

# ALNAP 25th Meeting



Concept Note for Day 1 of the 25<sup>th</sup> ALNAP Meeting

## Innovation in International Humanitarian Action

The 25<sup>th</sup> ALNAP Meeting will take place on 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> November 2009 at the Kensington Forum, Kensington, London, and will be hosted in partnership with the Humanitarian Futures Programme, Kings College London.

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ALNAP's Strategy and Mission both highlight the importance of innovation in improving humanitarian performance through learning and accountability. The ALNAP mission states that it will "work to provide direction and energy to initiatives and innovations that foster organisational and sectoral change", while the Strategy highlights that ALNAP will work to monitor and strengthen the take-up of new ideas and innovations in the sector.

If ALNAP was a network in the private sector, this task may be more straightforward. The corporate need to innovate is seen as a form of 'survival imperative' - companies must continually strive to develop new products and services or risk falling behind their competitors. Innovation is of growing interest in other sectors too. Innovation in the public sector has risen up the agenda in recent years, as governments seek to improve services and deliver greater assurance to the public about the best possible use of tax monies. And there is growing body of work on social entrepreneurs and their role in fostering social innovations across civil society.

The humanitarian sector may appear to lag behind these others in the area of innovations. However, as many of those involved in ALNAP's work so far have attested, the very nature of international humanitarian action requires making adaptations on a daily basis just to 'get the job done'. Staff in humanitarian agencies are forced to solve problems as they appear, adjusting to the rapidly changing contexts in which they work.

Such creative problem solving takes place in projects or programmes – and involves working within the context of existing practices, policies and norms of behaviour, often focusing on detecting and correcting deviations and variances from these standards, or finding ways in which standard operating procedures can be better implemented.

Much ongoing effort in the realm of international humanitarian action does not actively try to seek out *new and different ways of operating*. As a result, humanitarian organisations have often failed to generate, capture and integrate more radical

innovations into their ongoing work. While the humanitarian 'industry' has grown remarkably from humble roots, and recent decades have seen steps taken to consolidate the system and regulate action, this may have had unintended consequences in terms of growing conservatism and risk aversion. As argued in the ALNAP 6<sup>th</sup> *Review of Humanitarian Action*:

'...Consolidating good practice throughout the system is deeply important and represents the superlative virtue of the manager. But the system also needs innovation if it is to cope with and adapt to the inevitable shortcomings of its political and practical setting. Innovation is the virtue of the entrepreneur. As the system moves towards conformity, it must still urgently encourage innovation and entrepreneurialism whereby humanitarian agencies can make new discoveries and risk new approaches...'

In the face of increasingly rapid change and volatility growing numbers of practitioners and analysts are now arguing that humanitarian agencies must become more innovative simply in order to retain relevance. There are more positive reasons for humanitarian innovation too - as recently suggested in a popular publication focusing on the emergency nutrition sector: "at a time of deepening gloom over the global economic downturn and... environmental catastrophe, successful innovation and problem solving in our sector serves to maintain some degree of optimism and sense of progress."<sup>1</sup>

In order to take this area of work forward across the sector, ALNAP launched a programme of research in September 2008, which gathered a wide range of perspectives on innovation in the humanitarian sector, as well as exploring a range of case studies. This work led to the first comprehensive and detailed study of innovation in international humanitarian action, which will be published as part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Review of Humanitarian Action in June 2009.

As part of this work, ALNAP has developed a working definition of innovations:

*"...Innovations are dynamic processes which focus on the creation and implementation of new or improved products and services, processes, positions and paradigms.... Successful innovations are those that result in improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, quality or social outcomes and impacts... Innovation processes are shaped by the capabilities of the actors involved, the relationships between them, and wider social, economic and political contexts..."*

The 25<sup>th</sup> ALNAP Meeting in November 2009, hosted in partnership with the Humanitarian Futures Programme of Kings College London, will use this background work to provide opportunities for Full and Observer Members to explore and better

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Shoham, writing in Field Exchange, Issue 35 <http://www.enonline.net/fex/35/fex35.pdf>

understand the scope for innovation in international humanitarian action, the processes by which innovations come about, and how these processes might be strengthened as part of ongoing efforts to improve the performance of humanitarian agencies.

The meeting will highlight perspectives from outside and within the sector. As well as participatory discussions and debates, the meeting will involve an “Innovations Fair”, showcasing humanitarian innovations from a range of different sectors.

There are a number of specific questions that the Meeting participants will be invited to explore, which might include the following:

- How can humanitarian organisations better understand and strengthen innovative practices internally and across the sector?
- How should humanitarian organisations approach the risks posed by innovation, both for organisations and individuals, and what are the limits of humanitarian innovation?
- What incentives exist for individuals and organisations to generate and disseminate humanitarian innovations, and what mechanisms are needed to encourage sustained effort across the sector?
- What role does evaluation and research play in justifying and promoting humanitarian innovation, and how could this be strengthened?
- What role can codes and standards play in promoting innovations, while continuing to strive for quality and accountability?
- How can humanitarian organisations foster better inter- and intra- sector collaborative partnerships for innovation, especially with the private sector, academics, and national and local actors?
- What can new and emerging technologies contribute to humanitarian action, and how can agencies best adapt and utilise them in the complex realities of humanitarian response?