



Spotlight on learning series

Communicating humanitarian learning

What do we know?

Jo-Hannah Lavey

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

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Contents

1 Introduction	2
<hr/>	
2 Methodology	3
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3 Concepts and definitions	4
<hr/>	
4 What we know about communicating learning in the humanitarian sector to improve policy and practice	9
<hr/>	
5 The humanitarian context: Related literature	10
<hr/>	
6 Implications for humanitarian communication	14
<hr/>	
7 Questions arising	17
<hr/>	
8 What next?	20
References	21

1 Introduction

Effective communication of critical lessons is essential to improve response to crises. This paper identifies what we know about how the sector communicates what it has learned to improve policy and practice.

Humanitarians produce a wealth of research and knowledge. There is, however, little evidence on how to best communicate this knowledge to maximise its impact. Despite the diversity and evolution of preferences for engaging with information, many humanitarian learning products are still published in digital PDF report format. This may not always be the best mode of communication – the World Bank found in 2014 that over 31% of their reports were never downloaded (Doemeland and Trevino, 2014).

In equal measure, humanitarian practitioners and policy makers require information that is immediately relevant to their work, in their context, at that moment in time. Communication is a two-way process. If the content of what is being communicated is not relevant or timely for the user, no approach to communications will make it so.

This scoping paper is aimed at producers and communicators of humanitarian knowledge. It provides a brief overview of core concepts and existing literature related to communicating humanitarian learning. It identifies five useful findings:

1. Change is complex: it takes time and often does not succeed.
2. Documented evidence is a small contributor to change.
3. Humanitarians prefer tacit, networked knowledge over documentation.
4. Humanitarians access knowledge that is immediately relevant.
5. National actors are not sufficiently included.

The paper also outlines what the literature tells us about humanitarian preferences for how to communicate learning. It concludes by finding that those aiming to share documented learning to improve policy and practice are operating without a solid evidence base to guide them, and proposes a future research agenda to fill these evidence gaps.

2 Methodology

The approach taken to this scoping paper was iterative and exploratory, applying mixed methods of key informant interviews, academic and grey literature review, a round table and peer review. The approach did not seek to be systematic or comprehensive, but to provide high-level insight into the existing research.

An initial literature review and set of key informant interviews informed topic clarity and focused further rounds of literature review and consultations. Literature from outside the sector informed definitions of key concepts, namely communication, learning and improving policy and practice.

Literature specific to the humanitarian sector was then reviewed. Due to a lack of literature on the specific topic of communicating learning in the humanitarian sector, the literature review was expanded to related fields: learning, decision-making, change, and research impact. Literature was selected for its relevance and ability to rapidly provide high-level, quality insight into the topic of communicating humanitarian learning. Given the breadth of disciplines considered, literature on each was limited for the purpose of scoping.

The literature was coded for its contributions to effective communication. Key informant interviews, a round table discussion and a peer review process with 13 experts in humanitarian research, communications and learning were used to triangulate findings from the literature and to recommend ways forward.

Limitations

The scoping process was challenged by the lack of literature on communicating humanitarian learning, and the specificity of well-established academic disciplines related to the topic. As a starting point, the literature reviewed is almost entirely Western, English-language sources, missing important insights from regions and people critical to effective humanitarian action. This was offset to some extent through interview and peer review.

The study has also not benefitted from the views and experiences of people and organisations who are not primarily humanitarian actors, but might be central to humanitarian action and humanitarian learning, particularly as first responders (Pujiono, McCommon and Sutton, 2021).

3 Concepts and definitions

This research focuses on how humanitarians can effectively communicate what has been learned to inform and improve policy and practice. The emphasis is on communication as an important component of broader learning and change processes. This section defines how we have applied these terms to the topic.

In regard to what is learned, this paper focuses on **explicit knowledge**. Explicit knowledge can be written down and processed by information systems, codified or recorded, archived, and protected by organisations (Beck, Borton and Houghton, 2003). This contrasts with **tacit knowledge**, which comprises the beliefs, values and wisdom that people may take for granted, or hold below their level of daily awareness (Beck, Borton and Houghton, 2003). While tacit knowledge is critical to learning and change in the humanitarian sector, this paper has narrowed the scope to explicit, **documented knowledge**. This encompasses PDF reports, training, evaluations, lessons learned, guidelines, standards, briefs, case studies, online videos, podcasts and so on.

