vicious circle: the longer people feel that aid is irrelevant to them, the more mistrustful and unwilling they may be to engage with its machinery (Anderson et al., 2012).

A recurrent dilemma is how to handle the clash between the perspectives of affected people and the views of external aid experts – the so-called difference between objective and perceived priorities (ALNAP, 2018), which has played out in diagnoses from malnutrition (de Torrente, 2013; Ferreti, 2017) to disaster risk (IFRC, 2014). This disconnect was evident at the Annual Meeting, between those who saw the imposition of foreign ‘experts’ views and those who felt that ‘for certain things – water chlorination, surgery – experts do know best’ (Power and inequality session). Knowledge is power and, as Barnett puts it, ‘expert and moral authority can lead to a paternalistic imposition of assistance’ (Barnett, 2010: 105; see also Vella, 2016), bringing us back to the Western-driven

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44. this was a point of discussion in the consultations to revise the DAC evaluation definition of relevance. Ultimately the revised criterion notes: ‘We do not include the concepts of participation and ownership in the definition because these are factors that affect relevance (as well as effectiveness and sustainability), rather than dimensions of the criterion itself’ (OECD DAC, 2019: 8).

45. Brown and Donini propose a series of degrees of engagement in their paper for the 2014 ALNAP conference – according to this model, it appears the higher degrees of engagement: participation, partnerships, ownership are the less well served (Brown and Donini, 2014).

46. The medic–patient analogy is often used here: on the one hand, the doctor risks misdiagnosis if they simply observe symptoms and fail to consult the patient (Benini, 2018); on the other, the life-saving imperative and expertise of the paramedic trumps the need to seek the patient’s opinion (Dubois, 2018).
critique. Expertise is crucial, and scientific and technical advances from vaccinations to weather warning systems have doubtless saved countless lives, but they need to be applied with care. As Davey’s history of humanitarianism notes ‘practitioner confidence in the growing body of scientific knowledge has sometimes had the effect of reinforcing patterns of power’ (Davey et al., 2013). Indeed, the challenge for humanitarians is how to handle divergent and culture-clashing views of what’s relevant in a way that addresses power, fosters communication and enhances appropriateness, rather than imposes expertise. It comes back, once again, to the recurrent questions of hierarchy and humility. As one Annual Meeting participant said: ‘It requires that we, as humanitarian organisations, start rethinking some of our assumptions, questioning whether we are the ultimate authority’ (Cash-based aid workshop, 3.2).

In the five years since engagement was discussed at the 29th ALNAP Annual Meeting in 2014, there have been new initiatives and new crises that have shed light on practice and progress towards participation. In 2016, donors and agencies signed up to the Grand Bargain’s ‘participation revolution’ and in the following two years had reported high levels of individual and collective action in this direction (Metcalf-Hough and Poole, 2018). However, the outcomes of these efforts were uncertain, nor was it clear ‘whether humanitarian programmes are actually becoming more demand-driven’ (ibid: 45). As Kristine Anderson writes, ‘Participation is the process of the redistribution of power’ (UNHCR, 2019), but the 32nd Annual Meeting saw little sign that power over decision-making and design is routinely being shared.

2.3.2 Progress and the way forward

Recent crises have highlighted both positive and negative practice. The 2014 Ebola response in West Africa is a widely cited example of how failure to meaningfully engage with affected people – and indeed active dismissal of their perspectives and capacities – led to the failure to deliver a relevant and effective response. One evaluation attributed this to a ‘predisposition in the aid system towards control and an inflated sense of its own importance, rather than responses and strategies that engage with and rely on communities’ (DuBois et al., 2015: vi). Another noted that earlier involvement of anthropologists would have helped humanitarians to work positively with communities (UNICEF, 2017, instead of seeing their behaviour as the problem (ALNAP, 2018). There are also more positive examples that demonstrate the benefits of engaging more deeply with communities. For example, in Za’atari camp, where the numbers of Syrian refugees and the length of their displacement are rising, one evaluation noted the potentially pioneering participatory approach to camp management, which learnt from urban development approaches (Hidalgo et al., 2015). The Annual Meeting heard examples of a child development programme facilitating people to generate their own solutions, based on existing intergenerational care structures, and of large-

