# MORE RELEVANT?

## 10 ways to approach what people really need

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About the author
This paper was written by Sophia Swithern.

Sophia is an independent expert who specialises in consultative research to rethink international approaches to crises. With a background in programme delivery, policy and leadership, she has led and authored influential studies for a range of government, multi-lateral and civil society stakeholders.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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 generally felt 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 Bangladesh, we've seen how refugees are selling on aid to generate income to meet basic requirements (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018a), and in Tanzania and Ukraine, 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' (The New Humanitarian, 2019).

So, what's happening, and what needs to change? At its most simple level, relevance appears to be an uncontentious 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 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 expert views? 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 of the response. Are current systems getting in the way? What kinds of collaboration are possible? And what kind of funding, staffing and expertise would it take to do things better?

This background paper for the 32nd ALNAP Annual Meeting offers a framework for exploring these questions and understanding what relevance means in practice for humanitarian action. It is an attempt to unpack this fuzzy and far-reaching concept and provoke fresh discussion on a topic which is often encountered but rarely discussed in the round.

This paper seeks to explore some key questions rather than anticipate all the answers, and a fuller study will follow from the discussions at the Annual Meeting. This paper is not intended as an exhaustive inventory of relevance to specific demographic groups or needs; or of modalities or approaches. Instead, it offers a broad overview to inform and structure rich conversations based on experience and evidence.

It begins by looking at what we mean by relevance, and by taking stock of how well the humanitarian system is doing against this definition. It then explores what this means for humanitarians – firstly for *understanding* people's priority needs; and secondly for *providing* what's most relevant to meet these. It proposes five dimensions to each: inclusive, comprehensive, holistic, dynamic and polyphonic understanding of needs; and in providing a response to these – choice; tailoring, co-design, adaptation and complementarity. For each of these 10 areas, this paper provides a short summary to frame the problem, practice and dilemmas. These 10 ways include the *hows* as well as the *whats* of relevant assistance and show how 'understanding' and 'providing' are intertwined. They are not discrete or mutually exclusive paths, in fact there are overlaps and synergies and we must consider them together in order to make response more relevant.

# 2. WHAT'S THE RELEVANCE PROBLEM?

## 2.1 Definitions and redefinitions

Simply put, being relevant means being closely connected to what's important, being related to the main issue at hand, to what people really want or need. It's the holy grail 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: as one of eight core criteria for evaluating humanitarian action[1] – relevance is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) as 'concerned with assessing whether the project is in line with local needs and priorities (as well as donor policy)' (OECD DAC, 1999:22). When the standard criteria for evaluating development assistance were customised for humanitarian assistance, relevance acquired a twin principle – appropriateness, defined as 'the tailoring of humanitarian activities to local needs' (Beck, 2006:21). These twins are often referred to interchangeably, but they are not identical: relevance is more about the overall purpose – the 'what', appropriateness 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).

Yet this definition only takes us so far. It has in-built tensions and questions: most fundamentally – relevant to what and whom? Although donors' priorities should be guided by need (GHD, 2003), the two are not always aligned (see inter alia Darcy et al, 2013). So, when relevance to 'local needs and priorities' and to 'donor policy' are contradictory, how does one assess which is privileged as the touchstone for relevance? Fixation on alignment to donor or government

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1    Relevance is one of eight principal criteria defined by the OECD DAC, the others are: effectiveness, efficiency, impact, connectedness, coverage, coherence and coordination.

policy risks can risk skewing attention away from relevance to people's needs (Chianca, 2008). And how much weight should relevance have in an overall measure of humanitarian performance? De-prioritising relevance to other evaluation criteria, say efficiency or coordination, means that it is possible to have 'successful' projects that miss the mark completely (Andersen and Olson, 2003), busily doing 'the wrong thing right' (Ackoff cited in Ramalingham, 2013).

There are calls to rethink, redefine and re-position the relevance criterion, prompted by these questions, and the fact that the DAC definitions are 20 years old[2] and informed by the preoccupations of the 1990s. According to some, relevance should be the trump card for judging the quality of design or implementation of assistance – if a project isn't relevant to peoples' needs it can't be successful (Chianca, 2008; Sagmeister, 2016). Projects should also focus on whether the most important, rather than 'peripheral' issues are being addressed – these are after all complex realities in which many non-essential things could 'pass' as relevant (Heider, 2017).

Rethinking and putting the spotlight on relevance allows us to reframe how humanitarian action is judged, and by whom. It is an opportunity to shift perspective to the affected person, to examine if the humanitarian assistance provided aligns with what they most need. From this need-centred perspective, this paper doesn't draw a strong distinction between appropriateness and relevance – for someone receiving food aid that they can't eat, or services they can't access, the intervention will be irrelevant to them no matter how highly agencies prioritise hunger.

So, this discussion paper takes as its working definition that **relevance is being in-line with the priority needs of affected people**. It is a working definition that poses many difficult practical, political and philosophical questions and sets down a two-fold relevance challenge: how to understand what people's priority needs are, and how to assist them in meeting those needs.

## 2.2 Critiques and catalysts

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

Some of this might be put down to the misguided actions of certain aid organisations, but there are well-established critiques that suggest something is more fundamentally and structurally awry. Two sets of arguments stand

2    In 2018, the DAC Network on development evaluation ran a stakeholder consultation on adapting the DAC evaluation criteria. The summary of responses can be found here: https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/sites/default/files/Data/DAC-Criteria/ConsultationReport_EvaluationCriteria.pdf

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 are about power,[3] provenance and politics. In different, but clearly connected ways, they both offer answers to the question: in what ways is the humanitarian system[4] hardwired against providing relevant aid? We will see both critiques resurface in the barriers and constraints identified throughout this paper.

The 'western-driven' critique includes diverse arguments, but essentially claims that the humanitarian system is rooted in the western perspectives of those who laid its foundations in the early and mid-20th century and continued to shape its direction (see inter alia Duffield, 1996; Bernard, 2015; Bennett, 2016; Davey, 2014). Some see it clearly as a 'continuation of the colonial project' (Jayawickrama, 2018) or the 'perpetuation of colonial power relations' (Rutazibwa, 2019), while others trace its changing ideological incarnations through the 20th century (see inter alia, Davey et al 2013; Kent; Maxwell and Walker; Barnett, 2011). For relevance, the upshot is arguably the same: a paternalistic system which is driven by its own culture, values and purposes rather than those of the people it seeks to serve. Critics argue that a rigorous, honest look at the engrained 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).

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 inter-alia Darcy et al, 2013; Scott, 2014; IFRC, 2018; ALNAP, 2018). Being supply-driven arguably runs deep in the power dynamics of all philanthropy (Stirrat, 2006),[5] 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 (Obrecht, 2018; Andersen, 2003), the structures of sector-based coordination pre-set the response (ACAPS, 2016) and the politics of funding disincentivise agencies from transcending their 'offer' (Konyndyk, 2018). In this model, humanitarians are only answerable

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3   Barnett and Duvall's definition of power is helpful here: 'the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate' (2005).

4   In this paper, the humanitarian 'system' is understood according to the same definition of the formal internationally funded system used by ALNAP in the State of the Humanitarian System report: 'The network of inter-connected institutional and operational entities that receive funds, directly or indirectly from public donors and private sources, to enhance, support or substitute for in-country responses in the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection to a population in crisis' (ALNAP, 2018:32).

5   Drawing on literature on the politics of philanthropy in his examination of the 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'.

to their donors and the affected people 'are not shareholders in a supply-driven market' (De Torrenté, 2013:612).

So, what's the alternative? If we follow this market language, and focus relevance on what people need and want, then the obvious and often called-for opposite is a 'demand-driven' model (see inter alia Sanderson, 2018; Konyndyk, 2018; Metcalfe-Hough et al, 2018), that would be viable in a business, where the 'client' or 'customer' satisfaction is essential to shareholder happiness (De Torrenté, 2013) – and indeed some agencies have adopted 'client' language (see Narayanan, 2019).[6] But as we shall explore, 'demand-driven' is easier said than defined and done. Even Mary Andersen, one of the most eloquent critics of the supply-driven system, stopped short of giving this label to the alternative (Andersen et al, 2012). The supply-demand paradigm can only take us so far. Humanitarian action, despite 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 inter alia 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.

These critiques of the system might not be resolved, but neither have they been ignored – there have been significant attempts to re-align 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 re-opened old questions about cultural proximity and who gets the power to decide the response.

> **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.**

Just as the Rwanda, Bosnia, Indian Ocean Tsunami and Syria Crises were defining moments for the evolution of protection, participation and cash, other recent crises have brought relevance issues to the fore. The fact that more humanitarian response is taking place in urban settings and in middle-income countries is prompting a rethink in what's most relevant in these contexts, as are the imperatives to cover both more anticipatory and protracted action. Both the Ebola Outbreak – in West Africa and now in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – and the refugee crisis in Europe jarred with the familiar humanitarian models, forcing agencies to recognise, and respond to unfamiliar needs and unfamiliar contexts. And we can imagine that with future threats,

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6    In a study on the continued relevance of international non-governmental organisations, 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).

geopolitical shifts, and re-configurations of the humanitarian eco-system, humanitarians will need to continually re-ask the relevance question and reiterate the approaches and tools to do so intelligently.

## 2.3 Performance and shortfalls

It is always going to 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?

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 agencies fell short of the pass mark. Based on a set of verified evaluations, it scored 2.7 out of a possible 4,[7] better than some other commitments, but still short of the 'fulfilment' threshold of a score of 3 (CHS Alliance, 2019).