This paper focuses on the **communication** of documented learning products to support improved policy and practice. In particular, formal communication that is planned and executed by those who develop the learning products, with the organisations and people who are in a position to apply the learning. It includes the communication of learning products between individuals, teams, organisations and groups of organisations.

With the goal of **informing and improving policy and practice**, the purpose of the communications referenced here includes and exceeds information sharing and awareness, aiming to result in behaviour change. It also excludes the learning of established professional skills and competencies that aim to professionalise, rather than improve, humanitarian action.

3.1 Communication

Communication is a broad concept with many definitions. For the purpose of this paper, the term *communication* covers the result of any action (physical, written or verbal) that conveys meaning between people (Law, 2009). The transactional model of communication is useful to depict the dynamism of communication, the challenges in communicating what is intended, and the importance of understanding who you are communicating

with: your audience (Wood, 2011). It describes communication as occurring within the broader context of a person's field of experience: communicators must share some degree of overlap in language, culture or environment to be able to build shared meaning and communicate. 'Noise', such as bias and pre-conceptions, might interfere with the intended communication. This all impacts the intended and received meaning of the communication.

Communication as a discipline dates back more than 2,000 years (Wood, 2011), and includes multiple academic specialisations requiring specific professional expertise, among which the specific topic of communicating learning (outside of a classroom or training environment) does not appear to feature. The fundamentals of a communication plan are, however, well established. These fundamentals are captured in many guidelines, and include variations of the following (Government Communication Service of the United Kingdom, 2021; Mefalopoulos, 2008; Cassidy and Ball, 2018):

- a clear objective, or purpose (why)
- understanding the target audience (who)
- key messages (what)
- outputs and activities, including the product, channel and framing (how and when)
- measuring success.

Communication for the purpose of improving humanitarian policy and practice may target audience segments such as policy makers, leaders and practitioners, in headquarters and on the frontline, and international staff and humanitarians working in their home country. The options for how messages are communicated, by which product (or format, for example a PDF report, podcast or training), channel (how it is distributed and accessed by the audience) and framing (or narrative; the way in which the key messages are communicated for each audience) are finite. These very practical elements of a communications plan: purpose, audience, product, framing and channel, will be explored in more depth in [Section 6](#) of this paper.

3.2 Learning

Learning is a foundational concept to this topic, in particular, the learning of humanitarian actors – the individuals, teams, organisations and groups of organisations engaging in humanitarian action and that make up the humanitarian sector.

Learning is defined as the process by which individuals, teams, organisations and groups of organisations create, transfer and use knowledge in order to achieve positive change and realise their goals. Learning involves the application and interpretation of information, extending beyond the transfer of knowledge (Beck, Borton and Houghton, 2003).

This section provides a brief overview of some of the key concepts in the literature related to individual, team and organisational learning, as a basis to understand the role of communication within these learning processes.

A foundational theory underpinning **individual learning** is Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which established a cycle of learning and preferred learning styles. These individual learning styles are influenced by personality type, educational specialisation, career choice, current job role and tasks, culture of birth and residence (Kolb and Kolb, 2008). Key concepts relevant to this paper are (a) the need for individuals to reflect, conceptualise and apply what has been learned, and (b) the acknowledgement that there are a variety of ways in which individuals learn.

Teams are important organising units within organisations and the humanitarian sector. Edmondson established **team learning**, both within and between teams, as a behavioural process (Wiese and Burke, 2019). Her study found that team psychological safety – a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking – is associated with learning (Edmondson, 1999). This concept links to later discussions on organisational change and the importance of the human dimension to achieving change.

Organisational learning includes learning processes at the individual, group and organisational levels and the interaction between these levels (Crossan, Lane and White, 1999). It occurs when an organisation develops new knowledge that changes behaviour to improve future performance (Barker and Camarata, 1998). This is helpful to link the concept of learning to the outcomes of changed behaviour and improved performance, in line with the objectives of this paper.

