Humanitarian learning under the Covid-19 pandemic; a pathway to localisation?

Author: Pawel Mania, Humanitarian Leadership Academy

Research and consultancy: Franziska Basse, Ellie Chesshire, JP Fisher, Jess Lyga, Irem Simsek, London School of Economics

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List of Abbreviations

CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard
ESA	Eastern and Southern Africa
FIELD	Field Managers in Emergencies Learning and Development
HAG	Humanitarian Advisory Group
HLA	Humanitarian Leadership Academy
HOP	Humanitarian Operations Programme
IASC	Inter-agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
KII	Key Informant Interview
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
LSE	London School of Economics and Political Science
LNGO	Local Non-governmental Organisation
MEEE	Middle East and Eastern Europe
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NNGO	National Non-governmental Organisation
SARS-CoV-2	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus Type 2
SCUK	Save the Children United Kingdom
SHIP	Save the Children Humanitarian Intermediate Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Summary: COVID-19 and a new demand for learning

COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on the functioning and programming of the humanitarian sector. Despite challenges, the pandemic may present opportunities to fast track a shift towards a locally led response by reinforcing the commitment of aid organisations implementing responses "as local as possible and as international as necessary" (IASC 2016: 3).

To better understand the scale of that opportunity, as well as the challenges, the Humanitarian Leadership Academy (HLA) delivered a piece of research together with the department of International Development at the London School of Economics (LSE).

Applying a mixed-method methodology that included an extensive literature review, a survey, interviews with the selected learners, as well as analysis of the data from our nominated digital learning programme: Humanitarian Operations Programme (HOP) Fundamentals, we have not only confirmed some our assumptions, but gained **fascinating insights on what the future of digital humanitarian learning could look like to meet the current as well as the forthcoming needs.**

While designed and rolled-out well before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the HLA's HOP Fundamentals is an introductory, open access course that enables users to access content remotely, and easily tailor the content to their needs. It is part of the HLA's vast portfolio of capacity strengthening programmes which equip local and national organisations, meaning those closest to the frontline have the skills and knowledge needed to manage effective humanitarian responses.

This deep dive approach not only allowed us to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the access and use of different learning opportunities for those working in the humanitarian sector, but also allowed us to reflect on what this means for the wider localisation agenda.

One opportunity that our findings make very clear is that **humanitarians globally are seeking learning opportunities at an unprecedented scale**. A quick look at the rapid growth of the HLA's global online learning platform, Kaya, shows a huge increase in demand for humanitarian learning in the first year of the global pandemic (March 2020 – March 2021).

KAYA Platform Registrations
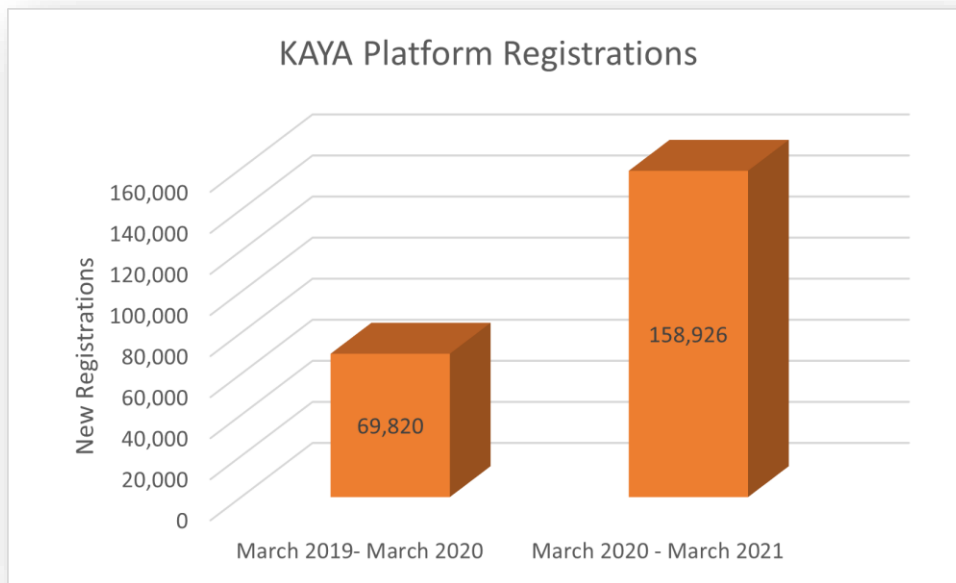
The following conclusions confirm that humanitarian learners accessed HOP Fundamentals to improve their own capacity to respond to humanitarian needs, which in result benefited and strengthened the capacity of their national and local organisations.