47. It has been a long-standing concern that anthropologists are typically brought in after the event to explain ‘irrational resistance of local people’ to aid programmes that were deemed ‘appropriate’ or ‘technologically exemplary’ by providers. They were ‘expected first to identify cultural glitches and then help overcome cultural resistance by suggesting ingenious ways of fine-tuning projects to make them culturally palatable’. (Colson, 2011:155).
scale shelter programmes allowing people to design their own houses (Life-saving panel, 2.1). Pilots of ‘peer allocated funding’, where donors fund communities who then contract aid agencies, offer a more radical handover of decision-making (Debate on priority needs). Co-designed projects were understood to be more effective, more inclusive, and more sustainable (Cash-based aid workshop, 3.2; Life-saving panel, 2.1; Protection roundtable, 3.4).

So how can agencies make these positive examples the norm? Annual Meeting participants suggested that perceived operational constraints to participation were surmountable and may actually create opportunities. Time constraints may limit the amount of consultation that’s feasible in the early stage of a crisis but, as one participant noted, working with a new client group is the ‘exception rather than the norm’ so there is plenty scope to use existing feedback (Programme design session, 2.4). And a lack of resources can be a catalyst rather than a constraint for co-design, forcing agencies to shift their attention to ‘doing less and listening more’ and to supporting rather than substituting people’s self-recovery strategies (Programme design session, 2.4; Bringing it all together session). Staff shortages can also be an opportunity to support skills-building in communities: citing the lack of UN High Commissioner for Refugees staff with energy expertise, one participant asked: ‘What if we come up with some proper training programmes for refugees to become solar technicians?’ (Life-saving panel, 2.1)

As well as making a more concerted effort to put existing participation and engagement tools into practice and to replicate positive examples, humanitarians can also learn lessons from other spheres of social action; international agencies would do well to pay attention to community action models on their own doorsteps. As well as encouraging basic empathy, these models offer approaches for facilitating democratic design. The Annual Meeting heard the example of ‘equity-centered design’ from community work in the US, a framework that brings together the people facing the issue in their daily lives (termed the ‘equity designer’) and those in a position to help amplify their voices (the ‘design ally’). Participatory democracy models are on the rise around the world, in response to urgent public policy issues including climate change, and they can help to shift humanitarians’ mindsets and expand their power-sharing toolkits (Bringing it all together discussion).

48. Participants made the point that humanitarians need to stop ‘othering’ recipients and design assistance as if they were the end user, asking themselves ‘What would we want aid to look like in our towns?’ (High-level panel, pt.1; Bringing it all together discussion).
49. See Creative Reaction Lab (n.d.) ‘What is equity centred community design?’ (www.creativereactionlab.com/eccd).
50. A central ask of the Extinction Rebellion movement is for citizens’ assemblies to formulate policy on climate change action.
2.4 Adaptive assistance: changing what’s needed over time

‘If I get cash, food, permanent housing and opportunities to earn a livelihood, I will be more optimistic about the future.’

Rohingya refugee, Bangladesh

2.4.1 The issue and the challenge

Being relevant is not a one-off fix. Rather than being an upfront approach, relevance is an iterative design process. This is because, as dynamic understanding reveals changing needs over the course of a crisis, the delivery of humanitarian assistance needs to act on this learning to stay relevant. It’s also because, with its emphasis on speed and scale, humanitarian assistance often won’t get it right first time: ‘What you choose in the beginning of a response when you need to scale quickly shouldn’t be then what you stick to throughout the response’ (Programme design session). And of course, it is because changing in response to feedback is critical to accountability (Darcy, 2016a).

