

ACTION LEARNING IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE



Concept note | April 2019

What is this ALNAP research about?

ALNAP is working with its Members to develop and test approaches to action learning in frontline humanitarian response. The aim of this work is to improve the quality of within- and cross-response learning in order to make improvements to humanitarian operations.

This work looks at two broad sources for learning within a humanitarian response.

- **A first source for learning is from within the response itself:** the implicit knowledge that already exists amongst frontline staff and the people they serve. Action research is a broad family of approaches with an emphasis on placing knowledge users at the centre of research activities. In action research, practitioners consciously use a variety of approaches to better understand their situation and solve practical problems faced in their work. All action research approaches are participatory (the user of learning participates in generating the knowledge) and action-oriented (knowledge is used to take action, to improve practice or solve a problem). Such approaches can provide structure to the informal learning already taking place in a humanitarian response, making it easier to communicate and share this learning for wider use.
- **A second source for learning is external:** evidence and knowledge from other humanitarian responses that can be applied to improve quality in a new response. While there are increasingly large numbers of lessons learned products and evidence being produced in different response settings, it is difficult for individual decision-makers to understand which is most relevant for their work, and how to apply these findings to their own situation. 'Implementation science' is a set of approaches used to apply research findings to specific contexts. Implementation science was developed originally in the health sector to support the implementation of effective health interventions in different contexts. These approaches could be further developed to support the contextualisation of lessons learned and other evidence for use by decision-makers in humanitarian response.

Rationale

A great deal of knowledge exists in frontline humanitarian programmes, yet is rarely shared or fully utilised. There are many reasons for this. A shortage of time and resources means that it is challenging to apply structured approaches to reflection and learning, especially for national and local NGO responders. Monitoring and evaluation practices tend to be geared more towards meeting donor requirements than towards identifying and acting on new learning in order to improve a programme (Warner, 2017). Sometimes, the implicit knowledge and expertise held by individual frontline staff is undervalued or not recognised as ‘real’ knowledge because it is not expressed in formal documentation.

Even when structured learning approaches, such as research or impact evaluations, are used to understand the effectiveness or quality of an intervention, it is difficult for practitioners in other contexts to apply this learning directly to their own work. Findings from such research can be kept within single organisations or teams and not widely shared. When learning is shared, there are challenges around accessing and using this learning. There is little existing knowledge on best practices for adapting interventions in order to successfully apply lessons learned from one context to another.

This means that the assistance received by crisis affected people does not always fully reflect available knowledge on how best to support them and therefore is not as effective or relevant as it could be.

At the same time, there is increasing evidence that adapting and improving humanitarian programmes throughout implementation can increase the effectiveness, relevance and appropriateness of humanitarian action (Obrecht and Bourne 2018; Mercy Corps and IRC 2016; Campbell 2019). However, it is difficult to adapt and improve a response unless field staff are able to learn from what they are doing and apply learning from similar experiences elsewhere.

Activities and Timeline

The ALNAP Secretariat will be developing a set of approaches to action learning that can be used by humanitarian practitioners in a response. Approaches will be grouped around two to three themes, selected for their relevance to the key challenges in collecting and using learning for field level decision making. Each approach will be developed by a consultant with relevant expertise and will consist of a short methods paper and a set of exercises or practices to be used by frontline responders. These may be accompanied by the development of tools, such as apps or templates, depending on interest from end users and time availability.

ALNAP will establish a Steering Group, drawn from its membership, who will oversee the development of these approaches. Steering Group members will have the first opportunity to test and trial these approaches in their organisations, supported by ALNAP. A package of approaches to action learning will be produced on the basis of this testing and input by December 2019.

The ALNAP Secretariat will also produce a mapping of action learning approaches and/or applications, available by January 2020.

Interested in finding out more, or participating in the Steering Group?

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