The quantitative analysis of HOP Fundamentals' Anglophone learning pathways reveal a steep growth in online access to HOP Fundamentals after the onset of the pandemic, with 81% (2,862) of all users completing at least one module during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Zooming in at the East and Southern Africa region (which has the highest number of learners from across all regions), we see a a growth of 263%. It is important to note that the Anglophone version was launched in 2019, so a year before the global pandemic was announced by the World Health Organisation.

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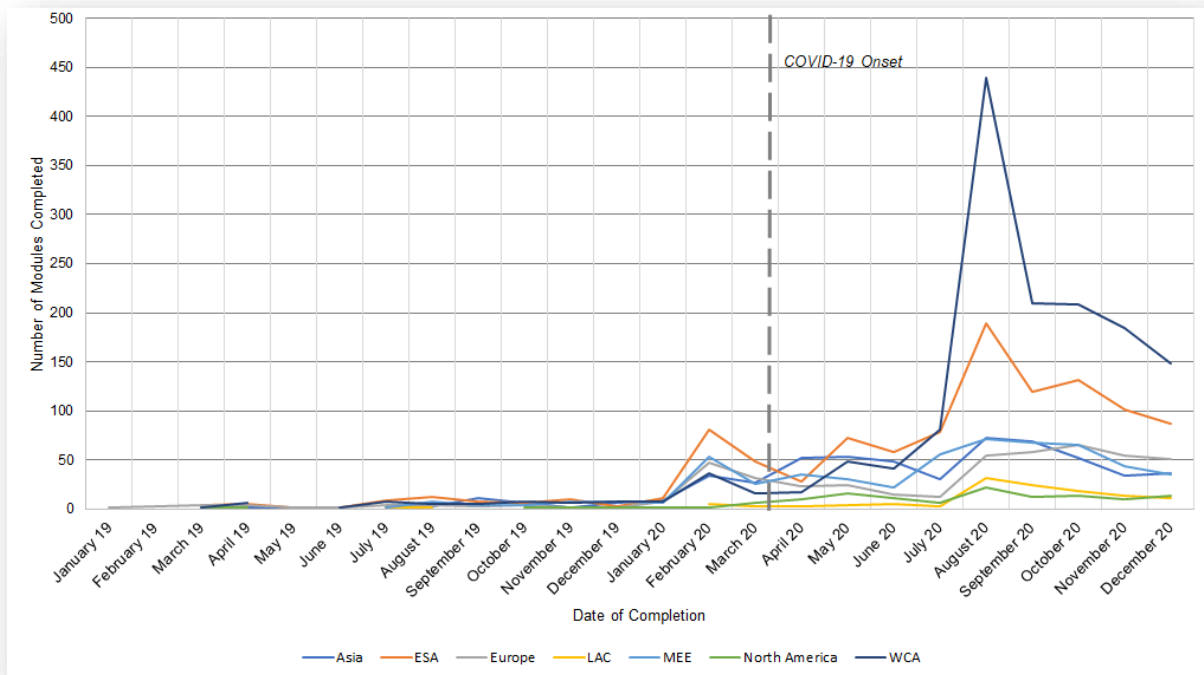humanitarian
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Figure 1: First Completion of a HOP Fundamentals Module on Anglophone and Francophone Platforms by Region. The Francophone version, mainly accessed by West and Central Africa region, has launched after the onset of the pandemic which explains the huge spike in the WCA but cannot be used for comparison between the access before and under the COVID-19 pandemic.