*The State of the Humanitarian System 2018 report* (SOHS) (ALNAP, 2018) analysed the findings of a much wider set of evaluations and interviews and found cause for optimism and concern. On the positive side, evaluations suggested that – in line with the humanitarian imperative – interventions were generally successful at addressing people's most urgent basic needs. And, strikingly, practitioners felt that relevance was the strongest aspect of their performance. But this 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 – in particular, 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).

People on the receiving end of aid are the best judges of whether it was relevant to their priority needs. Evaluations can be self-referential – measuring

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7    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.

relevance against the priorities of the project – and they don't routinely ask recipients for their views.[8] Measuring how people judge relevance is, however, not straightforward. Judgement will be affected by who is asked what, where and how, and by the power dynamics and relationship to aid at play. Perceptions of threats and risks will differ and deriving a general overview from wide-ranging individual experiences is fraught. This is evident in the mixed feedback gathered in surveys conducted by Ground Truth Solutions (Ground Truth, 2018b) and by the SOHS project (ALNAP, 2018).

With this in mind, we see that people were generally positive in their responses to the SOHS survey of aid recipients. When asked if the assistance they received met their most important needs, of the 5,000 respondents to a mobile phone survey across five countries,[9] 39% answered 'yes' and 48% answered 'partially', an improvement on previous years. But unlike practitioners, they also felt that performance was poorer in this area than in others, and 30% felt that providing the type of aid most needed was the area where most improvement was needed.

In their surveys, Ground Truth Solutions 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[10] whether the aid they received covered their most important needs, a total of 33% answered 'not at all' and a further 42% answered 'not very much' or 'somewhat'. Only 26% answered 'completely' or 'mostly yes' – a figure which would have been much lower if a particularly positive score from Haiti were excluded. However, it is 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.

The surveys also offer some insight into what people consider their priority needs. Asking what people most needed, the SOHS survey highlighted food as the major priority, followed by cash/vouchers, education, health, shelter and clean water and sanitation (ALNAP, 2018:173). Asking what needs went most unmet, the Ground Truth surveys highlighted shelter and housing, and food and healthcare. But two obvious issues belie these generalisations: firstly, that priority needs varied significantly between countries;[11] and that peoples' answers appear to be framed in terms of what's already on the humanitarian menu of assistance. These issues are central to the question of understanding what people need which we shall explore in .

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8   According to the 2018 SOHS, affected people were asked their opinion on relevance in 19 out of 121 evaluations reviewed.

9   For the 2018 SOHS report, ALNAP commissioned GeoPoll to carry out mobile phone surveys with aid recipients in DRC, Kenya and Ethiopia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

10  Ground Truths Solutions surveyed people in Afghanistan, Haiti, Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, Uganda and Bangladesh to inform its 2018 report against Grand Bargain Commitments.

11  In the SOHS survey, of the five countries surveyed only the two in the Horn of Africa (Kenya and Somalia) shared the same top three priority needs. In the Ground Truths surveys, cash was the most important unmet need in Iraq but less prominent elsewhere.

**Figure 1:** The 10 dimensions of a relevant response
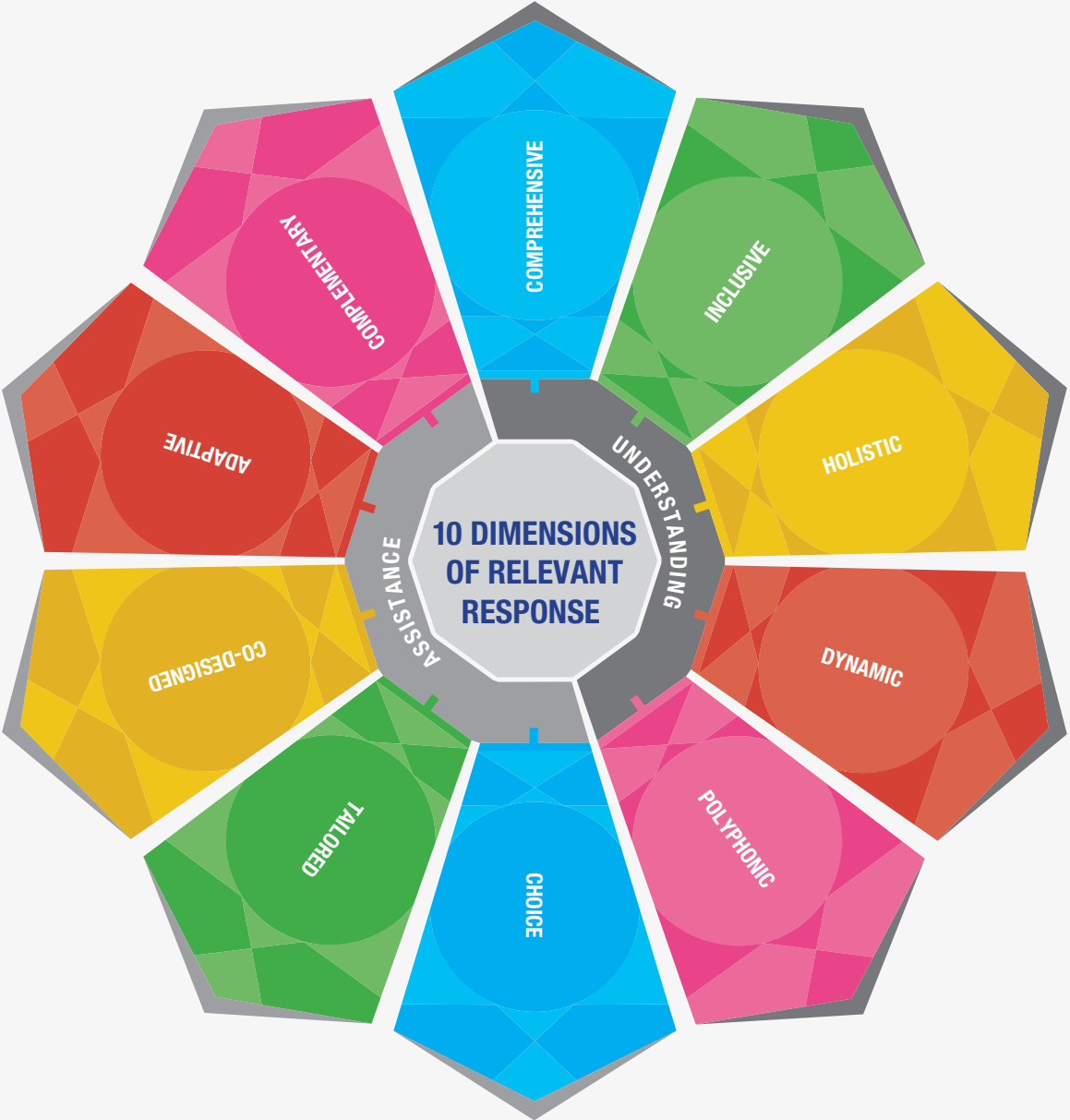
**Figure 2:** Sliding scales of the 10 dimensions of a relevant response



UNDERSTANDING

ASSISTANCE

Predefined basic needs

How **comprehensive** is our understanding?

Contextualised well-being

How much **choice** do affected populations have?

Standard menu

Variable choice

Homogeneity

How **inclusive** is our understanding?

Intersectionality

How **tailored** is our assistance?

Blanket

Bespoke

Needs only

How **holistic** is our understanding?

Capacities & culture

How **co-designed** is our assistance (with affected people)?

Communication

Co-design

Upfront assessment

How **dynamic** is our understanding?

Constant learning

How **adaptive** is our assistance?

Fixed offer

Evolving offer

Single narrative

How **polyphonic** is our understanding?

Analysis ecosystem

How **complementary** is our assistance?

Project relevance

Collective relevance

# 3. HOW TO UNDERSTAND WHAT PEOPLE NEED?

## 3.1 Commitments and developments

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 (see inter alia ICRC, 1994; Poole, 2014; Dalrymple and Smith, 2014) – this is a central tenet. But there is no fixed definition of what a 'humanitarian need' is – beyond being something to do with human suffering related to crises and disasters (see GHD, 2003). Like humanitarianism itself, need is a fluid socio-political construct under continuous re-negotiation (Davey, 2014; Gordon and Donini, 2016; IFRC, 2018) – it shape-shifts with the scale of ambition, the availability and 'business model' of response, as well as the context of the crisis and 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).

This hasn't stopped humanitarians investing significant effort in the important *practicalities* of understanding what people need in a crisis. In 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 multi-agency and multi-sector assessments are in common use, and there are many examples of increasingly sophisticated techniques for gathering and analysing information (ACAPS, 2016) – from the drought in Somalia to the earthquake in Nepal.

Yet despite these efforts, our understanding of needs is still widely felt to be partial and flawed, riddled with 'blind spots' (see inter alia ACAPS, 2016; ODI, 2017; IFRC, 2018). This is partly inevitable and partly avoidable. Inevitably, humanitarians have to settle for 'good enough' given the environments and

scale they are working in: 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*.

So, what does all this mean for our needs-based relevance question? We will explore five recurring aspects that are wrapped up in this problem of understanding needs as the basis for relevant response: how to get a **comprehensive** understanding of all the types of needs people face; how to get an **inclusive** understanding of what these mean for different sections of the population; how to get a **holistic** understanding of people's capacities and contexts; how to get a **dynamic** understanding of changing needs; and how to make sense of the **polyphony** of different versions of what's needed.