Adaptiveness can be broadly defined as the ability to respond effectively to changing and uncertain circumstances, based on robust learning and decision-making (adapted from Obrecht, 2018; Ramalingam, 2018; IRC and Mercy Corps, 2016). The concept is gaining currency in humanitarian thinking, learning from other economic and development sectors. Although volatility is a humanitarian’s milieu and protracted crisis is their ‘normal’, adaptiveness still proves difficult. Just as humanitarians struggle to understand changing needs, so do they struggle to respond to what they do learn. Many of the same systemic issues that thwart dynamic understanding compromise adaptive programming. Agencies find it very hard to effectively evolve or overhaul what they offer, constrained by pre-set resources, agendas, mandates and sectors as well as the momentum of programme delivery.

Knowing this, are humanitarians becoming more adaptive to stay relevant to people’s changing needs? An overall measure is hard: unlike participation, there are no specific commitments to adaptiveness against which to report, although it is inherent in accountability standards and in Grand Bargain commitments to multiyear flexible approaches and unearmarked funding. Presently, however, ‘neither practitioners nor affected people involved in humanitarian operations believe that agencies are flexible enough’ according to the SOHS (ALNAP, 2018: 163).

It is helpful to look at this problem at different levels. Obrecht categorises into five broad areas the many ways in which humanitarian agencies may need to adapt. These are adapting in regard to: delivery – changing where assistance is given and how; targeting – changing to whom assistance is given; the product and service – changing what is given or what solutions are offered; and the strategic – changing roles or functions entirely. There are positive examples of the first two, from agencies shifting locations to follow changing patterns of movement and access in the European migration response, to rethinking the targeting of assistance to IDPs in Afghanistan (Obrecht, 2018; 2019). But there is still concern that agencies are failing to act upon monitoring reports (Quasmi, 2018; Lawday et al., 2016; Warner, 2017) or to demonstrably take on board the increasing levels of feedback they are soliciting (see Jean, 2014; IRC, 2017). Many agencies are trying to resolve this second issue, including IRC with its new client responsiveness approach (Narayanan et al., 2019; Tamminga et al., 2019).

Difficult as operational and programmatic adaptiveness might prove, strategic shifts, unsurprisingly, appear to be even harder. This was echoed in the experience of some participants at the Annual Meeting who reported that although feedback mechanisms are becoming more sophisticated and better embedded in programmes, the changes that they trigger are more at the level of delivery, targeting and product, and not yet at the level of strategy (Programme design session). Staff might be able to take operational decisions to improve what they are doing but find it hard to know how to respond to information that requires a deeper organisational or cross-organisational rethink (Jean and Bonino, 2014). This is especially the case when staff are disincentivised from doing so by rigid output driven models (‘Story in 5’: Decolonising project management; Honig, 2019). The general tendency is for flexibility to veer more towards quality correction than course correction.

2.4.2 Progress and the way forward

Adaptation demands changes in organisational systems, cultures and staffing and funding. Culturally and organisationally, responsiveness to feedback needs to be seen as the responsibility of all staff, not just those with monitoring or accountability in their job titles. Oxfam’s mobile feedback management tool aims to institutionalise this, enabling all staff – including local technicians and country directors – to review and respond to feedback (Programme design session, 1.3). Their experience revealed that ‘there’s a huge cultural piece, making it part of people’s jobs and placing real emphasis on the responsibility of individuals – otherwise the case management system will fail and people will lose trust because action is never taken’ (Programme design session, 1.3). There is a clear need for multiyear, flexible funding: short-term, inflexible grants linked to predetermined outcomes can make it very hard for agencies to programme adaptively (Poole, 2014; FAO, 2017; Obrecht, 2018). While there are good examples of flexible funding, donor imperatives for output-focused and adaptive programming can often be in direct tension. And the quantity of funding is as much of a constraint as its quality as money tends to drop off the longer a crisis goes on. The six crises with appeals every year over the past decade all saw a decrease in their levels of funding (IFRC, 2018). Flexible funding at scale – which is both predictable and outcome focused – is therefore critical. The Annual Meeting heard how this can make a real difference when a situation changes: the Somalia Humanitarian Fund was able to bring its flexible pooled funds to support coordinated reprioritisation of programmes in response to the 2018 floods (Staying relevant panel).