An open invite survey we initiated, in addition to the Kaya platform's data analysis, further confirmed the above claims. National and local humanitarians want to prepare themselves to respond to emergencies in the best way they can. **The COVID-19 pandemic not only created a capacity gap, but also provided an opportunity where so much of decision making in terms of running humanitarian programming and responses has moved from the international headquarters to the country and field offices.**

However, this great opportunity exposed also some pre-existing limitations that need to be addressed if we are aiming to fully democratise the learning and leave no one behind: access to technology for marginalised groups, including women, technological literacy or gaps in contextualised content available in different languages.

Capacity strengthening vs localisation in the times of COVID-19

The theory and commitment

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The pandemic has further powered debates on the necessity of strengthening local capacity, as some 'original sins' of the humanitarian system were exposed again, including inefficiencies, overcentralisation, power imbalances between actors, as well as unsustainability (Lister 2000; Hillhorst 2002).

It is worth reminding that, in recognition of the importance of a professionalised humanitarian system that can prepare and respond to the growing number of humanitarian crises, many organisations have long-standing commitments to implement localisation as part of their response. Save the Children UK and in consequence the HLA, as a signatory of the Grand Bargain, has repeatedly emphasised its vision of a locally and nationally led humanitarian response, backed by global resources when necessary. **This has never been as relevant as today in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has accelerated the shift towards localisation to tackle challenges for accountability, coordination and quality of humanitarian assistance.**

The exact meaning of localisation has been debated numerous times and will not be the focus of this paper, but after Van Brabant and Patel (2017) I will recognise localisation as a decentralising, technical change to improve on-the-ground response and resource access, which they suggested is a second form of localisation, in addition to a transformative process for political economy of humanitarianism.

As such, localisation can take various forms, from remote management to increased funding or capacity strengthening (Elkahlout, Elgibali 2020). Many of these measures require conscious decisions to transfer authority and power (Shifting the Power 2017). Therefore, many authors highlight this deliberate shift of power to local actors as a key aspect of the localisation processes (Olliff 2018; Elkahlout, Elgibali 2020; Sundberg 2019).

Even though the essential role of local and national NGOs (LNGOs/NNGOs) in increasing efficiency and ownership of a humanitarian intervention are well established themes in the literature, a clear definition of 'local actor' is difficult to identify (Campbell, Knox-Clarke 2016). Debates around more critical engagement with conceptualising local and international actors as binary opposites additionally complicates rigorously identifying local actors (Roepstorff 2020). This also calls into question Interagency Standing Committee's (IASC) definition of 'local' as framed by the Grand Bargain: "Organizations engaged in relief that are headquartered and operating in their own aid recipient country and which are not affiliated to an international NGO" (IASC 2017; Emphasis added). Specifically, in the context of closed borders and evacuated international staff, the exclusivity of 'local' is challenged by some in its omission of local staff affiliated to international organisations who are nonetheless working in their country of origin (Barbelet et al. 2020). **The pandemic has highlighted the need for a wide pool of skilled, local humanitarian responders to enable surge capacity** (Humanitarian Advisory Group

2020), regardless of affiliation with either local or international organisations (Humanitarian Advisory Group 2020).

While many authors and practitioners still grapple with the definition of 'localisation', it has been a long-established term in the humanitarian sphere, which has been manifested in various humanitarian standards and declarations over the years. The humanitarian frameworks, such as the Paris Declaration (2005), the Humanitarian Accountability Report (HAR, 2015), the Charter for Change (2016) have reaffirmed the principle of localising humanitarian action and increasing local ownership of responses (CHS Alliance 2015; Sphere Project 2018; ICVA 2018). The following World Humanitarian Summit with its announcement of the Grand Bargain reform agenda (2016), has only placed localisation more firmly in the centre of debates around change in the humanitarian system, by committing governmental and aid organisations to implementing responses "as local as possible and as international as necessary" (IASC 2016: 3; Metcalfe-Hough et al. 2019). In this context, reinforcing local capacities has been pushed to the forefront to ensure transparency, efficiency and harmonisation (IASC 2016).

