



The Humanitarian Performance Project: Briefing Note No 1

December 2008

1. Introduction

ALNAP has always been concerned with finding ways to assess and report on system-wide performance. The evaluations syntheses in the seven editions of the *Review of Humanitarian Action (RHA)* collectively present an important longitudinal review of sector-wide performance issues. ALNAP also played a central role in the formation and facilitation of the *Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC)*, which was the first evaluation of system wide performance since the joint evaluation of humanitarian aid to Rwanda.

Over the past two years since the publication of the TEC synthesis report, there has been an ongoing series of explorations and discussions on the feasibility, value and scope of an improved mechanism for reviewing system-wide performance. This work is collectively referred to as the Humanitarian Performance Project. These efforts have been informed by a series of membership-wide consultations, and were acknowledged in the *ALNAP Strategy 2008-13*. This includes the specific action of developing:

“...an annual structured commentary on system-wide performance related issues and to make a judgement on the progress the system has made in trying to improve performance...”

The Humanitarian Performance Project is now at an important milestone, with work scheduled on a concrete pilot exercise to be carried out in 2009, as well as the specification of a number of performance-related areas for further exploration. This short Briefing Note provides an outline of the Humanitarian Performance Project, describing progress to date and explaining next steps in this exciting and innovative area of work. This is the first in an ongoing series of HPP Briefing Notes which will circulate at regular intervals in order to keep the ALNAP membership updated on the progress of the HPP and to outline opportunities for inputs and engagement.

2. Origins in the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition

The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition undertook the most comprehensive system-wide joint evaluation of humanitarian action since the *JEEAR* in 1996. The TEC process and reports value lay in its confirmation and deepening of the collective understanding of the workings of the international response system. The “snap-shot” of how the system works, what it does well and where it needs to do better was reflected in the range of recommendations outlined in the TEC synthesis report and the five supporting evaluations.

One of the most common responses by expert analysts was that the TEC reports did not say anything particularly new or startling. This reflected the fact that many of the findings were instantly recognisable to those working within the sector – indeed many had been explicitly identified in previous publications and evaluations. The underlying issue was the question of how and why, in this extraordinarily well funded - possibly over-funded – humanitarian response, these well-acknowledge flaws and problems played out.

A conclusion was unavoidable: that the system as a whole had not significantly improved since the Rwandan response. Disheartening though such a conclusion was, it also raised new opportunities and possibilities in how to contribute to such 'system-wide improvements'. The key question was how to monitor changes and improvements in system-wide performance, without waiting another 10 years or so for another mega-disaster and concurrent system-wide joint evaluation.

3. Designing the Humanitarian Performance Project (HPP)

In response to the TEC, ALNAP began an internal process of reflection which looked at possibilities for finding a more systematic and better way of monitoring and reflecting on system-wide performance. There was background work which outlined a number of options including an 'index for overall humanitarian performance'. Discussions at the 22nd Biannual Meeting in Senegal in December 2007 focused on these issues and possible ways forward. The idea of an index was rejected but there was still wide support for the idea of improving system-wide performance monitoring and reflection.

Post Senegal discussions led to a concrete proposal in the form of a provisional feasibility study, as well as a name for the process, the 'Humanitarian Performance Project'. The aim of the feasibility study was to explore a range of options for monitoring, assessing and reflecting on the overall performance of the humanitarian sector, from low cost approaches such as an expanded form of ALNAP current Review of Humanitarian Action, to higher cost and more ambitious models. The exploratory phase ran from January to June 2008 and consisted of a consultative process canvassing the views of key stakeholders across the ALNAP network and the wider humanitarian system. Progress on this phase was slower than expected, partly due to the realisation that there was a huge amount of data being generated by the system that could feed into such an effort. The task was adapted to develop a 'map' of who was collecting data in the system; what kind of data it was and how regularly it was being collected, and what implications this had for initiatives for assessing 'system-wide performance'.