Adaptive management approaches need to go hand in hand with flexible funding. This moves away from rigid linear log frame approaches (‘Story in 5’: Decolonising project management; Obrecht, 2019) to a cycle that starts with taking the best possible decisions based on available information, but with the explicit expectation that these decisions will need to change and with built-in opportunities for this to happen. In applications such as World Vision’s Fragile Context Programme Approach, multiple scenarios might be developed, which would then be regularly tested and revisited to check they are valid. Programme teams would use this analysis, together with emerging feedback, as the basis for regularly exploring adaptations and alternatives (Staying relevant panel, 2.1; Alcayna, 2019). Adaptive management is closely linked to a shift from the unwavering belief in pre-planned solutions and tight management control, to a ‘navigation by judgement’ (Honig, 2019; ‘Story in 5’: Decolonising project management).

52. Lack of responsiveness to feedback was also described as a barrier to trust in a recent RCRC research report on accountability. It quoted one female community member who noted: ‘The [RCRC] never listen, so I don’t trust anyone’ (Chechvala, 2019).

53. Honig’s ‘navigation by judgement’ argument is that Honig’s argument (Honig, 2019) is that local partners know more than internationals do (asymmetry of knowledge) but internationals have the imperative to control alignment to goal, so set in place rigid countable output indicators that are not only misleading, but have distorting effect on programmes. These are counterproductive to real results and disincentivise and stymie use of knowledge-based initiative: ‘Management control may also make organizations less flexible and responsive, causing agents to act based only on what they know their principals can also see and verify.’
2.5 Complementary assistance: being collectively relevant

‘I already had the phone from [agency name redacted] [...]. When I received the second phone for shelter assistance, they told me to keep the device and there will be money to pay for my shelter [...]. But still I cannot read the messages [...]. So, when the messages arrive on the phones we hurry to see the agency so that they can check the content and direct us to someone who can make the disbursement.’

44-year-old male from the Central African Republic, in Cameroon, discussing the challenges of working with multiple phone provided by separate agencies for mobile-based cash payments. 54

2.5.1 The issue and the challenge

In the realities of complex, changing crises, humanitarian assistance represents just one, often small, set of contributions upon which people will draw to meet their priority needs. As discussed in section 1.3 on holistic understanding, the Annual Meeting noted the relatively small ‘sphere of influence’ that humanitarians have in people’s survival, recovery and resilience (‘Story in 5’: Decolonising project management; Programme design session, 1.3), noting ‘we are small bit players in a process that is happening’ (Life-saving panel, 2.1; Programme design session, 1.3).

As the Time to Listen report (Anderson et al., 2012) reveals, beyond staying alive, what people really want is economic betterment, improved security and a sense of solidarity. No single approach, particularly no humanitarian approach, can respond to all of these priorities. As Heider suggests in her reframing of the relevance criteria, there is a need to relocate relevance in complexity thinking – looking for the most important ‘node’ for any intervention to contribute to addressing the wider problem (Heider, 2017). There is a logical link to be made between the DAC evaluation criterion of relevance and those of connectedness and coordination.

This applies to thinking about the humanitarian assistance as a whole set of resources, as well as within the whole of other resources. If relevance means relating to people’s most important needs, then given the extent, diversity and changeability of those needs, no single project or agency can ‘do’ relevance in isolation. Achieving relevance relies on collaborating, cooperating and complementing. For example, where a humanitarian shelter specialist agency can’t respond to health needs, they’ll need to effectively work with others that can. Where humanitarian aid can’t be relevant to people’s long-term needs, other solutions need to be found. As complex urban settings are teaching us, this may require humanitarians to shift their role from implementor to convenor and facilitator (Campbell, 2019). There is a need for humility about what humanitarian response can cover, and for being responsible for not overlooking what it can’t (‘Story in 5’: Local aid workers).