However, research suggests that a divide between rhetoric and practice persists, as these "commitments rarely translate into effective relationships on the ground" (Wall, Hedlund 2016: 3). Smillie (2001) emphasises the difficulty in successfully implementing these commitments by pointing to the relationship between INGOs and L/NNGOs continuously being shaped by patronage instead of partnership. Nevertheless, recent literature underlines the possibility of partnerships in localisation mitigating a top-down, resource-dependent approach to the implementation, while ensuring sufficient support from INGOs for local actors (Eade 2007; Elkahlout, Elgibali 2020; IFRC 2018). In this context, many authors identified that **reviewing partnership agreements and strengthening capacities of local actors will have to be a key step towards implementing localisation commitments** as a paradigm shift on the ground (Nightingale 2012; Gingerich, Cohen 2015).

In recognition of the importance of capacity strengthening, international organisations have committed to providing capacity strengthening initiatives for local actors as part of the localisation workstream of the Grand Bargain. According to the IASC Guidance Note on Capacity Strengthening, support should aim to enhance the ability of local actors to adequately "prepare for, anticipate and deliver timely and cost-effective humanitarian services of appropriate quality, and to strengthen the resilience of the affected population and transparent and accountable management of resources" (IASC 2020).

While the central role of local actors in the humanitarian system has widely been acknowledged, debates around implementation and concepts remain – especially against the backdrop of capacity strengthening. Over the years, research has documented the terminological developments and a broad range of different interpretations of capacity. Save the Children UK refers to capacity in line with its Grand Bargain commitment to include preparedness, coordination, response and planning (IASC 2016). When examining capacity strengthening

approaches, it is vital to acknowledge the relevance of terminology because differences between building or strengthening capacities have emerged over time (Barbelet 2018; Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream 2020). This definitory ambiguity is exacerbated by different targets, purposes and a lacking agreement among stakeholders (Smillie 2001; Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream 2020). Save the Children UK (2016) defines **capacity strengthening as "[t]he process through which organisations, people and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time".**

Many authors analyse the challenges and opportunities that are intrinsic to the implementation of capacity strengthening in the humanitarian space (see e.g. Obrecht 2014). Literature repeatedly emphasises the importance of capacity strengthening programs that are co-developed and oriented towards long-term, contextualised, sufficiently funded partnerships between L/NNGOs and INGOs (Christoplos 2004; Smillie 2001)5. Recent studies aim at evaluating the implementation, but also show the difficulty in precisely determining the impact of capacity strengthening on the capacity of local actors (see e.g. Sobeck, Agius 2007; Sobeck 2008).

The current set-up of the humanitarian system has often been criticised for undermining, instead of strengthening local capacities (Smillie 2001). Nevertheless, a vast body of literature on capacity strengthening underlines the importance of the issues for ensuring localisation of response, increasing accountability, local ownership, cost-effectiveness and strengthening resilience (Smillie 2001; Sobeck, Agius 2007).

The here and now

This dichotomy in academic debates has been intensified by **the COVID-19 pandemic, when most expatriate experts and international employees left the response teams, mainly leaving local staff to manage and implement responses – making capacity strengthening initiatives critical for implementation** (Paul 1995; Bryant 2020). A 2020 Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) Briefing Note detailed that some INGO and UN country offices experienced a 50 to 75 percent reduction in international staff (Barbelet et al. 2020). Organisations that would generally bolster local responses with surge capacity from non-host countries increasingly relied on in-country staff and remote support mechanisms to coordinate activities (IASC 2020). This demographic shift in in-country responders following the exit of large numbers of international expatriate staff has led to a shift in roles for actors at all levels, creating new space for local leadership (Humanitarian Advisory Group 2020). The importance of readily-available local expertise to provide surge capacity for health emergencies is not unique to COVID-19, but has repeatedly been emphasized by transmissible SARS, avian influenza and Ebola epidemics (Turner 2020).