## 3.2 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 (cited in Time to Listen)[12]

**Problem:** Are humanitarians understanding the full range of people's greatest needs, rather than only those that they are conditioned to see? No, they are not, according to the supply-driven critique – understanding of what people most need is blinkered by a pre-determined humanitarian offer. Armed with hammers, humanitarians only recognise nails (ACAPS, 2016:3).

Although this may partly be due to technical competence (ALNAP, 2018; Obrecht, 2018), critics point to a deeper problem – governments and agencies 'straightjacket' (Andersen et al, 2012) what is considered a 'humanitarian' need, according to their own institutionalised priorities, business models resource constraints and world view (see inter alia IFRC, 2018; Darcy et al, 2013; Konyndyk, 2018). In long-term aid settings – where the bulk of humanitarian response takes place[13] – this model becomes an entangled reciprocal dependence (Andersen et al, 2012), which can warp what people see and say their priority needs are. When asked by Ground Truth Solutions which of their needs were going unmet, half of people answered in terms of what was on offer already (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018b).[14]

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12 See: www.alnap.org/help-library/time-to-listen-hearing-people-on-the-receiving-end-of-international-aid

13 Almost three quarters of international humanitarian assistance goes to long-term recipient countries according to the Global Humanitarian Assistance report (Development Initiatives, 2018).

14 It should be noted however that people's response to unmet needs was as much about sufficiency as relevance: approximately 50% of those surveyed stated that they needed more of what they were already receiving.

How to ensure fairness in the global designation of needs when people experience very different baselines of wellbeing and prioritise very different needs in different contexts?

But there is clearly more to it than this. Even without the 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*. Issues of culture and power resurface here. Language can be a specific barrier: in the response in North Eastern Nigeria, Translators without Borders revealed that the 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. Power, culture and trust influence who voices which 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 severe mental health needs, and that families with malnourished children do not ask for assistance (Tay et al, 2018).

**Practice and progress:** Knowing all this, what are humanitarians doing to address these blind spots and achieve a more comprehensive picture of what people need? They are certainly recognising more types of needs. The evolution of protection is perhaps one example. Learning from the failures of the international response to the Rwandan Genocide and the Srebrenica Massacre, its premise was that people needed safety, dignity and protection 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 people (IDPs) camp wearing a sign which read: 'We don't need food. We need safety' (Roberts, 1996).[15]

Attempting to overcome the straightjackets of sectors and mandates, agencies have over the last decade been undertaking more and better multi-sector needs assessments.[16] According to one review, the quality of the information in assessments have 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 multi-sector processes merely aggregate, rather than transcend, the views from the sector silos or impose simplicity on complexity.

Lessons are also starting to be learned from beyond the humanitarian world. A wider conception of the requirements for wellbeing is well-rooted in many domestic welfare and international poverty approaches including multi-

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15   Yet, over time protection has itself been criticised for becoming 'sectorised' and for failure to identify priority needs (Niland et al, 2015).

16   The Nepal Earthquake post-disaster needs assessment (Government of Nepal, 2015) is cited as a positive example, bringing experts together across 23 sectors, and in Somalia, the drought impact needs assessment joined humanitarian and development perspectives (ACAPS, 2016).

dimensional measures of poverty and basic necessities surveys (Benini, 2018). Similar approaches have been adapted and trialled more recently in some humanitarian settings. The Humanitarian Emergency Settings Perceived Needs Scale provides a quick way to measure a wide range of problem areas as perceived, expressed and prioritised by affected people themselves (see WHO, 2011; Benini, 2018). It includes both needs which fit with humanitarian sectors' basic needs – such as food or health – and those which go across and beyond them – such as information and respect.

**Constraints and dilemmas:** Calling for a comprehensive understanding of needs inevitably leads many to pose questions about humanitarian parameters and voice concerns about humanitarian 'mandate creep'. It sets up the longstanding debate between those who fear that the necessarily narrow conception of emergency aid will face distraction, dilution and diversion of scarce resources (see inter alia Macrae et al, 2002; Rieff, 2002; Dubois, 2018) and those who feel that it has to expand or adapt to emerging context-specific realities (Darcy, 2003; Ban Ki Moon, 2016; Fal-Dutra Santos, 2018).

Beyond mandate creep, comprehensive understanding creates two dilemmas: expectations and equity. The expectations dilemma is perhaps common to all aspects of understanding needs: how, when resources are stretched, to ask people about their full set of needs in the full knowledge that delivery is unlikely. This can perhaps be easily dismissed – provision won't change if needs aren't known. aHarder to square is the equity dilemma: how to ensure fairness in the global designation of needs (Binder et al, 2013) when people experience very different baselines of wellbeing and prioritise very different needs in different contexts.

## 3.3 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 and Inclusion, 2015:19)

**Problem:** 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's 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, 2018). 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. 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 and less accountable to provide relevant and appropriate services.

There is particular concern over how women and girls, older people, and people with disabilities are excluded from the picture of needs. Decent disaggregated data on sex, age and disability is often missing (see inter alia Williams, J 2011; ACAPS, 2016; ALNAP, 2018; IFRC, 2018). Others highlight failures to consider sexual or gender minorities,[17] for example with gender binary markers on forms or household surveys that make assumptions about family composition. The result, as case studies in Pakistan, the Philippines and Nepal show, may be harassment or exclusion from assistance (Devakula, 2018).

> By rendering their needs invisible, organisations are less driven and less accountable to provide relevant and appropriate services.

**Practice and progress:** There does not 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; 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, 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 Action Group, 2018).

So why, despite this institutional awareness, is application so patchy? Again, there is no simple answer. Some argue 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) and male experience. 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' has highlighted. At a technical level, some cite a problem of insufficient data, and others an over-fixation on data distracting from what can't be counted – e.g. power dynamics – or what can be too risky to record – e.g. sexual orientation.[18] At a practical level, it may be sheer inclusion-overload – too many vulnerable groups to survey and too little time, skills and support to include them all (WaterAid et al, 2016; ALNAP, 2018; CHS Alliance, 2018).

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17   This paper uses the term sexual and gender minorities to refer to what other papers variously refer to as LGBTQI or SOGIESC, following the term used by the Humanitarian Advisory Group paper (Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2018).

18   The Humanitarian Action 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).

**The dilemmas:** 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) around – for example – inclusion of women or of sexual and gender minorities. 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 constraints and disruption of most emergencies, it is much harder.

The obvious danger is of a reductive 'check-list' approach to inclusion, one which pre-selects 'vulnerable' groups – women, older people, people with disabilities – and pre-sets ways of counting them. This risks not only excluding others, but also over-simplifying and fixing peoples' identities, needs and experiences (Hyndman, 2010; Hilhorst et al, 2018; Ahmad and Eckenwiler, 2018) – replacing one 'cookie-cutter' approach (IFRC, 2018) with three others.

So how can we take differences into account without falling into this trap? Hugo Slim and others make the case for an 'intersectional' approach, which takes into account the multiple 'personal, political and social dimensions which intersect our lives and shape our experience of power' (Slim, 2018). Shortcuts will be necessary and inevitable in the early stages of major crises, he argues, but a nuanced social analysis should be the aim.

The question is whether humanitarians' profiles, toolkits and skillsets support them to do this or whether this simply falls into the 'too hard basket' (Humanitarian Action Group, 2018). The discussion on inclusion of vulnerable groups appears to be moving from setting guidelines to supporting implementation. As it does so, there is perhaps a choice: either to reinforce separate approaches to different groups, risking the paralysis of inclusion overload; or to seek practical ways to bring them together, in a 'good enough' approach that avoids the 'perils of perfect pluralism' (Hyndman, 2010).

## 3.4 Holistic understanding: all the affected persons

> '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)

**The problem:** Defining people solely in terms of their needs is fundamentally problematic. It is not only dehumanising – reducing people to needy passive victims, rather than rounded active stakeholders (see Harrell-Bond, 2002; Grünewald and de Geoffroy; 2008, Dubois, 2018) – but it also fails to understand the whole person, their capacities, culture and context, and reduces the odds of designing support that is relevant and appropriate to them. Despite this, the

entire need-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 Andersen it's far from what's really required – an approach which 'starts from what people have, not what they need', where 'outsiders' integrate the 'assets and capacities of insiders to develop contextually appropriate strategies' (Andersen et al, 2012:137).

We see consequences of 'needs-only' understanding in many humanitarian situations. In terms of capacities, for example, assessments often fail to take into account the livelihoods and societal roles of older people, assuming dependency of all over-60's (IFRC, 2018). There is also the problematic tendency to equate 'women' with 'vulnerability' (Hilhorst et al, 2018). In terms of context,[19] a lack of understanding complex urban environments has compromised many responses including the West Africa Ebola response (Campbell, 2018). In terms of culture,[20] the spread of the Ebola outbreak 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 socio-cultural understanding continues to be a major challenge in the fight against Ebola misinformation in DRC (Leach and Bedford, 2015).

**The practice:** As humanitarians respond to unfamiliar crises in unfamiliar settings, they are less able to rely on familiar assumptions and may be learning to further explore context. With more urban responses, including in middle-income countries, there are now more contextual analysis tools than ever – ranging from rapid perception-based assessments to longer in-depth approaches (Campbell, 2018). The rise of cash-based programming (see Section 4.2) is also bringing more awareness and analysis of local market dynamics (see Juillard, 2018). But routine application appears to be a long way off: the existence of tools doesn't automatically mean acceptance uptake, and uptake doesn't mean automatically mean quality analysis (Campbell, 2018).