54. This quote is unpublished, but was recorded for our research on ‘Mitigating the risks of abuse of power in cash assistance’ done in partnership with UNHCR and WFP in Cameroon and DRC in 2018. The final report was published in May 2019 and can be found here: https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/GtS_HCR_WFP_report_summary_062019.pdf

55. Indeed, Ground Truth surveys of humanitarian aid recipients found that the overwhelming majority of respondents do not feel that the aid they received empowers them to live without support in the future (Ground Truth Solutions, 2019a: 16).
Relevance, however, is usually judged at the level of implementation of specific projects or programmes from specific agencies and not at the level of collective effort. As Levine noted in his analysis of the 2011 East Africa Drought, there are many reasons that make ‘improving systems much harder than building the capacity of individual agencies’ (Levine, 2011: 8. Coordination can always be burdensome, but in a system that many observe to be structured and incentivised towards fragmentation and competition (Bennett, 2016; Konyndyk, 2018), it is particularly hard.56

Interagency evaluations, although rare, do allow some insight into the collective relevance of major humanitarian agencies. A synthesis of those for the responses to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and the complex crises in South Sudan and the Central African Republic found gaps in relevance and appropriateness. It also found limited buy-in to the joint strategic and operational planning, concluding that ‘This partly reflects the gravitational pull of individual agency agendas and raises particular questions about accountability for delivery against collectively agreed objectives’ (Darcy, 2016b: 15). The coordinated Humanitarian Response Plans are intended as a collective strategic basis for responding to priority needs but they are widely felt to be more a compilation of individual agency and sector projects (see Darcy, 2016a; Konyndyk, 2018; Swithern, 2018). And since there is no systematic reporting against them – as reporting tends to be at the agency or project level – there is no means of assessing their collective relevance and learning from this.

2.5.2 Progress and the way forward

Recent developments – including the ‘triple nexus’ that links humanitarian, peace and development – are giving humanitarian agencies new imperatives and frameworks for thinking about their role as part of a wider effort to address people’s needs. More broadly, the localisation agenda and the rise of new private, civil society and volunteer humanitarian actors (The New Humanitarian, 2019) are prompting reflection about their respective contributions (Lawrence, 2018). And the New Way of Working57 seeks to bring humanitarian, development and peace actors together to make use of their comparative advantages to address collective outcomes for crisis-affected communities. The Annual Meeting heard the case for, and examples of, working with a wide range of other actors and groups, from village savings and loans associations, to grassroots activists; to the World Bank (Cash-based aid workshop, 3.2; Non-traditional crises roundtable, 3.3; Life-saving panel, 2.1). Within humanitarian response, the rise of cash programming is forcing agencies to work together. Consortium-led feedback mechanisms are enabling common management of feedback and automatic cross-agency referrals based on location and technical sector (Programme design session).

Again and again, Annual Meeting participants heard the call for progress in genuine complementarity with local and national partners (National and local organisations panel, 3.1; High-level panel, pt.1; Power and marginalisation roundtable, 1.4; Power and inequality sessions). Achieving this means facing up to, and seeking to overcome, the asymmetry of power between international agencies and their local partners that is manifest in everything from pay disparities, to control of resources, and imposition of ways of working (Local organisation panel, 3.1; Power and marginalisation roundtable, 1.4; Bringing it all together discussion). Even in the Typhoon Yolanda response, which has often been held up as a triumph of localisation, local organisations felt they were discardable ‘second-class citizens’ in ‘Aidland’ (Ong and Combinido, 2018; ‘Story in 5’: Local aid workers). As Al-Abdeh and Patel write, ‘very few donors see partnership working as a form of solidarity which can promote equal exchange of ideas and thinking’ (2019: 246).

56. One Annual Meeting presenter noted the fundamental tension in the humanitarian business model: between a set of policy commitments that demand a ‘fine comb’ of very context-specific and localised response, and a very ‘broad brush’ funding model that concentrates funding to a small, select group of large international agencies (‘Story in 5’).