Over the years, training as one particular instrument of professional capacity strengthening, has shifted into a focus of research and practice (Russ 2012; Eade 1997). Especially in the context of humanitarian practitioners, training has shifted into

an important approach to capacity strengthening of organisations. **Against the backdrop of an increasing number of disasters, and more personnel available overall, which often also comes from a variety of different backgrounds, training can be a key mechanism to guarantee adaptable, sustainable and efficient responses** (Hailey, James 2002; Walker et al. 2010)7. This is closely linked to a shift towards professionalisation and accountability in the humanitarian sector – of which the calls for standardised and qualitative training mechanisms are symbolic (Bolletino, Bruderlein 2008; Bustamante et al. 2020; Russ 2012). And while these developments have increased the demand for training overall, providing more training opportunities in lieu of complementary support mechanisms such as funding may not be sufficient. Thus, Bolletino and Bruderlein (2008) highlight the importance of strategically increasing the uptake among local actors to ensure a shift in cooperation and power methods.

Training can be conducted in person via experiential training and simulations, while bringing people from different backgrounds together (Eade 1997). Additionally, training is being conducted online, which has become increasingly important during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impossibility of face-to-face teaching (Tint et al. 2015; Bolletino, Bruderlein 2008). Against this backdrop, intersectoral partnerships have been found to promote knowledge dissemination and improve the overall response to the health crisis (Aluisio et al. 2020). Remote relationships are acknowledged to have increased as a result of the pandemic, with 70 percent of actors in a Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) led case study identifying an increase in remote support. Within this context, it was found that remote support was most helpful when combined with technical advice and coaching and mentoring from a distance that complemented local cultural and political expertise (Humanitarian Advisory Group 2020). While designed and rolled-out before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Humanitarian Operations Programme (HOP) Fundamental's open access pathway and blended learning approach, enables users to access content remotely and easily tailor the content to their needs. **Online training tools are often used to reach additional participants and it is therefore a tool to enhance and not replace in-person, traditional forms of training** (Pollard, Willison 2005). **Consequently, these tools provide a basis for humanitarian organisations to disseminate humanitarian and organisational principles and to ensure accountability and standardisation among personnel and cooperation partners** (Bolletino, Bruderlein 2008). Gingerich and Cohen (2015) point to key aspects regarding the content, such as active learning methods, training on humanitarian principles and management tools, all making a foundation of the HLA's digital, blended and non-digital learning programmes.

As a signatory of the Grand Bargain, Save the Children movement has committed to strengthening the capacity of local actors. As part of this commitment, Save the Children has designed multiple context-driven training and learning programmes dedicated to increasing the capacity of humanitarian actors with the Core Humanitarian Standards and Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS) as a foundation. Among these mechanisms, **HOP Fundamentals aims to strengthen the capacity of staff working in emergency**

response at national and regional levels. The training programme addresses essential elements in setting up and running a humanitarian response. The theoretical knowledge covered in the training aims to enhance the ability of participants to practice new skills and share those skills with others (SCUK, HCB, 2019). Being a flagship, introductory course in the HLA's portfolio, it provided great insights into current trends in the demand for digital, online learning for those working or entering the sector.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: CAPACITY GAPS & IMPACT OF LEARNING

The initial analysis showed a huge increase in uptake and demand, but we were equally interested in understanding what learning gaps the pandemic exposed, and what local and national humanitarians think of the online offer presented to them. To mitigate gaps exacerbated by the pandemic, many local actors working in the humanitarian sector indicated they have accessed HOP Fundamentals to improve their capacity. The interviews conducted by the students from the LSE highlighted these aspects and pointed to additional challenges relating to the management of field operations, monitoring operations and coordination consistent with the survey results. Firstly, due to movement restrictions and health and safety concerns, project implementation in the field has been strongly affected. This situation was exemplified in the interviews as:

> *As a food security and livelihood coordinator, I'm having so many difficulties in reaching out to our beneficiaries. I have 400 households to attend in four days. After the pandemic started, especially around June-July last year, it took almost 20 days to attend to these beneficiaries, can you imagine the implications of this for those people?* (Interview 1, 2021)

In addition to hardships involved in reaching out to beneficiaries, lockdowns and other restrictions can create additional challenges for programme delivery.