The concept of a learning organisation has been a desired goal at least since the 1990s. One of the more accessible descriptors is the three building blocks that make up learning organisations: a supportive learning environment, concrete learning processes and practices, and leadership that reinforces learning (Garvin, Edmondson and Gino, 2008).

Another concept that may be useful to the humanitarian sector is the distinction between micro-learning: 'I need help now' and macro-learning: 'I want to learn something new' (see for example, Shank, 2018). Operational responses and busy policy makers often require micro-learning on demand, for example, while communicating for more substantive change may require strategies designed to support macro-learning.

In summary, learning is a process. There is extensive literature on the learning of individuals and teams, within and between organisations. It highlights the challenge the humanitarian sector faces in learning to improve policy and practice – the complexity of the process and its dependence on individuals who all learn differently – within the context of teams, organisations and sectors where a number of factors impact learning, including the relational.

3.3 Improving policy and practice

In this paper, the phrase *improving policy and practice* is used interchangeably with the term *change*. Although not all change will result in improvements to policy and practice, it is not possible to improve policy and practice without change.

The distinction and interaction between changing policy and changing practice is important to consider when identifying a target audience for learning and influencing change. This is unpacked further in concurrent research by Ramalingam and Mitchell (2022), taking a multi-dimensional approach to understanding how learning and change occurs across the humanitarian sector. For the purpose of this paper, the challenges of communicating to change policy and practice are considered together.

To improve policy and practice, governments and the corporate sector have successfully applied the science of behaviour change to communications strategies (Guntner, Lucks and Sperling-Magro, 2019; Jones et al., n.d.). For example, it forms the basis of communications guidance to governments for improving hygiene to combat COVID-19 (Curtis et al., 2020). Behavioural insight models form the foundation of the UK government's communications guidance for implementing government policy and influencing changes to practice (UK Government Communication Service, n.d.(a), n.d.(b)). The guidance highlights both the importance of communications to behaviour change and that communication is just one component of the interventions required to deliver behaviour change.

The UK government applies two models when developing its communications strategies: the COM-B model, applying audience insight to set objectives for desired behaviour change, and the EAST model to develop the communications strategy and implement it effectively for each audience (UK Government Communication Service, n.d.(a)). The following box provides more information.

Behavioural insights models used by the UK government communications professionals

The **COM-B model** holds that an individual must have the **capability** and **motivation** to undertake a behaviour and external factors must provide the **opportunity**. Effective communications can help to address barriers to people's capability (knowledge and understanding) and motivation (beliefs and attitudes) to act differently. Barriers to opportunity (resources, tools, access etc.) may need to be addressed through alternative strategies.

The **EAST framework** can be applied to communication activities to overcome barriers and achieve communications objectives through the proposition, messages and channel strategy. When creating a communications strategy, check whether the proposition or ask is **easy, attractive, social and timely**.

Source: UK Government Communication Service, n.d.(a).

Although behaviour change is not a fully fledged applied science (Aunger and Curtis, 2016) and there are a multitude of theories and models to navigate, it is included in this scoping process given the lack of alternative models directly linking communications plans to learning that results in changes to policy and practice. One behaviour change model termed 'Behaviour Centred Design' and promoted by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (n.d.), for example, is based on the reinforcement learning theory, where learning happens via interaction with the environment, through trial and error, with a view to maximising rewards (Aunger and Curtis, 2016). It is also not entirely new to development and humanitarian aid. The World Health Organization's *Principles for Effective Communication* draws on social science to support behaviour change at the individual and societal level, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees applies behavioural and social sciences to strengthen the impact of its communications aimed at influencing policy and practice (World Health Organization, 2019).

4 What we know about communicating learning in the humanitarian sector to improve policy and practice

The humanitarian sector produces numerous learning products with the aim of informing policy and practice. However, a preliminary mapping of the literature by Lessons Learned Simulation and Training (Stevens and Roberts, 2021) found a notable gap in the literature regarding communication strategies and practices for the purpose of information sharing and learning within and between humanitarian organisations. Existing research on communication in the humanitarian sector focuses primarily on communication with affected communities and communication with the public. This was confirmed in independent searches of relevant databases, including the [ALNAP HELP Library](#), academic journals and Google Scholar. There are some exceptions; limited literature on communicating humanitarian research is explored in the next section.