57. See: https://www.un.org/jsc/content/new-way-working

2. HOW TO PROVIDE WHAT PEOPLE NEED? DECIDING AND DESIGNING
True complementarity – that is, supporting local actors from a starting point of trust and equality, not paternalism and subcontracting – can lead to programmes that are more successful and more relevant in complex situations. One presenter drew on Daniel Honig’s model of navigation by judgement (see section 2.4 on adaptive assistance), citing his evidence that projects tend to be more successful when implementation and decision-making are freely left to local staff (‘Story in 5: Decolonising project management). This was echoed in the Annual Meeting’s power and marginalisation roundtable, 1.4:

If you let people that know the context and community work in the way that they want to work, you have a much more community sensitive result that’s very different to when you fill their job description with all the things that you want them to do and the way that you want them to do it. (Power and marginalisation roundtable, 1.4)
CONCLUSIONS AND A WAY FORWARD

If relevance means a close match between a response and what people most need, then as we’ve seen, this forces us to think hard about most aspects of humanitarian action. The relevance test reaches wide and deep.

It is a test that cuts across the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of humanitarian action: both are important if people’s priorities – both tangible, such as food and water, and intangible, such as dignity and community – are to be addressed. This takes us beyond simplistic ideas of supply and demand and encourages us to think about humanitarian assistance as being as much relational as transactional.

For each of the 10 dimensions we’ve explored, there are no clear-cut, text-book answers to the relevance test. Instead, there are sliding scales along which choices must be made (see Annex 1). Each of these sets of choices poses serious dilemmas for humanitarians: dilemmas of expertise – who knows best and who gets to judge; dilemmas of action – what to prioritise and for whom; and dilemmas of boundaries – when to stop, when to handover and how to complement. Faced with the real-world operational, organisational and structural constraints and challenges of the humanitarian system and settings, these dilemmas become particularly tough.

Overcoming all of these dilemmas and constraints would not yield a perfect score on the relevance test. Relevance is iterative and hard to measure objectively; humanitarians can aspire to be more relevant rather than perfectly relevant – to aim for the elusive humanitarian ‘good enough’, given the inevitable compromises that have to be made in any given context and crisis stage.

Yet, as we have seen, many clear recommendations for becoming more relevant did emerge from the discussions at the 32nd ALNAP Annual Meeting. These recommendations, which are set out under the 10 dimensions in this study, can be summarised into five broad calls to action for the humanitarian system: to expand the repertoire; to default to inclusion; to assume agency; to work iteratively; and to think systemically. These calls to action include broad demands for change, as well as practical tools and replicable good practice drawn from the humanitarian and wider social justice sectors.
Five calls to action for more relevance

EXPAND THE REPERTOIRE:

taking off the blinkers to respond to peoples’ real range of needs

As we’ve seen in the comprehensive section, this involves moving away from the ‘hammer seeking nails’ approach in which humanitarians’ understanding of situations is circumscribed by what agencies have to offer. It means becoming less dictated by pre-set sector-driven assessments, and embracing open, multidimensional methods that capture the wide range of people’s needs.

And based on this, as the choice section shows, agencies need to consider their repertoire of provision and support. This can involve offering a wider set of options of assistance – providing goods and services that fall outside the standard package – as well as, offering programming modalities which relocate choice to the people on the receiving end.

Communication is key, as it is to all the dimensions of relevance. A more comprehensive understanding of what people really need, must be accompanied by an ‘ethics of refusal’ when agencies are unable to provide accordingly. And where options are available, choice must be supported by sharing information, technical expertise and knowledge.

DEFAULT TO INCLUSION:

ensuring a fair response for marginalised members of society

Discussions on inclusive understanding revealed how agencies need to invest in implementing their many guidelines on reaching marginalised people but do so in a way that doesn't reduce them to tick-boxed vulnerable groups. Emerging approaches to intersectionality, which incorporate multiple social factors, offer a way forward. And while granular data can be critical to identifying ‘invisible’ people and needs, its absence shouldn’t prevent a default to inclusion from the outset: there are good examples of pre-positioned information about demographics and culture supporting reasonable working assumptions ahead of more detailed assessments.