Understanding people's capacities doesn't appear to come with a standalone set of guidelines and approaches. It is most commonly integrated into the vulnerabilities and capacities assessments used by many agencies, with capacities understood as being part of assessments (see inter alia ACAPS, 2014) and of an inclusive and participatory approach (Humanity and Inclusion, 2015; Brown and Donini, 2014). However, their findings rarely feature in analysis of the situation or needs overviews. In these, analysis of capacities mostly looks at the level of national or local organisations' or institutions' capacity to respond to the crisis, rather than at people's capacities and active roles in their societies.

19   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.

20   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).

**The dilemmas:** Shifting from a needs-only to a holistic understanding, raises inevitable questions of how to do this, and how far to go. As we've seen above with the inclusion challenge, overwhelm is a problem – the reality of high-urgency, low-resource humanitarian responses with an already 'dusty stack' (Campbell, 2018) of approach guidelines, make 'holistic' seem like a very tall order (see Meaux and Osofian 2016; Goddard and Annaraj, 2017). There are also problems of high staff turnover and limited expertise, and the lack of existing knowledge about the context in a sector that despite localisation impetus, is still largely foreign-led.

Being locally led, developing better listening skills (Andersen 2012) and employing more anthropologists (Colson, 2011; Mosel and Holloway, 2019) would no doubt help to improve understanding, but it doesn't answer the question of where to set the parameters of understanding. What's our unit of understanding – the locality, the community, the household or the individual?[21] – and what is usefully, feasibly and ethically enough to know about them? The stage, scale and nature of different crises will mean setting the parameters in different places.

## 3.5 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 South Department, Haiti (South department)
(Ground Truth Solutions, 2018)

**The problem:** Humanitarian action takes place in volatile settings, usually over many years. So how can humanitarians ensure that support *stays* relevant – that their understanding keeps pace with changing requirements?

We know that crises change over time – whether 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 material needs, such as moving from shelter and food to housing and seeds, but also non-material needs: for example, WHO 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). And we also know that people's relationship to aid is dynamic, often becoming more negative as frustrations build and priorities shift from immediate provision to concerns about how they

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21   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).

Inclusion involves decisions about whose needs to understand, and how to understand them. These can be politically and culturally loaded and practically tricky.

are treated and what the future holds (Andersen et al, 2012). The Ground Truth Solutions' surveys reveal how the top unmet needs change from one year to the next (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018).[22]

Yet 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 protracted emergencies (ALNAP, 2018). This, it suggests, is partly because of an entrenched approach which sees understanding needs as something to be done upfront in one-off intensive assessments. It's a rigid linear approach to the programme cycle embedded in the coordination process for humanitarian requirements which, 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.

**The practice and progress:** Staying relevant therefore demands an iterative learning process about what people want and need (Dillon, 2019). 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 institutionalised effort invested in this ongoing understanding. Assessments are privileged over monitoring at a system-wide level and a project level (see inter alia Warner, 2017) and what monitoring there is tends to be focused on checking quality of outputs, rather than evolution of needs (Turnbull, 2016 cited in Obrecht, 2018; Dillon and Sundberg, 2019).

Good practice is emerging with renewed attention to accountability and adaptiveness, new approaches and new examples. The CHS on quality and accountability and the Grand Bargain's 'participation revolution' workstream both build on longstanding calls for humanitarians to listen actively and continually throughout the duration of the response – and to learn from what they hear. There is a clearer expectation that agencies will build in two-way communication in all phases of aid programmes (Tamminga et al, 2019) and many initiatives to make this happen (Metcalfe-Hough et al, 2018). In separate developments, evolving approaches to risk-based or early-action approaches are bringing more sophisticated tools for ongoing monitoring of indicators for risks and threats (Tozier de la Poteria et al, 2018) and moving towards a more phased approach (Hailey et al, 2018).

**The dilemmas and constraints:** These various initiatives and commitments have yet to add up to a shift in the balance from upfront assessments to ongoing understanding. Many agencies lack the systems, staff and processes to do this.

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22   For example, in Afghanistan in 2017 people reported that their most important unmet needs were shelter, energy and food. In 2018 these had changed to food, protection and cash. Changes of unmet needs from year to year is visible in all 6 countries for which Ground Truth Solutions' data is available for both years.

This may be partly because there are few incentives to do so. Donors do not routinely demand it and may indeed encourage a fixed trajectory, as we'll see in Section 4.5. There is also no institutionalised approach to monitoring in the UN coordinated Humanitarian Response Cycle to mirror that for upfront Needs Overviews (Swithern, 2018).

Many of the practical constraints are familiar. A shortage of resources means that agencies feel compelled to make investment trade-offs between 'monitoring' and 'doing'. 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 to monitor. Ethical considerations also prompt questions about how much to intrude on people with repeated surveys – striking the right balance is critical. As we shall explore in Section 4.4, involving people in constant monitoring, may well worsen their relationship with aid over time, unless agencies act on what they learn by providing more relevant assistance.
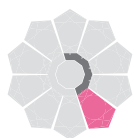
## 3.6 Polyphonic understanding: all the narratives

'They only interview the IDP camp administrator,
but not us beneficiaries directly.'
60 year-old IDP in Puntland, Somalia (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018)

**Problem:** Understanding what people need involves understanding many differing aspects and versions of what that means. Everything we've explored above – comprehensive, inclusive, holistic and dynamic understanding – involves listening to multiple perspectives. How then do humanitarians handle this? How can they listen to these many coexisting and sometimes competing narratives from institutions and affected people in order to hear what's most relevant? Can it be a polyphony[23] – where different voices each have their part – rather than a cacophony, or a single dominant voice?

Making sense of multiple narratives is hard, and particularly so for a system geared towards singular, decisive action. 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. In doing so, they run the risk of focusing on the wrong problems (Campbell and Knox Clarke, 2018).

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23    In this musical analogy, polyphony is defined as the ability to simultaneously combine a number of distinct parts or notes in a single piece.

There are two levels to this problem. Firstly, how do decision makers make sense of the multiple narratives and sources of information about needs? This is the level we focus on in this section. Secondly, how do those sources deal with the multiple versions they hear from affected people? We focus on this level in Section 4.4 below. Both levels raise the critical issue of who gets to be the dominant 'expert' on what's most relevant.

> **Making sense of multiple narratives is hard, and particularly so for a system geared towards singular, decisive action.**

**Practice and progress:** The system is not short of descriptions of need. 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 Haiti Humanitarian Response Plan, noted 100 needs assessments, the one for Chad for 2019 noted 29 multi-sector 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 to 'coordinate and streamline data collection' to ensure this, but there has been limited evidence of progress (Metcalfe-Hough et al, 2018). As the SOHS 2018 study notes, there is a lack of convergence in the current 'highly atomised system' (ALNAP, 2018) – 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, 2016).

At the same time, there is an urge to overlay a single narrative onto these multiple assessments. The Grand Bargain called for a single overall assessment of needs for each crisis. But this has proved to be both controversial and intractable (Metcalfe-Hough et al, 2018): perhaps inevitably so in a system where who controls the needs narrative is tied up with who controls the market share of the response (Konyndyk, 2018). It is also practically difficult in contexts where there is high uncertainty and little consensus on what the needs are. ACAPS argues that the solution is two-fold: firstly, independent needs assessments conducted by those not involved in delivering the response, and secondly building an 'assessment ecosystem which can give contrasting and complementary perspectives to decision makers' (ACAPS, 2016).

But perhaps this places too much on the current mode of assessments. Juxtaposing multiple assessments won't automatically mean that multiple voices are heard within them. Adding up 'bracketed' 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 and Ground Truth Solutions, 2018b; IFRC, 2018). A truly participatory model underpins the idea of co-designed assistance, which we explore below.

**Dilemmas and constraints:** 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. The default mode of simplicity is arguably understandable.