The lack of readily available literature on this topic is caused in part by a scarcity of study but also by the extensive focus in research on other areas of humanitarian communications, particularly communication with communities and communication for advocacy or public relations purposes (Stevens and Roberts, 2021). It likely also reflects the absence of a field of research on 'communicating learning' (outside of a training or classroom environment). As a result, this paper explores literature related to the topic of communicating humanitarian learning.

5 The humanitarian context: Related literature

In the absence of sufficient literature specifically on communicating learning in the humanitarian sector, this section draws on related literature to provide a foundation for understanding the humanitarian context for communicating learning to improve policy and practice. The areas of research include learning and the application of that learning: decision-making, evaluation utilisation, research uptake and change. As communication is central to each of these fields, each provides insights for effective communication to improve policy and practice.

The literature highlights five key findings from the humanitarian sector with implications for communication strategies when aiming to influence policy and practice.

Finding 1: Change is complex: it takes time and often doesn't succeed.

Improving policy and practice requires individuals and organisations to change. Change literature from the humanitarian sector reinforces how difficult it is to achieve. Examples where change has not occurred, despite strong documented evidence, include the protection failures in Sri Lanka and the sector's inability to substantially increase core funding to local and national NGOs (Knox-Clarke, 2017). And yet, humanitarian organisations have achieved changes to structures, procedures and ways of working (Ramalingam and Clarke, 2008).

Challenges in achieving change are not unique to the humanitarian sector. Most planned change initiatives in all sectors fail (Knox-Clarke, 2017). The health sector, for example, estimates it may take 17 years for evidence to reach clinical practice (see Morris, Wooding and Grant, 2011).¹ Characteristics of humanitarian organisations that may make change more difficult include high levels of staff turnover, short programme cycles, time pressures, geographically dispersed structures and increasing diversity of central actors (Knox-Clarke, 2017).

¹ Noting that this is a flawed figure.

When communicating learning to improve policy and practice, it is useful to understand that people are central to achieving change, that it is an emotional as well as a practical process, and that resistance to change is normal. Clarke and Ramalingam (2008) draw on change theory from the business sector to understand change through metaphors. One metaphor of organisations as living human systems focuses on the formal and informal side of organisations, with an emphasis on communication and broad engagement to help address the natural emotional discomfort that people feel in situations of transition.

Finding 2: Documented evidence is a small contributor to change.

Changing policy and practice requires much more than communicating documented evidence:

The information deficit model – positing that more information will result in better decisions – was debunked nearly as soon as it was captured. (Christiano and Neimand, 2017)

This is also reflected in literature from the humanitarian sector, finding that documented evidence is a small contributor to decision-making and change (Beck, Borton and Houghton, 2003). Only a minority of humanitarian evaluations, for example, usually intended to inform change, are effective at doing so (Sandison, 2006). This could be due to the preference for tacit learning (see [Finding 3](#)); 'consideration of evidence not being an explicit part of the decision-making process, or because decisions are affected by a number of other considerations: politics, resource availability, or security' (Knox-Clarke, 2017).

Barriers to using evidence in the humanitarian sector have been found to include not enough generalisable evidence to guide decisions, but also time pressures, funding constraints, lack of relevance to policy and practice, and lack of relevance to national actors (Carden, Hanley and Paterson, 2021).

Guidance from Elhra (based on UK Aid guidance) to strengthen 'research uptake',² or facilitate utilisation of evidence in the humanitarian sector, reinforces the need for strategies beyond communicating evidence to improve policy and practice. It recommends communicating research findings as just one component to support research uptake, together with stakeholder engagement, capacity building and monitoring and evaluation (Elhra, 2014).

² Defined by Elhra as 'all the activities that facilitate and contribute to the adoption and utilisation of evidence by researchers, practitioners, and other humanitarian actors'.

Finding 3: Humanitarians prefer tacit, networked knowledge over documentation.