The purpose of tailoring assistance is to achieve equity in a response, wherein where a person’s outcomes are not defined by their identity. A design-thinking mindset enables team to generate and test solutions that best fit all segments of society. Two practical models for tailoring were raised at the Annual Meeting: universal design, which consciously factors in access for all into generic solutions; and user-centred design, which purposively creates sets of representative user-profiles and customises to these.

Ultimately, diversity within humanitarian organisations is fundamental for an inclusive worldview and equitable action. This demands an honest look at the profiles and hierarchies of staff and of partners – that is, who is hired and how they are valued. This needs to happen right from the highest echelons of leadership to the direct face of delivery, alongside the creation of a culture of open reflection on power, prejudice and inequality.
The relevance test encourages us to think about humanitarian assistance as being as much relational as transactional, than investment in basic good programming.
A holistic understanding begins by seeing people in terms of what they have – support mechanisms, expertise, rights – as well as what they lack. It challenges the ‘deficit needs’ model of much humanitarian assessment. Building on the self-recovery assumptions that are already used in some sectors, this holistic understanding doesn't only gather metrics on needs but also asks: ‘What are you already doing and what assets, ideas and skills can we support?’

This mindset is the foundation of co-designed assistance, which offers people the chance to genuinely participate in shaping assistance most relevant to their situation. Co-designing involves trusting and supporting people's expertise, shifting from an approach of ‘imposing aid’ to one that facilitates problem-solving and sharing power. This spectrum of co-design and power-sharing spans from radical handover of decision-making in ‘peer-allocated funding’, to collaborative models where people generate solutions that inform programmes, or where they customise the design of what assistance they receive. Scaling up these models will require organisations to build different skill sets, wherein the abilities to listen to, negotiate and support others' expertise are as sought-after as technical delivery expertise.

In all this, international humanitarians can learn from community action and public service models on their own doorsteps. Doing so is not only an exercise in encouraging basic empathy – prompting foreign aid workers to ask, ‘What would I want aid to look like if it were in my community?’ – but it also provides transferrable models of civic participation such as equity-centred design, showcased at the Annual Meeting.

WORK ITERATIVELY:
keeping up with changing requirements to stay relevant

Working in protracted volatile settings is the humanitarian normal, with contexts, circumstances and priorities changing over the course of a crisis. This demands a dynamic understanding, which would see humanitarians shift from a dependence on resource-intensive, up-front assessments to an ongoing learning process. The Annual Meeting heard how growing investments in gathering feedback and how situation monitoring tools both need to become routine and challenge the linear tyranny of the log frame programming approach.

Unless they are integral to an adaptive approach, however, ongoing monitoring and feedback are at best wasteful and at worst counterproductive to relevance. Ongoing investment therefore needs to be equally placed in gathering feedback and information and in analysing and course-correcting in response to this and in closing the feedback loop.

Flexible action relies on flexible funding from donors who are open to embracing uncertainty and iterative solutions, rather than being fixated by rigid outputs. The Annual Meeting heard how this can make a real difference to staying relevant if it goes hand in hand with adaptive management approaches, which start with assumptions that programmes will have to change, regularly test and revisit alternatives, and allow space for local partners to ‘navigate by judgement’.
Polyphonic understanding is about hearing and handling multiple perspectives, instead of trying to impose simplicity on complexity by ‘editing’ these out. Annual Meeting participants shared a range of tools for actively listening to the diverse and divergent viewpoints of affected people, including in-depth and open-ended enquiry methods. They also stressed the importance of investing as much in meaningful analysis as in gathering information. When it comes to synthesising all these analyses, the humanitarian system still has the impulse to establish a single over-arching narrative of needs, often controlled by the dominant aid providers. Instead, independent analysis has a role to inform decision-makers who should have the analytical maturity to review multiple contrasting and complementary perspectives.