Balancing multiple and often divergent narratives also raises many dilemmas. We will now explore what happens when listening to a polyphony of perspectives hits the crunch point of deciding what to do. How to avoid bias in deciding whose voices are heard and which are the priority needs for the most relevant spend of limited resources? And how to reconcile the conflicts and contradictions between people's own various experienced and observed needs and between those of the 'experts' and the 'recipients'?
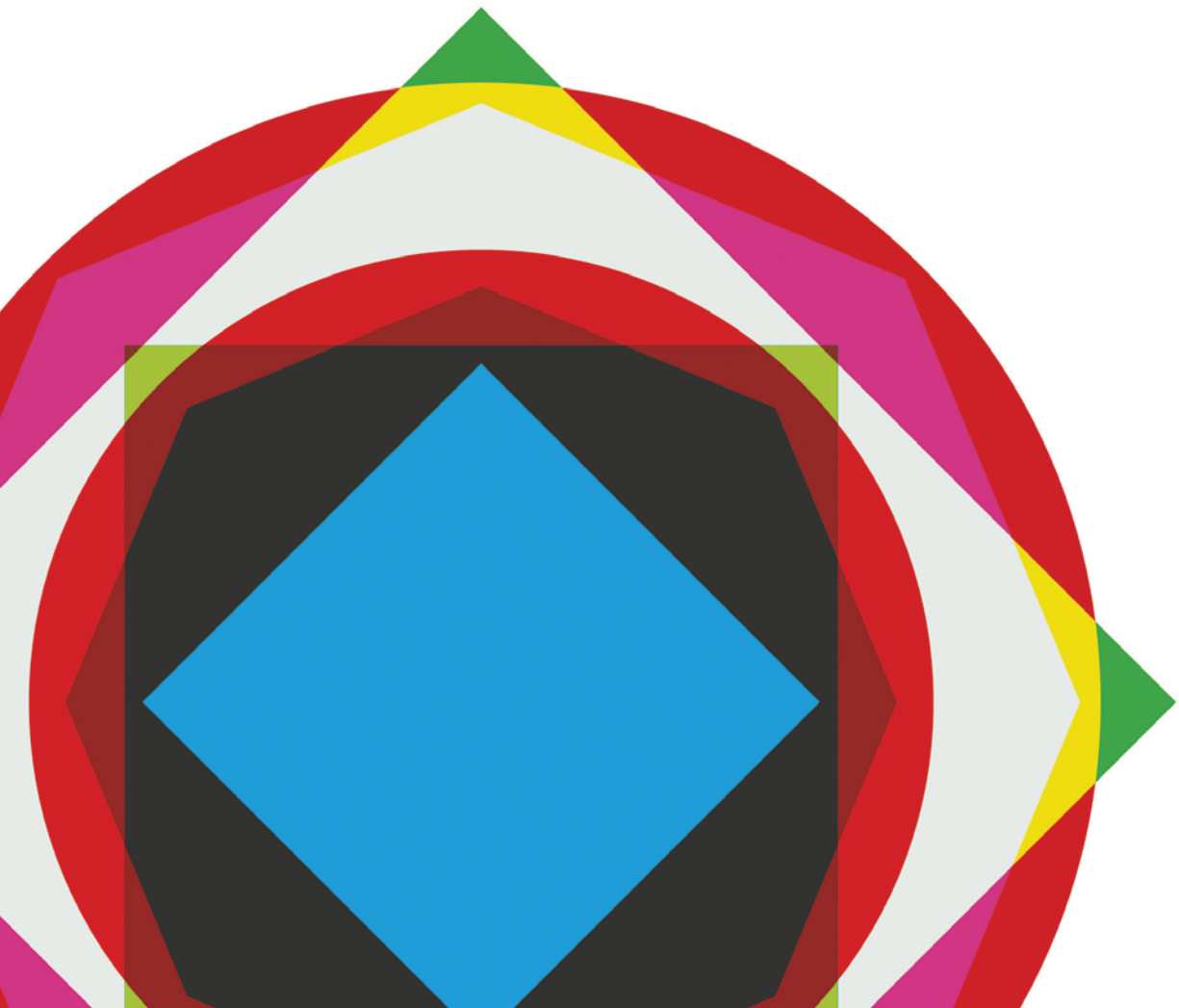
# 4. HOW TO PROVIDE WHAT PEOPLE NEED?

## 4.1 Deciding and designing

If relevance is about being in line with people's priority needs, all the aspects of understanding above must translate into decision-making and action. So how do humanitarian agencies and donors decide what the most important needs are, and how best to meet them in the most relevant way? Opaquely and obliquely, according to much of the literature on humanitarian decision-making. This argues that the relationship between needs assessments and programme design is unclear, indirect and inconsistent, more influenced by existing preferences and biases than a clear process of engaging with the evidence (see inter alia Darcy et al, 2013; Obrecht, 2017; Maxwell et al, 2013; de Geoffroy et al, 2015).

The word 'priority' in the DAC definition is a loaded one: prioritisation is a live problem, inherent in assessment as well as action. The clear logic and imperative of humanitarian action is, first and foremost, to respond to immediate, life-saving needs but this is by no means clear-cut. Humanitarians continue to grapple with it. Faced with overstretched resources, the humanitarian response plans are under pressure to better articulate their various rationales and strategies for prioritising the most severe needs (Swithern, 2018). Discussions and initiatives are taking place at the global level to introduce more transparency and better tools into the processes of deciding what and where the priorities lie. To open the black box of decision-making between assessments and action, more agencies are using response analysis frameworks to utilise information about needs, situation and context to plan the response options and target groups 'based on appropriateness and feasibility and taking into account potential risks' (Mohiddin and Smith, 2016:7; CaLP, 2018).

Yet however clear the methodologies, prioritising response 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 label the 'principled' and 'utilitarian' approaches (Binder et al, 2013). Advocates of 'effective altruism' (see inter alia 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 count as, for example, safety.

Who gets to decide is central to how decisions are made. As we've seen above, 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 widespread concern about the lack of participation of affected people 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 which are and feel less fair, relevant and appropriate (Andersen et al, 2012).

The lines between assessing, deciding and doing what's relevant, although a helpful structure for this paper, are perhaps artificially drawn in real life. 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 we will examine each of these in the next sections of the paper: 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. These broadly relate to the five aspects of discussed above – and like those, we shall see how there are synergies, as well as tensions within and between them.

## 4.2 Choice of assistance: the 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 (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018)

**The problem:** If people's needs are diverse and dynamic, then the repertoire of assistance must be too. But as we've seen, the supply-driven critique argues that humanitarians have a limited range of set responses that fit with their sectors, mandates and established expertise. The system tends to default to a basic 'standard' package which, while of crucial importance to many people in many crises, can be of limited relevance to many others (ALNAP, 2018).This is seen within longstanding archetypal humanitarian settings, for example of shelter programmes ignoring health needs (Mutunga et al, 2015, cited in Obrecht, 2018). It is also seen in recent crises which challenged the templates

of humanitarian needs and response – from 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. There are two approaches, which are not mutually exclusive, but both challenge the 'standard package'. Firstly, expanding the humanitarian repertoire to include modalities which allow people to make choices themselves; and secondly, expanding 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).

**The progress and practice:** 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 relocate choice to 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. Cash is now far from the outlier experiment it once was, it is a mainstream part of major responses, most notably the Syrian Crisis response, the tipping point in the case for cash.

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[24] and a lack of trust in people to decide what is best for them (CaLP, 2018). The fact that 'multi-purpose cash' – what would be called 'money' in other contexts – proves contentious (CaLP, 2018), is arguably an upshot of the clash between the principle of enabling choice and the engrained model of delivering discrete packages of assistance towards fixed measurable outcomes.[25]

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 (MacHattie, 2002; Maxwell et al, 2007). Clearly cash programming is not suitable for all needs in all settings and nor was it ever purported to be: not all crisis settings have markets which can support this choice, and not all essentials can be cash bought – for example protection or communal facilities (see inter alia Smith and Mohiddin, 2015; Global Wash and Shelter cluster, 2017; Gentilini, 2016). It is not what people generally say they need the most (ALNAP, 2018), and – as we'll see in the next section – it doesn't automatically address marginalised people or needs.

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24  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 (ODI and CDG, 2015).

25  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.

But we have also seen how the humanitarian 'standard package' is ill-suited to many needs and contexts – so to what extent are options increasing? The range of assistance available does appear to have expanded. Tracing the evolution of protection (Niland et al, 2015) and education (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2017) towards 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 of what's provided, evident not just in the Syrian Refugee and Ebola Crises, but also for example, in the response to the Rohingya Refugee Crisis, where psychological support is increasingly seen as part of the package of essential health services (Tay et al, 2018).

> The key question is where to set 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 and expert domain of others.

However, while there is innovation in many areas, the standard package still dominates. The funding figures are indicative: the food sector continues to dominate the humanitarian response – in 2018, it accounted for over 40% of sector specific international humanitarian assistance.[26] While this reflects the fact that food is critical for life-saving and is people's most cited priority need (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018) there is widespread criticism that there is under-investment in, and patchy application of, expanded options. 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 at the lack of implementation, noting how in the face of political, access and resource constraints there is a default to 'ready-made approaches' (Niland et al, 2015).

**Dilemmas and constraints:** There are obvious barriers to agencies being prepared to consider a wider set of solutions: these go beyond habit and mandate and involve critical practical questions of whether organisations have the expertise to provide new types of assistance, or the resources to grow this. As we have seen, cash has limits and faces institutional and systemic constraints. It also challenges agencies to rethink how they decide what to do, rather than sticking to a default set of standard responses. The high bar that has been set on deciding whether and how to 'do cash' has brought renewed focus on response analysis and response design approaches. If the general humanitarian tendency is to offer the same solution whatever the problem,

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26   According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' financial tracking service.

then these approaches offer ways to decide what the best solution might be and how to overcome practical constraints to offering it.