Humanitarian workers are highly selective in the uptake of evidence (Darcy et al., 2013), drawing heavily on tacit knowledge even when it is available in documented form (Beck, Borton and Houghton, 2003). They commonly prefer to rely on past experiences (Darcy et al., 2013) or information from colleagues, rather than documented evidence – such as reports and evaluations – to inform their decision-making.

This finding is reinforced by research on frontline worker preferences for learning. They prefer to access knowledge through networks and conversations with other frontline workers. The more traditional mechanisms for learning and communicating knowledge in explicit, documented form, such as guidelines, monitoring reports and surveys, are not considered important sources of learning (Beck, Borton and Houghton, 2003).

Research by Knox-Clarke (2017) finds this is not limited to frontline humanitarian workers, quoting one policy maker who said: 'as the Chief of Policy Analysis I never read a journal'.

Finding 4: Humanitarians access knowledge that is immediately relevant.

The literature on learning, evidence and change all emphasise the importance of relevance. Evidence was more likely to be used where it responds directly to need; for example, when it was explicitly requested (Knox-Clarke, 2017). Evaluations that focus on the needs of primary users, are timely, and have meaningful participation and follow up are more likely to be used (Sandison, 2006). Frontline workers seek specific information and knowledge directly related to operational priorities (Beck, Borton and Houghton, 2003).

This is a critical issue for producers of humanitarian research and evidence. Lack of relevance to intended users is a common barrier to the use of research in the humanitarian sector (Knox-Clarke, 2017). It is concerning that humanitarian research is even less relevant to humanitarians from the Global South (Carden, Hanley and Paterson, 2021).

Finding 5: National actors are not sufficiently included.

National and international humanitarian actors face barriers in accessing and sharing the same learning. In particular, national humanitarians were found to have less access than their international counterparts to formal and informal opportunities to share tacit learning (Beck, Borton and Houghton, 2003). This includes the coordination and group meetings that provide valuable opportunities to gain tacit operational knowledge (Beck, Borton and Houghton, 2003). The research produced in the humanitarian sector is also less relevant to national actors (Carden, Hanley

and Paterson, 2021). As a result, evidence and learning is not reaching national actors to the extent that it should, widening the learning and communication gap.³ International humanitarians are also missing out. Literature suggests that international actors do not adequately access learning from national actors, national staff or the affected population (Beck, Borton and Houghton, 2003).

³ Interview 5

6 Implications for humanitarian communication

It is clear from the literature that improving policy and practice in the humanitarian sector is complex. The role of documented learning, from capture to communication to application, is but one component contributing to change. To influence policy and practice, plans to communicate learning need to be part of broader change strategies. The research and evidence being communicated must be relevant to its intended users at the time. Communicators must access tacit, networked avenues for sharing knowledge. And both the research itself, and the way it is communicated, must be inclusive for national and international audiences.

This section analyses the same literature reviewed in [Section 5](#) for practical insights into the communication of humanitarian learning. It structures findings around each of the key elements of communication plans: purpose, audience, product, framing and channel. This approach is intended to draw out what we know from the humanitarian literature about how to effectively communicate learning products.

Purpose

The purpose of the research must be relevant to your audience. Learning products are much more likely to be used when they respond to demand from users (Carden, Hanley and Paterson, 2021). They must also be timely, and able to inform decisions on policy and operations as they occur (Darcey et al., 2013). One suggestion to improve relevance is to involve intended users in designing and developing the research, evaluation or other learning (Sandison, 2006).

Audience

Perhaps the biggest challenge to communicating documented learning is the finding that practitioners and policy makers prefer to rely on personal experience and informal, networked knowledge over documents (Beck, Borton and Houghton, 2003).

While some research recommends focusing more narrowly on connecting with the group of individuals whose belief or behaviour change will result in a lasting difference (Parater, 2018), other research recommends broad circulation through a variety of media such that the evidence can feed into social constructs and peer discussions that inform decision-making (Knox-Clarke and Darcy, 2014).