Our ability to deliver the programmes is affected. For example, we were supplying food for one child (who is in school) for a month in one household. When lockdown happens, families come to get the food, but since all family members are in the house due to lockdown, they all eat the food we supplied for the child and it is all gone in five days, because they are all hungry, but we had limited food. Nobody could see this, we were unprepared (Interview 4, 2021)Secondly, due to low levels of funding, interviewees from some organisations do not have permanent offices in remote areas. With the addition of travel restrictions due to the pandemic, providing services for beneficiaries in remote areas and monitoring ongoing programme activities has become more challenging than ever. Many participants stated that, especially in remote areas, tradition, culture and religion have a great impact on people's lives. In these contexts, taking time for sensitisation and awareness is critical

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when implementing projects, particularly in the context of the pandemic. **Considering the impact of COVID-19, every practitioner interviewed emphasised the increased importance of understanding the needs of everyday life, and taking time to address these issues to ensure that people comply with the rules of social distancing, wearing masks and other precautionary measures, in contexts where close monitoring has become nearly impossible.**

Thirdly, **coordination has become a major issue also due to the lack of internet access and reliable power supply.** All practitioners stated that this prevented them from keeping in touch with other co-implementing partners, especially in remote locations where reliable power supply is also a major problem. Many actors also highlighted that in the office, internet connectivity and accessibility was much easier compared to at home. Therefore, working from home due to lockdown measures further aggravated these challenges. These issues were often accompanied by frustration and demotivation among staff. One interviewee highlighted this situation by stating:

> *I have to attend at least four meetings in a day. Think about the burnouts from online meetings and now try to think you have connection problems in every one of them several times in the context where you have to do everything online, but can't do it properly (Interview 7, 2021)*

Against the backdrop of capacity gaps, often exacerbated by the pandemic, humanitarian staff have turned to capacity strengthening tools, such as HOP Fundamentals, though their motives vary. The majority of survey respondents (86%) confirmed that the learning was beneficial and applicable to their work (86%), but more importantly, there was an agreement that the ability to adapt to changing contexts was critical.

> *During the training, we are taught how to operate in difficult circumstances and especially lessons about how to avoid crowds in outlets during distribution is something I've utilised from training* (Interview 5, 2021)

This proves the ability to adapt to changing contexts is an important area to close any capacity gaps and to strengthen local stakeholders' capability to increase flexibility and adaptability of responses.

The ability to make adequate assessments of situations was regarded as a critical capability for successfully addressing various challenges. Interviewees emphasised that poor assessment of the context is a major issue that is encountered frequently. Specifically, timely information about what is needed and how to handle issues is also important for budget management in the face of decreasing funding. (Interview 9, 2021), which was also echoed among survey responses.

Another common theme raised in the interviews is that HOP Fundamentals increased awareness of community engagement and understanding the minimum requirements and standards in humanitarian responses. Topics related to gender,

inequalities and minorities have repeatedly been highlighted in the interviews, as the training programme provided new perspectives about how to approach the situation and created awareness on aspects that were neglected beforehand:

> *It doesn't matter how many years you spend working in this sector. Training always adds value to your work because it challenges your established thoughts and convictions. For example, I realised the importance of community feedback, how to listen to them and learn, most importantly, take everyone into account* (Interview 6, 2021: Has completed HOP Fundamentals (more than 3 modules), Core and Response).

This data analysis indicated one principal trend: the use of HOP Fundamentals has significantly increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, 81% (2,862) of all participants started the Anglophone programme of HOP after 23 March 2020 and all 39 who completed the entire programme (22 modules) did so during the first year of the pandemic. Moreover, this trend is generally consistent across different regions and demographics.

From a gendered perspective, significantly more men have started HOP Fundamentals than women, with the Anglophone data showing that 65% (2,295) of all participants were male and only 35% (1,226) female. The Francophone gender data supports this claim but the discrepancies are even wider, with a total of 83% (736) male participants and 17% (156) female participants having completed at least the first module after the onset of the pandemic.

DIGITAL LEARNING: INCLUSIVE or EXCLUSIVE?