The findings of the mapping process were presented at the June 2008 biannual in Madrid, as well as the possibility of an integrating process which combined existing data with additional investigations to develop a regular report on system-wide performance. The response from the membership was clear and constructive. The membership agreed it was vital to be realistic about what it was possible for the Humanitarian Performance Project to achieve in the short term. It was felt that new complicated mechanisms or structures were not desirable. The idea of piloting a mechanism for reviewing overall performance, building on ALNAP's prior work in the RHA was put forward.

It was also recognised that the Humanitarian Performance Project highlighted a number of areas for further investigation, which would be of value both in and of themselves, but also as part of the ongoing HPP process. These areas were:

- joint approaches of performance assessment
- understanding impact of humanitarian assistance
- reviewing the scope for beneficiary surveys to play a greater role in understanding performance, and
- the development of 'key performance indicators' for the system

Collectively, the idea of the pilot and the areas outlined above helped to move the Humanitarian performance Project from a design stage towards an implementation phase. Of special note was the fact that each element of the HPP would need to be of value both as a stand-alone component in the ALNAP workplan, as well as feeding into ongoing discussions on system-wide performance.

4. Implementing the HPP

The recommendations of the June Biannual were taken on board by the ALNAP Secretariat and Steering Committee, and reflected upon. At the September 2008 Steering Committee meeting a number of ideas were presented and approved for action by the Steering Committee. This consisted of the following five elements to be incorporated into the ongoing and future ALNAP workplan. It was also decided to summarise the findings of the HPP, especially the data map and the range of conceptual and methodological challenges related to performance assessment, and to combine these with an account of performance issues more widely, and to publish this as part of the 8th review of Humanitarian Action, in May 2009.

Element 1: Understanding Impact Assessment and the role of Collective efforts

The Biannual on Impact Assessment in Berlin December 08 outlined six broad themes and challenges that the sector faces in relation to impact assessment. They include definitions of impact; stakeholder interests; indicators and base lines; methodologies; interpretation and analysis of data, and capacities and incentives. A running theme through both the background paper and the Biannual Discussions was the idea that collective efforts to assess overall impact of the humanitarian system, followed by reflections on the contribution of individual agencies, were far more sensible and feasible than the idea of attribution of impact to specific agency efforts.

Following on from this ALNAP is currently carrying out further research on a number of specific humanitarian impact assessments, supported by an Advisory Group from across the ALNAP membership, who will work to shape the research effort, and hone the recommendations and peer review the final chapter. The workplan can be found here http://www.alnap.org/meetings/pdfs/24_rethinking_humanitarianIA_workplan.pdf. For more on this Advisory Group, contact Karen Proudlock k.proudlock@alnap.org

A workshop is planned to be held in conjunction with AfrEA, NONIE and 3Ie at a conference in Cairo in March/April 2009. A report of the work will be published as a chapter in the forthcoming RHA to be published in May 09.

Element 2: Joint evaluation approaches to assessing system-wide performance

One of the more costly options for assessing system wide performance is through more regular system-wide evaluations. It is important to carefully consider the possibilities and constraints of such an approach. A review of humanitarian joint evaluations was undertaken and published in 2008 as part of the 7th Review of Humanitarian Action. This work highlighted the quality of joint evaluations in relation to single agency evaluations and also provided an account of strengths, weaknesses and future potential. One important finding was that joint evaluations are of better quality, engender trust between agencies, and are generally much better at addressing impact than single agency evaluations. These valuable insights for future HPP activities, and provide a basis for further discussion of the feasibility of regular system-wide joint evaluations.

The ALNAP review of joint evaluations can be found here <http://www.alnap.org/publications/7RHA/Ch3.pdf>. For more on this work, contact Ben Ramalingam b.ramalingam@alnap.org

Element 3: Performance Indicator Interest Group

An Interest Group is currently being set up to share thinking and relevant materials on approaches to organisational and programme performance indicators within the humanitarian system. The structure of the interest group and the way it will operate have deliberately left open to allow an organic development within the group and to maximise

the available energy and enthusiasm. The findings from this ongoing work will inform ongoing HPP work. The concept note for this Interest Group can be found here http://www.alnap.org/meetings/pdfs/24_hp_indicators_interest_group_note.pdf. For more on this Interest Group, contact Karen Proudlock k.proudlock@alnap.org