Darcy et al. (2013) find that matching the product, channel and framing to user preference may be essential to learning and informed decision-making. Carden, Hanley and Paterson (2021) make key points related to audience that should inform communications plans. Humanitarians tend to be time-poor, with limited capacity to absorb documented evidence. Some staff may not have the skills to appraise evidence or apply findings from other contexts. Perhaps obviously, it is important to consider the language of the intended audience.

Product

The most useful product or format will differ by user. Common requests include products that are easily digestible, that is, short and concise, in accessible non-technical language, and in formats that are easy to operationalise, such as tools, checklists or training that are directly linked to context (Darcy et al., 2013). Even standards and guidelines may not be sufficiently short or contextualised to facilitate application (Carden, Hanley and Paterson, 2021). When aiming to deliver a change initiative, storytelling may be a useful format to tap into people's values and beliefs (Ramalingam and Clarke, 2008).

Humanitarians were asked directly what they see as the most useful types of research products in a survey by the Humanitarian Advisory Group in 2021. It found the most useful – self-reported – types of research products to be, from most useful to least useful: tools for practical application (71%), short research briefs or think pieces (65%), training (61%), research reports (49%), guidance notes (38%), infographics (38%), videos (32%), organisational audits on thematic areas (31%), webinars (23%), events (23%) and podcasts (12%) (Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2021).

This differed by group. Local NGOs, CSOs and NGO networks preferred training (71%), tools for practical application (65%) and research reports (61%). International NGO and UN agencies preferred short research pieces or think pieces (67%), tools for practical application (66%) and training (54%). Donors preferred training (67%), short research briefs or think pieces (63%) and tools for practical application (58%) (Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2021).

Framing

In communicating learning, it is important to concisely demonstrate its direct applicability and use to intended users (Carden, Hanley and Paterson, 2021). When directed at decision-makers, the framing must capture the attention of the right people, including leaders in the humanitarian sector (Ramalingam and Clarke, 2008), and support the non-technical reader to easily understand the evidence or argument and make an informed judgement (Darcy et al., 2013). If intended to support a particular course of action, the evidence and information should be structured in a way that makes the case for that action (Carden, Hanley and Paterson, 2021).

When aiming to affect change, Ramalingam and Clarke (2008) highlight the importance of framing research and findings in ways that communicate to the intended user's values and beliefs. As mentioned above, they suggest the use of storytelling as a tool to build support for change.

Channel

Recommended channels to facilitate the socialisation of evidence, in line with the preference for tacit learning, include training courses, meetings and accessible media such as short films distributed via social media (Knox-Clarke, 2020). Creating or leveraging channels for staff to discuss evidence with confidence, and empowering them to do so regularly, was proposed to develop cultures of evidence use (Carden, Hanley and Paterson, 2021). This may further support the preference for tacit, networked learning.

Carden, Hanley and Paterson (2021) place high importance on brokering roles and services as a driver of research use, ensuring findings reach the 'right people, in an appropriate format, at an opportune moment'.

7 Questions arising

Many of the findings in the previous section will not be a surprise to readers with experience in the humanitarian sector. They do, however, highlight several issues. The primary issue is the lack of evidence-based guidance for understanding the various humanitarian audience segments and their preferences for learning and communication to improve policy and practice. Although this review was able to identify some important insights that will assist with more effective communication, it required an analysis across a breadth of literature and is still not sufficient to be actionable across audience segments.

This section identifies questions arising for future research. Before pursuing these, it is important to reinforce two points. Firstly, communication is but one component needed to support the use of documented learning in the humanitarian sector to improve policy and practice. If the content of what is being communicated is not relevant or timely for the user, no approach to communications will make it so. The initial scoping highlights the importance of ensuring that what is researched, as well as when and how, is relevant to maximise the research's impact on policy and practice.

Secondly, this scoping paper is not a comprehensive review of the literature or of expert and practitioner insights. As a foundation for future research on communicating learning, it would be valuable to produce a more systematic review of the literature across, and drawing linkages between, the various disciplines outlined in this paper. In particular, to explore in depth the links between communication, learning, behavioural change models and organisational change, and how these might differ across organisational and cultural contexts.

Key questions arising from this scoping paper that focus specifically on the effectiveness of communications are thus:

1. How can the humanitarian sector strengthen its focus on ensuring that research and evidence is effectively communicated to contribute to improved policy and practice?