Responding to these many perspectives is of course beyond the scope of any single programme, agency or sector. Relevance is usually judged at the programme level and yet no part of the response can ‘do relevance’ in isolation. It demands complementary assistance, where connections are made between and beyond humanitarians. The Annual Meeting heard many examples of promoting this collective relevance, whether through collaborative multi-agency approaches to two-way communication and to cash programming, or wider attempts to put the humanitarian-development-peace nexus into practice.

Running throughout these discussions was the call for true complementarity with local partners, for partnership based on a genuine consideration of the added value of each party. This needs to be based on solidarity, trust and equality, rather than paternalism and subcontracting.

Getting radical about relevance

Being open to these ways forward means being open to significant changes in the who, what and how of humanitarian action. Operational changes at the level of individual organisations and projects can continue to improve the match between what's offered and what's needed – and can indeed prompt systemic change. But addressing some of the most entrenched constraints and thorniest dilemmas implies a disruptive ‘upending’ of the system. Discussions at the Annual Meeting were both honest about the reasons for irrelevant aid and ambitious in proposing how to be more relevant. Participants spoke of the need to ‘turn the business model upside down’ and urged ‘subversion’ (Bring it all together session).

Many at the Annual Meeting called for a radical role change for international humanitarians. This includes transcending the sector-based system, but it also goes much further. It involves turning over power and resources to those who are best placed to judge what’s relevant and involves using expertise to support others to make decisions, rather than impose decision-making.
Many participants spoke of the need for international humanitarians to shift from seeing themselves as providers to becoming facilitators, brokers and bridge-builders (Power and inequality session; ‘Story in 5’: Decolonising project management; Feedback and closing panel; Innovative design session, 1.3; Protection roundtable, 3.4). Reflecting on their experience of community-led action on education in emergencies, one presenter said: ‘The journey of self-recovery starts before outsiders come in, and it continues after we go, so I learnt a lot about us having a facilitation role, but not providing solutions’ (Life-saving panel, 2.1). Another stated starkly: ‘The only way to get to relevance in the eye of the one who’s supposed to benefit from what we do, would be to turn over decision-making and resources to people themselves’ (Power and inequality session). This is hardly a new call and it links closely to the demand for more genuinely locally led response that ran throughout the Annual Meeting. But the fact that it is well-rehearsed – and less well-realised – should not mean that it is omitted from an agenda for relevance. Limiting the way forward to being about operational approaches, and not about power, would be to limit the extent to which humanitarian assistance can become more relevant.

Many at the Annual Meeting called for a radical role change for international humanitarians. This includes transcending the sector-based system, but it also goes much further. It involves turning over power and resources to those who are best placed to judge what’s relevant.

The Annual Meeting should be the start of a conversation about relevance – one that brings it into plain sight, from being a side-lined evaluation criterion to becoming an explicit guiding objective for humanitarian response. The meeting began to bring together the many dimensions and initiatives that contribute to making aid more relevant, seeing the bigger picture by joining the dots from cash, to accountability to diversity. And it provided the space for a hard, honest and open look at the privileges and prejudices that get in the way. While a two-day meeting can’t do justice to the substance or to the implications of all of these, it can catalyse a new level and quality of consciousness for the sector to take forward to improve its relevance. Making sure that the relevance test is always front and centre will be critical if the humanitarian system is to improve, engaging recipients, agencies, and donors in routinely asking how humanitarian aid can be more relevant to what people really need. After all, for those who aim to support others through crises, there can be no question more fundamental than: ‘Are we doing the right thing?’
The following publications can also be accessed via the Humanitarian Evaluation, Learning and Performance (HELP) Library: [https://www.alnap.org/help-library/32am](https://www.alnap.org/help-library/32am)


Barber, R. (2016b) *Did the humanitarian response to the earthquake in Nepal ensure no one was left behind?* London: Save the Children. [www.alnap.org/help-library/did-the-humanitarian-response-to-the-nepal-earthquake-ensure-no-one-was-left-behind-a](www.alnap.org/help-library/did-the-humanitarian-response-to-the-nepal-earthquake-ensure-no-one-was-left-behind-a).