There are also deeper conceptual dilemmas. We've seen above how the humanitarian stretch to encompass a wider set of needs in chronic crises has led to critiques and concerns about mandate creep, expectations and equity. The key question, which we will return to below (Section 4.5) is where to set 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 and expert domain of others.
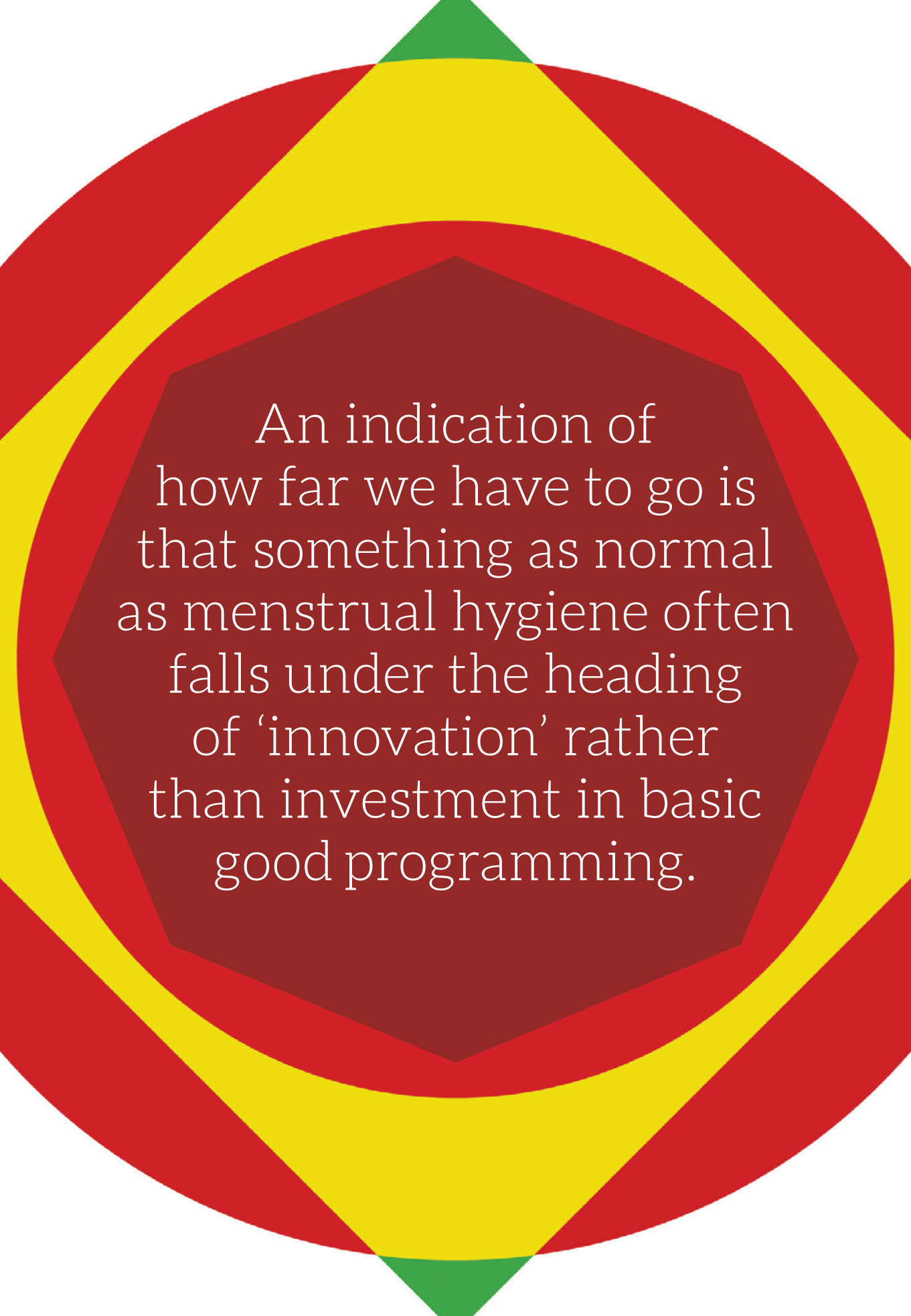
## 4.3 Tailored assistance: shaping provision to specific groups

'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.'

37 year-old male returnee in Afghanistan (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018)

**The problem:** Expanding the choice of assistance on offer doesn't guarantee relevance to the most vulnerable and marginalised people. For example, mental health support provided in camps in Bangladesh isn't necessarily specialised for the most high-risk groups (Tay et al, 2018). Even cash, which seeks to give households choice, is not automatically inclusive of demographic groups with specific needs (Berg and Seferis, 2015; Browne, 2014). Whatever the type of assistance on offer, 'blanket delivery' to populations will mean that it misses or is irrelevant or inappropriate for many. One study on the continued blanket provision of food, non-food items and cash after the Nepal earthquake showed how it excluded many marginalised people including Dalit and female-headed households (Barber, 2016). They missed out for several reasons: because they went unseen in assessments, because distribution was on the basis of home ownership and proof of citizenship which they did not hold, and because standard payments and packages didn't take additional needs into account.

Tailoring assistance is therefore key to improving its relevance. It is central to the DAC definition of relevance and appropriateness which sees the latter as 'the tailoring of humanitarian activities to local needs' (Beck, 2006:21). For those affected, it may be indistinguishable from 'coverage' – if methods of assessment and types of assistance are not tailored to them, they can miss out entirely. As we have seen, there is no shortage of documentation raising awareness and setting out standards and guidelines for improving inclusion of different groups. But while there are many positive examples of efforts to tailor assistance in mainstreamed or discrete programmes (see IFRC, 2018), this does not appear to be the norm. An indication of how far we have to go

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is that something as normal as menstrual hygiene often falls under the heading of 'innovation' rather than investment in basic good programming.

**The practice and progress:** Assessing humanitarian performance in meeting the needs of vulnerable population groups, the SOHS found marked improvement for women and girls – and indeed in surveys they generally did not rate relevance lower than men and boys did.[27] However, as we have seen, it also found that humanitarians still often fail to 'get the basics right', and are much worse at responding to the specific vulnerabilities of older people and people with disabilities (ALNAP, 2018:141).

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 by Humanity and Inclusion which revealed that 70% said health services were a priority but only 33% got them, and that targeted services were only available to 24–31% of respondents (Humanity and Inclusion, 2015). Other studies have shown how assistance not designed to be sensitive to the needs of sexual and gender minorities can cause them to avoid accessing it altogether (Devaluka, 2018).[28]

As we've discussed, people's experience of vulnerability is intersectional, so tailoring assistance demands considering other aspects of identity, social relations (see Rao, 2019) and culture (IFRC, 2014). But, in general 'where differences within a population are addressed, this is often through pre-determined activities for pre-determined "vulnerable groups"' (ALNAP, 2018:142) and these are delivered by siloed agencies with siloed responses (IFRC, 2018).

Language is a prime example of the need to tailor to intersectional needs – speaking a minority language or being illiterate often intersects with other aspects of marginalisation. Yet there are multiple examples of where failure to communicate and deliver support appropriately has directly led to exclusion – from public health interventions for Ebola which 'missed the mark' (Translators without Borders, 2019) to menstruation kits which went unused because of lack of appropriate instructions (Shadman, 2017).

**The dilemmas and constraints:** So why does the humanitarian system appear to be so limited in its ability to tailor assistance to be relevant and appropriate to those who most need it? As we've seen in Section 3.3, it comes back to the questions of the profile and lack of diversity of those who decide how aid is delivered and the entrenched power imbalance between them and people on

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27    According to the surveys of aid recipients by Ground Truth Solutions and SOHS, there was not a significant difference in responses from women and men to the relevance questions.

28    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).

the receiving end. It's also about whose voice gets heard within communities, those at the margins of society are often least likely to have their needs heard when official data or community leaders are the point of reference.

From an operational perspective, it also comes back to the supply model. According to Obrecht, 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. And unlike other business models which would 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 (Dubois, 2018; Andersen et al, 2012) beyond donor tick-box requirements for gender-sensitivity.

But this does not answer the dilemmas of offering inclusive bespoke assistance. On a sliding scale from blanket to bespoke approaches, how tailored is good enough? If 'tailoring to local need' (Beck, 2006) is the goal, what is the denominator of 'local' – the community, the demographic group, the individual – and how to do this in a way that preserves impartiality? And, as discussed above, how should humanitarians choose between meeting the needs of the many and the few? What does a pragmatic approach to tailoring look like in different stages and types of crisis – one that at least seeks to recognise and respond to the most prevalent marginalised groups and the main social, cultural and linguistic considerations in responding to them? And how do we do this without sacrificing efficiency?
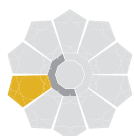
## 4.4 Co-designed assistance: involving affected people

'The aid providers trust their own opinions more than the refugee's opinions.'
46 year-old female refugee from South Sudan in Uganda (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018)

**The problem:** Participation is critical to relevance. This speaks clearly to the questions of inclusive and holistic understanding, and choice and tailoring. If assistance is to be relevant for affected people, then there is a strong argument that 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 (see Andersen et al, 2012; Mosel and Holloway, 2019), then being an active agent in the response becomes not just a *means* to relevant response, but an *end* in itself (see Brookings Institution, 2008; cited in Brown and Donini, 2014:20).

The case for participation – and engagement more widely – is well accepted in principle and enshrined in many commitments, from codes of conduct to the CHS and IASC guidelines. But participation appears to be easier said than done.

As we've discussed, it is widely felt that performance falls short of principles. People are primarily consulted in the assessment and monitoring stages but are not sufficiently involved as co-designers or partners in the implementation of responses (Grunewald and de Geoffroy, 2008; ALNAP, 2018).[29] As one Ecuadorian grassroots activist famously put it: 'This is how the verb to participate is conjugated: I participate. You participate. They decide.' (Andersen et al, 2012:68). It's a charge levelled at the whole aid effort, humanitarian and development, but raises particular questions for humanitarians in the rushed, constrained and politicised settings they work within.

**The practice and progress:** In the five years since engagement was discussed at the 29th ALNAP Annual Meeting in 2014, there have been new initiatives and new crises which have shed some 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 (Metcalfe-Hough et al, 2018).

> As one Ecuadorian grassroots activist famously put it: 'This is how the verb to participate is conjugated: I participate. You participate. They decide.' (Andersen et al, 2012:68). It's a charge levelled at the whole aid effort, humanitarian and development, but raises particular questions for humanitarians in the rushed, constrained and politicised settings they work within.

However, Ground Truth's surveys concluded that the benefits of this activity were not widely felt by affected people, who 'currently do not feel they can influence the decisions that affect them' (Ground Truths Solutions, 2018b:8). This holds true despite the improvements apparent in more recent surveys covering the same countries (Ground Truth Solutions, 2019). Overall, the outcomes of efforts were not clear, nor was 'whether humanitarian programmes are actually becoming more demand-driven' (Metcalfe-Hough et al, 2018:45). This is echoed in the SOHS findings, which 'did not see any large-scale shift in decision-making power away from humanitarian organisations and towards people affected by crisis' (ALNAP, 2018:158).

