

33RD ANNUAL  
MEETING

# FACING THE UNKNOWN

MANAGING  
UNCERTAINTY  
IN HUMANITARIAN  
ACTION



ONLINE CURTAIN  
RAISER:  
18 NOVEMBER 2020

IN-PERSON EVENT:  
MID-2021

# Facing the unknown is a consistent reality for humanitarian actors.

## Why are ALNAP Members meeting to discuss this topic?

Large-scale international emergencies may happen unexpectedly. And, whether large or small, crises unfold in unpredictable ways. We don't always know how people and governments will react, if or how populations will move and for what period of time, and what resources will be available. We often lack information – about both the present situation, and how it may develop in the future.

But while humanitarians are experts in responding to crises and dealing with unknowns, they are not experts in managing uncertainty. This difference has become apparent in recent months, as the COVID-19 Pandemic has swept the globe, creating unprecedented, long-lasting and wide-ranging uncertainty.

COVID-19 has forced humanitarians to reckon with an unknown present and an unknown future: 'Who is affected?' 'What is safe?'; 'What will happen?' 'What should we do?' 'When will things be more certain?'. It has shown how humanitarian actors (and people and organisations of all sizes in many sectors, for that matter) can struggle to adjust quickly to handle new uncertainties. But in looking to manage uncertain futures in humanitarian settings, important practical and ethical questions emerge – not least of which are what organisational resources might be needed and how crisis-affected people could be included in decision-making.

Humanitarians have developed different strategies to handle the unknown – all with various degrees of success. Risk management aims to deal with the unknown by measuring and mitigating. Scenario planning is used to identify and prepare for different possible futures in a crisis.

And rapid cyclical approaches to monitoring and learning, though used less commonly, can allow humanitarians to adjust humanitarian delivery over time. These different approaches underline the fact that, although there is a growing body of experience and learning, we lack a shared language for and understanding of uncertainty in humanitarian action and how to manage it.

It is within this context that the 33rd ALNAP Annual Meeting will explore the challenges posed by uncertainty for humanitarian action and the things that humanitarians can do to better equip themselves to respond. The Meeting will look at effective approaches for managing uncertainty. The likely topics for discussion will be:

- Making decisions in uncertainty: learning from other sectors and disciplines
- Effective and transparent approaches to risk sharing
- Systems-thinking skills and their role in navigating uncertain futures
- Scenario planning and anticipatory action: can we learn from business contingency planning? What is ‘futures thinking’?
- Big data and modelling: exploring the potential of predictive analytics for reducing and managing uncertainty
- Cyclical and adaptive ways of working: learning how to adapt, addressing structural and financial barriers to flexibility, and balancing flexibility with accountability and risk management
- Communicating uncertainty: how do we build trust with stakeholders, communicate change, make decisions responsibly and ethically, and better understand how crisis-affected people engage with uncertainty?
- Dealing with the psychological impact of uncertainty: understanding fear and stress; developing positive coping mechanisms, promoting mental well-being and learning to accept uncertainty
- Looking on the bright side: spotting – and making the most of – opportunity in uncertainty

# The 33rd ALNAP Annual Meeting will provide participants with the opportunity to explore both the challenges and opportunities that uncertainty presents.

We will share emerging learning from across and beyond the humanitarian sector, focus on the practical shifts needed to manage uncertainty and, crucially, consider it from the perspective of crises-affected people, donors, local and national responders and M&E professionals, amongst others.

## Format and structure

The Meeting will have two components:

- **A virtual curtain-raising event (18 November 2020)**, which will allow ALNAP Members to contribute to the usual Annual Meeting Background Paper process and kickstart discussions on the topic.
- **An in-person event (mid-2021)**, which will bring ALNAP Members together in the usual Annual Meeting format. The location of the Meeting will be determined closer to the date, but we are looking at venues in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Central or South America.

Both the virtual and in-person events are also open to non-Members on a first come, first served basis. They will feature discussions, interactive sessions, presentations, networking opportunities and storytelling. They will also provide opportunities to engage with practical realities and to share learning across the ALNAP Network and beyond.

# How to participate

## Call for ideas

ALNAP invites Member organisations and the wider humanitarian sector to contribute content to the 33rd Annual Meeting and to the virtual curtain-raising event in November 2020. We want to hear your experiences of working under uncertainty, what you have found to be effective, and what issues the sector needs to address to deal better with it. For more information, please check our [Call for Ideas](#).

## Attending the meeting

Both the virtual and in-person events will be open to all staff of ALNAP Member organisations. As places are limited, each ALNAP Member will be guaranteed at least one place in each event. The Secretariat will try to accommodate Members who wish to send more people. A limited number of places will also be available for external participants, particularly those who are contributing content to the events by speaking, storytelling and/or running a session.

## M&E Skills-Building Day and Members Day

The curtain-raising event will be accompanied by a virtual **Members Session** on 19 November 2020.

A separate virtual **Skills-Building Day** for M&E practitioners will follow in 2021.

For the in-person 33<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting in 2021, as in previous occasions, ALNAP will host an in-person **M&E Skills-Building Day** and an **ALNAP Members Day** as part of the Annual Meeting week.

## How to register

Registration for both the virtual 33<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting curtain-raiser and the Member event (18–19 November 2020) will open on 18 September 2020. Find out more and keep up to date at [alnap.org/33am](https://alnap.org/33am).

You can also sign up for our email updates or follow us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#).



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