Access to internet and technology

The findings above demonstrate a clear demand for learning amongst humanitarians, but do they provide insights into the future of humanitarian learning? The internet opens the doors to information for so many, but it also shuts for quite a few. Access; one of the buzz words of the current humanitarian system; still remains an issue for a great percentage of global population, even more so in countries grappling with conflict, natural disasters or chronic poverty. Weak power supplies, lack of access to computers and the internet remains a real issue. For example, three interviewees from South Sudan explained how they are discouraged to even start any kind of online training due to connection problems. One of the interviewees explained this by saying:

> *Every time I start to take an online course, my internet keeps disconnecting every 10 minutes. Sometimes I lose my progress in the training due to sudden logout. If not, I get distracted and unable to focus anymore. So, I give up trying.*
> (Interview 2, 2021)

Those connectivity problems are further exacerbated due to working from home, which is less reliable than in an office, discouraged some learners from accessing online training tools, which stated in one of the interviews as:

> *In Zambia, even before the pandemic we were in the middle of an electricity crisis. But access to constant power and connection was way easier when we are in the office, as compared to home. After the lockdown started, we couldn't go to the office for more stable power and connection, and the situation in houses worsened when the electricity crisis intensified with the pandemic. It was really hard to work, let alone do the online training. (Interview 10, 2021:)*

In the presence of constant connection problems, one option participants mentioned is using hotspots from their mobile phones which is regarded as being safer than Wi-Fi. However, using data from mobile phones is not a better option for doing online training, due to cost and high data usage when online tools include videos. One interviewee explained this problem by saying:

> *I use my mobile phone when I need a constant connection, and it works better than other options. But it is not the best choice for doing one-hour long training especially with videos etc. If I do that, my data will finish so quickly, and it is really expensive.* (Interview 8, 2021)

Gender and languages

In addition, considering the gender discrepancies in terms of access; they may look very familiar as they mirror the reality of the humanitarian sector in many of the low income countries, but what does it tell us about access? What if the internet and digital delivery is not such an equalizer as we have hoped for, and what can we do about it? The Oxfam report on global megatrends (2020) observes that it is both technological illiteracy as much as access that hinders the progress, with marginalised groups, including those living in poverty being particularly excluded. Furthermore, it confirms that the digital divide is gendered and combination of different socio-economic factors prevents women from fully participating in the opportunity.

Another excluding factor is the language, most capacity strengthening content is produced and available in English, which is a barrier for many of the global learners. This was also clear with the example of HOP Fundamentals which had a very small number of learners coming from Francophone countries in Western and Central Africa or Haiti, but this has changed dramatically after the French version of the programme has launched (unintentionally in synergy with the COVID-19 onset). The Arabic version is in production but a very small figure of all learners from Latin America (116 including the Caribbean countries) shows that the needs for contextualisation, including making the content available in different languages, are much greater.

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Our research didn't investigate other potentially excluding factors, like content not being appropriate or adapted for people with disabilities but this would be another important factor to consider for those providing learning to the sector.

DIGITAL LEARNING: A FAST TRACK TO LOCALISATION OR CURRENT NECESSITY?

The research outcomes provide us with very strong evidence that there is huge demand for learning amongst humanitarians dictated by the current necessity and advancing localisation efforts. COVID-19 may have been the accelerator that have exposed both capacity gaps that have existed or have been created by the pandemic, as well as outdated organisational power structure between the global headquarters and the national and local teams.

At the HLA, we are working with our partners on meeting those ever-growing needs, through programmes like HOP Fundamentals or Field Managers In Emergencies, Learning & Development Programme (FIELD) that are available online on our Kaya platform, but also by adapting much of the content in the technical programmes for digital or remote delivery. Capacity strengthening is a critical component of localisation efforts, but by no means is a magic solution if not accompanied by other elements. Any training should be implemented as a complementary component of a comprehensive capacity strengthening programme for maximum impact. However, thanks to technology, humanitarian learning under COVID-19 has not only stopped but skyrocketed, and what this means for the future is yet to be determined.

If the sector continues to address the challenges mentioned in this report, and navigates its way through making digital learning more accessible and inclusive where possible; like providing downloadable, low bandwidth content that can be accessed offline (now possible through Kaya) – the opportunity for strengthening and accelerating localisation cannot be missed. However, some challenges will remain and may need to be tackled differently, including continuous interrogation of the definition of localisation and the perception of capacity, but also ensuring that any transfer of knowledge and power accounts for contextual variations as much as possible, including regional differences and the unique challenges presented by COVID-19-related restrictions.

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