New and escalating crises over the period have highlighted both positive and negative practice. The initial 2014 Ebola response in West Africa is a widely cited example of how failure to meaningfully engage with affected communities – and indeed active dismissal of their of perspectives and capacity for agency – led to a failure of relevant and effective response. One evaluation attributed this to a 'predisposition in the aid system towards control and an inflated sense

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29   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 pf engagement: participation, partnerships, ownership are the less well served (Brown and Donini, 2012).

of its own importance, rather than responses and strategies that engage with and rely on communities' (Dubois et al, 2015:vi). Another noted that involving anthropologists earlier in the response would have helped to overcome this divide and engage positively with communities (UNICEF, 2016), instead of seeing their behaviour as the problem (ALNAP, 2018).[30] There are more positive examples though. For example, in Za'atari camp, where the numbers of Syrian refugees and the length of their displacement are both rising, one evaluation noted the potentially pioneering participatory approach to camp management, which learnt from urban development approaches (Hidalgo et al, 2015).
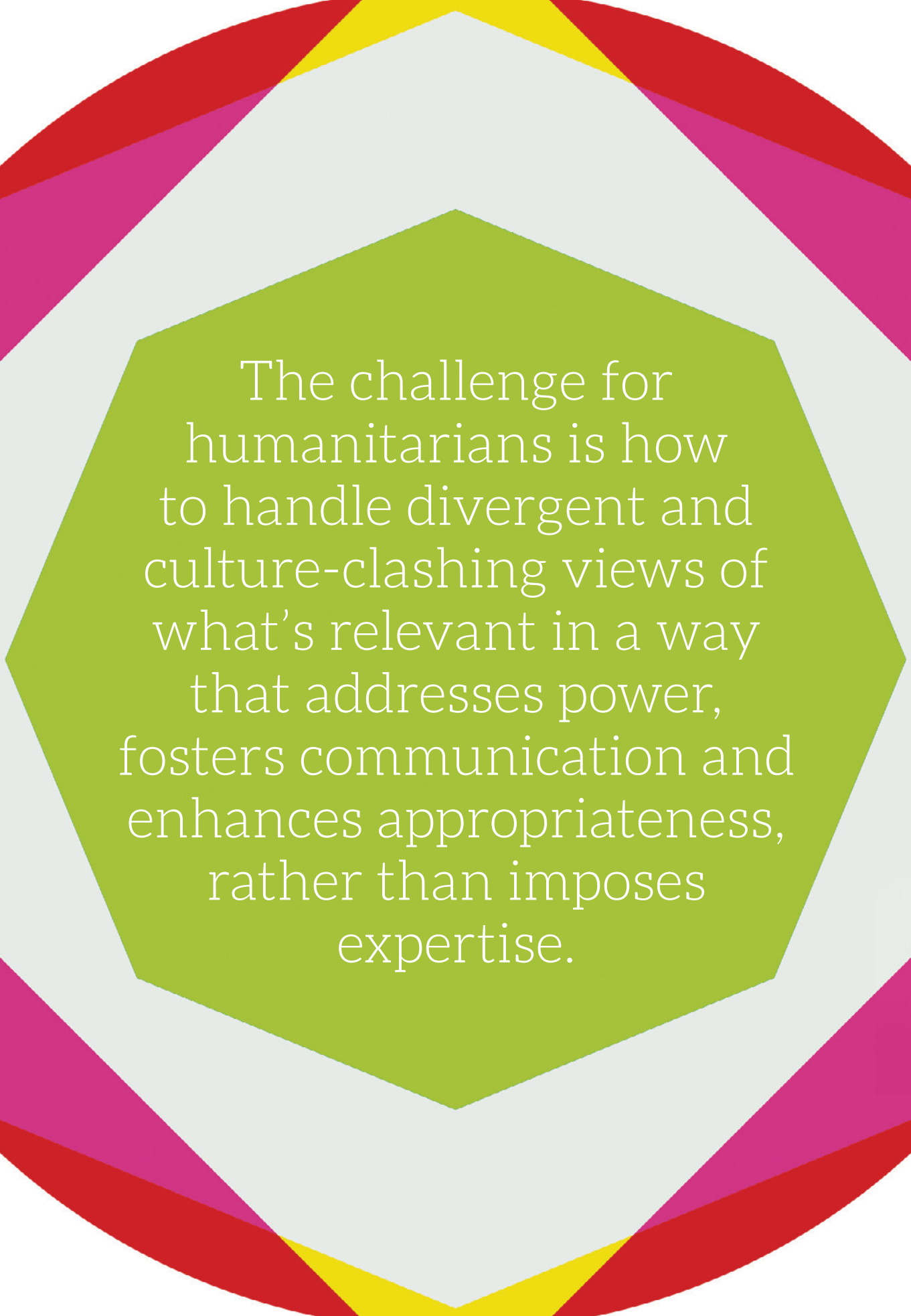
**The constraints and dilemmas:** The barriers and limits to participation are well-rehearsed. Brown and Donini categorise these as operational issues – cost, security, time and skills – and conceptual issues – technical, political and philosophical objections (Brown and Donini, 2014). Meaningful participation could, they argue, imply a radical 'upending' of the system. Steets et al point to the 'constellation of interests' that stand in the way of this (Steets et al, 2015:iii) and Obrecht, to the inherent tension between demands for participation and efficiency (Obrecht, 2018). From the participants' perspective there are multiple constraints: having the time, inclination, culture and power to engage with the design and delivery of programmes (ALNAP, 2018). Inclusion and representation to avoid elite capture are essential, but fraught with difficulties (IRC, 2017). There is, arguably, a vicious circle here too: the longer people feel that aid is not relevant to them, the more mistrustful and less willing they may be to engage with it (Andersen at al, 2012).

While listening to people is clearly critical to ensuring that aid is relevant and appropriate to people's priority needs, it does not guarantee that it will be. A recurrent dilemma is how to handle the clash between the perspectives of affected people and the views of 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).[31] Some resolve this by setting out that, based on IASC and CHS standards: 'compliance with humanitarian principles would take precedence over the will of affected populations where those are incompatible' (Steets et al, 2015:vii). But this precludes socio-culturally sensitive engagement at its peril, as we see in the Ebola response in DRC.

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 critique. Expertise is crucial, and scientific and technical advances from vaccinations to weather

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30   It has been a longstanding concern that anthropologists are typically brought in after the event to 'explain why technically perfect projects weren't working on terms of cultural resistance' (Colson, 2011).

31   The medic-patient analogy is often used here: on the one hand the doctor risks misdiagnosis if she simply observes symptoms and fails 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).

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.

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 sometime 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.

## 4.5 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.'
35 year-old male Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh (Ground Truth Solutions, 2019)

**The problem:** Being relevant is not a one-off fix. Rather than an upfront approach, it is an iterative design process. As we've seen in the dynamic assessment section, this is because as needs change over the course of a crisis, humanitarian assistance needs to keep up to stay relevant. It's also because, with its emphasis on speed and scale, humanitarian assistance often won't get it right first time. And of course, it's because changing in response to feedback is critical to accountability (Darcy, 2016).

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; IRC and Mercy Corps, 2016; Ramalingam, 2015). 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 they struggle to understand changing needs, humanitarians struggle to respond to what they do learn.

**The practice and progress:** 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, but it is inherent in commitments to accountability and in commitments to multi-year flexible approaches and unearmarked funding in the Grand Bargain. However presently, '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 at different levels. Obrecht categorises the many ways in which humanitarian agencies may need to adapt into five broad areas: in regard to *delivery* – adapting where assistance is given and how; *targeting* – changing to whom assistance is given; the *product* and *service* – adapting 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). But there is still concern that agencies are failing to act upon monitoring reports (Lawday et al, 2016; Quasmi, 2015; Warner, 2017; Dillon, 2019), and meaningfully take on board the increasing levels of feedback they are soliciting (see Jean, 2014; IRC, 2017), an issue which IRC is attempting to address through 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. 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 which requires a deeper organisational – or cross-organisational rethink (Jean and Bonino, 2014). There is a general tendency for flexibility to veer more towards quality correction than course correction: it's mostly at the level of technical adjustments to improve quality or appropriateness of specific deliverables, rather than fundamentally rethinking the response.

**Constraints and dilemmas:** 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.

Funding can also act as a serious constraint – short-term, inflexible grants which are linked to fixed pre-determined 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 towards 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). Even when funding enables greater flexibility, agencies can face constraints within their own systems, which have been developed over time to deliver an established set of solutions with linear theories of change (Ramalingam, 2013; Obrecht, 2018). Compounded by operating constraints these constraints limit options, meaning agencies still operate with short-term emergency responses in the face of longer-term needs – for example, providing tarpaulins instead of shelter, or food instead of livelihood support.