Despite the lack of literature specifically on communicating effectively to humanitarian audiences, there is some good data and guidance. At the very least, it is widely accepted that good practice means targeting communications to your audience, and ensuring concise, actionable products that are relevant, timely, accessible and translated where needed. What is less clear is whether this is consistently done, and what the impact is.

Time and resources tend to focus on research production rather than communication and activities to encourage use (Carden, Hanley and Paterson, 2021).⁴ One key informant noted that where there is an emphasis on communications, messages are much more visible and accessible in national civil society.⁵ Donor priorities, which often focus on research outputs, could be a contributing factor. It would be useful to understand the incentives that drive or hinder the necessary investment in communication and broader change strategies, and how these can be influenced.

2. Which communication strategies have proven to be successful in facilitating improved policy and practice in the humanitarian sector?

To better understand how to communicate effectively for improved policy and practice, it may serve to understand which strategies have worked in the past, and who they aimed to influence.

This could be done from two perspectives. First, it could be achieved by reviewing successful systemic or organisational change initiatives, such as the use of cash and vouchers, to understand which communications strategies worked within the broader change process and to compare how similar communications strategies fared in situations where change was not achieved.

A second perspective could examine learning and communication initiatives designed specifically to meet the communication preferences identified in the literature, such as the Peer 2 Peer support mechanism (IASC, n.d.), which provides immediately relevant tacit knowledge to humanitarian leaders as they respond.

It may further be useful to unpack the theory of change from the production and communication of documented learning through to improved policy and practice, and identify any similarities that could inform future communications strategies.

3. Can behavioural insights help the humanitarian sector to more effectively communicate documented learning to inform policy and practice? If so, which models are most useful and how should they be applied?

Behavioural change models, including the COM-B and EAST models mentioned above, are used by the UK government and aid programmes to inform the development of communication strategies that are more effective at influencing change. This research question aims to find out whether behavioural change models might help humanitarians to more effectively communicate learning to inform policy and practice and, if so, to initiate the production of guidance for practitioners to apply the models.

⁴ Also Interview 6

⁵ Interview 5

4. How to better understand and communicate with international and national humanitarian audiences to influence policy and practice?

- Do certain segments of the humanitarian audience have more influence for change?
- Applying the COM-B model, what are each audience's capabilities, opportunities, barriers and motivations to change?
- Which channels, products and framing are more likely to influence change? Applying the EAST model, which do the audience find most easy, attractive, social and timely?

Fundamental to any good communications strategy is to know your audience. Beyond understanding that humanitarians are time-poor and prefer networked, tacit knowledge, the above analysis has highlighted how little we know about specific segments of the humanitarian sector – how different actors prefer to access information and what their capabilities, motivations and opportunities to change might be. This paper has found that it is **particularly important to differentiate between international and national humanitarians** to ensure learning is relevant and shared. This will also differ across contexts. In the Pacific, for example, communication strategies based on talanoa, or personal encounters where people story their issues, realities and aspirations, will be more effective (Vaiioleti, 2006; Auger and Curtis, 2016).⁶

An added component to this question is how communication strategies can access the networked learning preferences of the intended users. For example, do communication strategies need to target the intended users, as well as their networks, to be effective?

⁶ Also Interview 5

8 What next?

Those aiming to share documented learning to improve policy and practice are operating without a solid evidence base to guide them. The literature finds that change is difficult to achieve, and requires attention to the emotional as well as the technical. In order to influence humanitarians, communicators will need to access channels used for networked, tacit learning over explicit learning and documentation. Relevance and timeliness of the documented learning itself is key. As evidence does not in and of itself lead to change, the communication of documented learning will need to be one component of a broader strategy to improve policy and practice.

Given the lack of data, it appears likely that the humanitarian sector would benefit from further research, assuming, of course, that findings are accompanied by appropriate communications and change strategies. This paper identified four significant gaps in the data that may assist producers and communicators of humanitarian knowledge to better influence policy and practice. At a minimum, any future research should be designed around key concepts for success identified in this paper, ensuring its relevance and timeliness to intended users, and including both national and international audiences.

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