Element 4: Work on Beneficiary Surveys as a Tool for Assessing Performance

This has been scheduled for 2009-10, and will review the different beneficiary surveys that have been undertaken within the sector, and look at ways in which these have fed into an understanding of humanitarian performance at the collective and single agency levels. Initiatives include qualitative approaches such as the work of the Fritz Institute, the Listening project, as well as quantitative approaches such as the IRC work on mortality surveys. For more on this work, contact Ben Ramalingam b.ramalingam@alnap.org

Element 5: Piloting the HPP with “The State of the System Report”

The ALNAP Steering Committee has given the go-ahead for the first *State of the System Report* which is envisaged as a systematic piece of research and analysis that will combine existing research, evaluations and studies with expert interviews and perception survey polls. The first report will pilot a methodology to assess overall humanitarian performance against agreed criteria and will provide a ‘base line’ to track future performance. The ToRs for the work are here http://www.alnap.org/meetings/pdfs/24_stateofthesystem_tor.pdf, and the successful proposal can be found here: http://www.alnap.org/meetings/pdfs/24_stateofthesystem_HO_proposal.pdf

The report will be guided by an Advisory Group made up of key specialists and senior policy makers in the sector, who will steer the project, providing feedback on the inception report, methodologies and peer review of the final work. The work is due to commence in March 2009 for completion by the end of the year. For more on this Advisory Group, contact John Mitchell j.mitchell@alnap.org

5. Feedback from the 24th Biannual

The process outlined above was presented at the 24th Biannual, and feedback was received. This feedback highlighted some important issues and suggestions for the State of the System pilot.

Specifically;

- To be clear on the thinking and process underpinning the initiative up to now and to provide some clear directions for how the membership can contribute to the process;
- to be clear about how the report will define ‘performance’;
- to be clear in the methodology about the ‘unit of analysis’;
- ensure coordination with other initiatives with regard to the use of indicators;
- establish a clear understanding from the outset that this initiative will not ‘rank’ agencies with regard to performance;
- be sensible and prudent with budgets and costs and ensure they do not spiral;
- be clear about the kinds of data that are being used and avoid confusion between needs assessment and impact assessment data.
- To ensure the different elements are coordinated and feed into each other effectively.

6. Summary

There has been an ongoing process of reflection since the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition reports, which has focused on the possibility and feasibility of a mechanism for reviewing system-wide humanitarian performance.

This has led to a number of elements being incorporated into the ALNAP workplan, which have both stand alone value as well as value in terms of feeding into the ongoing reflection around system-wide performance.

- The findings of the HPP process will be published in the 8th Review of Humanitarian Action.
- Work on impact assessment has been initiated and will be published in the 8th Review of Humanitarian Action.
- An interest group on humanitarian performance indicators has been launched.
- Work on beneficiary surveys and their role in performance will be initiated in 2009-10.
- A pilot of the HPP will be initiated in March 2009, entitled “State of the System” and completed by the end of the year.

7. Ways of further engagement

There are a number of possible ways for the ALNAP membership to engage with and strengthen the ongoing HPP process.

- The feedback from the membership at the 24th Biannual will be incorporated into ongoing efforts on HPP and the specific elements. Further feedback on the Humanitarian Performance Project process and elements - whether on the Biannual presentation or on this Project Briefing - is warmly welcomed. Please send feedback to J.mitchell@alnap.org
- If you or anyone in your organisation is interested in being part of any of the specific elements outlined in Section 5, whether in a formal or informal capacity, please do get in touch with the relevant Secretariat staff members
- An inception report from the consultants outlining methodology will be available in March / April 2009 – if you are interested in seeing and commenting on this, please do contact J.mitchell@alnap.org.
- There will be a series of key informant interviews conducted over the course of 2009, as well as a system-wide poll. We invite your inputs into these, and suggestions for others who might be interested in participating.
- Any relevant research and evaluations which are felt to be especially relevant to the ongoing effort to understand system-wider performance are also welcome.
- In the New Year a dedicated web page will be set up that will enable the membership to track progress and input ideas into the process. There will also be regular HPP Briefing Notes following this one to provide members with progress updates.