This relates to the dilemmas of the scope of humanitarian assistance – of where to set the parameters for the role of assistance (Swithern, 2018). Arguably, it is not the role of humanitarian response to stay relevant to people's needs over the full course of a protracted crisis. At some point, the humanitarian offer must de facto become irrelevant to make way for others, better able to

provide what people need, to step in (Bennett, 2016). Stretching the parameters of humanitarian response to stay relevant to people's needs for self-reliance and long-term solutions is not only unfeasible given the tools at their disposal and the environments they are working in, it's also a misdirection of assistance away from the most severe 'life-saving' needs (FAO, 2017). This is certainly the logic of attempts to forge a New Way of Working.[32] The persistent dilemma for humanitarian response is then: how and how far to adapt to changing needs when other solutions are not forthcoming?
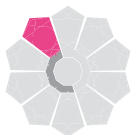
## 4.6 Complementary assistance: being collectively relevant

'I already had the phone from [agency name redacted], so I knew a little about the device (...). 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 I still can not 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 refugee from CAR in Cameroon, discussing the challenges of working with multiple phones provided by separate agencies for mobile-based cash payments (Ground Truth Solutions, 2019)

**The problem:** The scope dilemma forces us to look at humanitarian assistance as just one, often small, set of contributions that people will draw upon to meet their priority needs. A holistic understanding of their capabilities as well as their needs will begin to show this. Global as well as local analysis shows the range of private and public resources, from personal networks as well as national and international institutions (see Development Initiatives, 2018; Poole, 2019).

As the *Time to Listen report* reveals, beyond staying alive, what people really want is economic betterment, improved security and a sense of solidarity (Andersen et al, 2012). No single approach, particularly no humanitarian approach, can respond to all of these priorities.[33] Heider suggests in her reframing of the relevance criteria, that there is a need to relocate relevance in complexity thinking – looking for the most relevant 'node' for 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.

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

33   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, 2017:9).

This goes for thinking about the humanitarian assistance as a whole set of resources, as well as *within the whole* of other resources. If we are taking relevance to mean 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. There is a need to collaborate, cooperate and complement – 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 shifting their role from implementor to convenor and facilitator (Campbell, 2019).

Relevance, however, is usually judged at the level of implementation of specific projects or programmes from specific agencies. Whole-of response evaluations are rare and humanitarian coordination mechanisms tend to be a veneer for atomised, siloed responses (Darcy, 2016; Dubois, 2018). How then can humanitarians think about the collective relevance of their assistance, both as a whole and within the whole?

> If we are taking relevance to mean 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. There is a need to collaborate, cooperate and complement.

**The practice and progress:** Inter-agency evaluations allow some insight into the relevance of major humanitarian agencies, as a whole. 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 of the responses. 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, 2016:15). The coordinated humanitarian response plans are intended as a sound collective strategic basis for responding to priority needs, but these are widely felt to be neither collective nor strategic enough, and more a compilation of agency and sector projects (see Darcy, 2016; Konyndyk, 2018; Swithern, 2018). And since there is no systematic reporting against them – reporting tends to be at the agency or project level – there is no means of assessing their collective relevance and learning from this.

Recent developments are giving humanitarian agencies new imperatives and frameworks for thinking about their role in a wider effort to address people's needs. The rise of cash programming is forcing agencies to work together, albeit with some resistance. 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 Working seeks to bring humanitarian, development and peace actors together to work to their comparative advantages to address collective outcomes for crisis-affected communities. These shifts are encouraging but they are, for different reasons and in different degrees, a way off being able to evidence collective relevance.

**Constraints and dilemmas:** As Levine noted in his analysis of the Horn of Africa Drought, there are many reasons which make 'improving systems much harder than building the capacity of individual agencies' (Levine, 2011:15). In a system which many observe to be structured and incentivised towards fragmentation and competition (Bennett, 2016; Konyndyk, 2018), it is particularly hard.

Besides the politics, scale and complexity of the endeavour, there are genuine practical dilemmas about the burden of coordination. Though a lack of investment in collective effort can mean a misdirection of efforts, similarly an over-investment in coordination mechanisms means a diversion of scarce resources from 'doing' to 'connecting'. As we've seen in efforts to coordinate just traditional humanitarian actors under the common response plans, there are deep concerns about the demands that this places on time and resource poor agencies (see Darcy, 2016). Greater technology-aided analytic capacity to map various interventions against risks and needs might be part of the solution, but doesn't fully answer the question of how humanitarians can best work in a complementary way to contribute to meeting people's priority needs.

# 5. CONCLUSIONS AND KEY QUESTIONS

If relevance means a close match between 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.

We have seen how relevance and appropriateness are inextricable: the 'what' and the 'how' of humanitarian action are both important if people are to have their needs met – for their tangible priorities such as food, as well as their intangible priorities such as dignity. This takes us beyond simplistic ideas of supply and demand and encourages us to think about humanitarian assistance as much relational as transactional.

We have also seen the blurred line between understanding what's relevant and responding to it, that these are iterative rather than discrete processes. And while there is much room for improvement in understanding needs, there is not a simple equation to be drawn between more information 'in' and more relevant response 'out'. This is not only because of limitations in decision-making and prioritisation, but also because subjectivity and complexity pose limits to how much we can know and provide what's most relevant.

It is hard to measure how the humanitarian system is scoring against the relevance test. Relevance is contextual – so while global overviews can provide useful barometers, their insights are limited. Results are bound to be mixed depending on the stage and type of crisis, who asks whom and how. However, the consensus seems to be that there is a persistent relevance gap where people's various needs are not met by the standard humanitarian offer. This gap manifests in many ways – in addressing longer term needs after the acute phase of a crisis or providing the right support to people who fall outside a standard recipient profile. There are many good examples of approaches to fill the gap at large and small scales, from the spread of cash programming to emerging approaches to client responsiveness and individual inclusive and participatory programmes. But there is still a long way to go.

So, what gets in the way of improving relevance? Across each of the 10 dimensions in this paper, we see several common constraints: operational, systemic and conceptual.

**Operationally**, there are obvious external barriers of time and access, which may often be beyond the control of the humanitarian system and limit ability to listen deeply and adapt accordingly. But there are also internal issues of staff profile: both the diversity of who they are and the depth and breadth of what they know. There is also too much and not enough organisational protocol: organisations having on the one hand intransigent supply chains and on the other, gaps in tools and processes to enable inclusivity and responsiveness.

**Systemically**, the most salient barrier to relevance appears to be the fixity of the sector approach and of agencies' mandates – operational constraints can sometimes be a smokescreen for these more fundamental issues. The system's status quo promotes aid that is provided within this set menu – and the accountability incentives of the major agencies towards the major donors reinforce rather than challenge this. Funding is of course critical and tends to promote short-termism and adhesion to pre-set outputs. Questioning relevance of response inevitably leads to questioning how relevant the current humanitarian architecture and organisations are, and there are recurrent issues relating to the western roots of the humanitarian system and the exclusion of local actors and knowledge.

**Conceptually**, while there is little objection to the principle that aid should be relevant, there are challenges to what this implies. We've seen conceptual concerns around trusting people to know what is best for themselves play out in the cash debate. And we've seen conceptual concerns around the purpose and parameters of humanitarian assistance: that it should have a clear and bounded function of saving lives by meeting a clear set of basic needs.

Overcoming all these constraints would not yield a perfect score on the relevance test. As 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, knowing what's relevant enough in any given context and crisis stage, and what's enough information to guide this.

For each of the 10 dimensions we've explored, there are no clear-cut answers, but sliding scales along which choices must be made (see Annex 1). Each of these sets of choices pose serious dilemmas for humanitarians. The dilemmas we have identified fall into three broad groups: dilemmas of expertise i.e. who knows best; dilemmas of action i.e. what to prioritise; and dilemmas of boundaries i.e. when to stop.

The expertise dilemma revolves around the differences within and between the views of external experts and aid recipients. Who knows best, what's most relevant and who should control that narrative? There will be times when expert opinion can diagnose problems and technical solutions beyond the knowledge of affected people; but there will be times where external experts are blind to the what's really going on. There will be times when this can be

resolved through communication and negotiation, but there may also be times when there is an unsolvable clash of culture and opinion. There are also the thorny questions of representation. Who controls the needs narrative amongst humanitarian actors – when are single agency views, multiple agency views and independent overviews necessary? And who controls the relevance narrative amongst recipients – if we can't hear all voices all the time, how do we hear the most important ones at the most important times?

The action dilemma revolves around balancing the trade-offs of where to invest limited resources. Given that information is imperfect, and time is of the essence, when is it acceptable to make blanket decisions based on rules of thumb? At a practical level, there are trade-offs between directing investments to understanding, monitoring, coordinating and delivering more. Crucially, the question of the few and the many haunts humanitarian action. Humanitarian action is principled and aims to meet the needs of the most vulnerable but is also driven by a utilitarian imperative to meet the severe needs of the most people, which is reinforced by concerns of coverage, effectiveness and economies of scale. How then to prioritise and how far then should humanitarians go in tailoring assistance to specific needs and profiles? What is the balance between blanket and bespoke, and what does this mean for equitable allocation of resources within and between crises?

And finally, the boundaries dilemma revolves around the question of when humanitarian action should de facto become irrelevant. This goes for the action of specific agencies as well as of the endeavour as a whole. In the complex reality of needs, what are the most important nodes for humanitarian organisations to individually and collectively address, and how to make sure that their efforts connect with others? Across the long-term arc of people's needs from anticipatory action to protracted crises, how far should humanitarians go in adapting their offer to be relevant to these, and when is it time to let go and pass to others? As is the case in many crisis settings, the lack of other options makes this a particularly painful relevance dilemma.

These may appear to be overly abstract questions, but they have very practical implications. Being open to addressing these dilemmas head-on means being open to significant changes in the who, what and how of humanitarian action. Addressing some of the most entrenched constraints and thorniest dilemmas implies a disruptive 'upending' of the system. At the same time, 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. Routinely bringing the relevance test front and centre will be critical, engaging recipients, agencies and donors in routinely asking the question: how can our humanitarian support be more relevant?

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