MORE RELEVANT?
5 CALLS TO ACTION

March 2020

If relevance means a close match between a response and what people most need, this forces us to think hard about most aspects of humanitarian action. The relevance test reaches wide and deep.

It is a test that cuts across the 'what' and the 'how' of humanitarian action: both are important if people's priorities – both tangible, such as food and water, and intangible, such as dignity and community – are to be addressed. This takes us beyond simplistic ideas of supply and demand and encourages us to think about humanitarian assistance as being as much relational as transactional.

There are no clear-cut, text-book answers to the relevance test for each of the 10 dimensions explored in the ALNAP Study *More Relevant? 10 ways to approach what people really need* (Figure 1). Instead, there are sliding scales along which choices must be made (Figure 2).

Each of these sets of choices poses serious dilemmas for humanitarians: dilemmas of expertise – who knows best and who gets to judge; dilemmas of action – what to prioritise and for whom; and dilemmas of boundaries – when to stop, when to handover and how to complement. Faced with the real-world operational, organisational and structural constraints and challenges of the humanitarian system and settings, these dilemmas become particularly tough.

Overcoming all of these dilemmas and constraints would not yield a perfect score on the relevance test. 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 in any given context and crisis stage.

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Figure 1: The ten dimensions of a relevant response
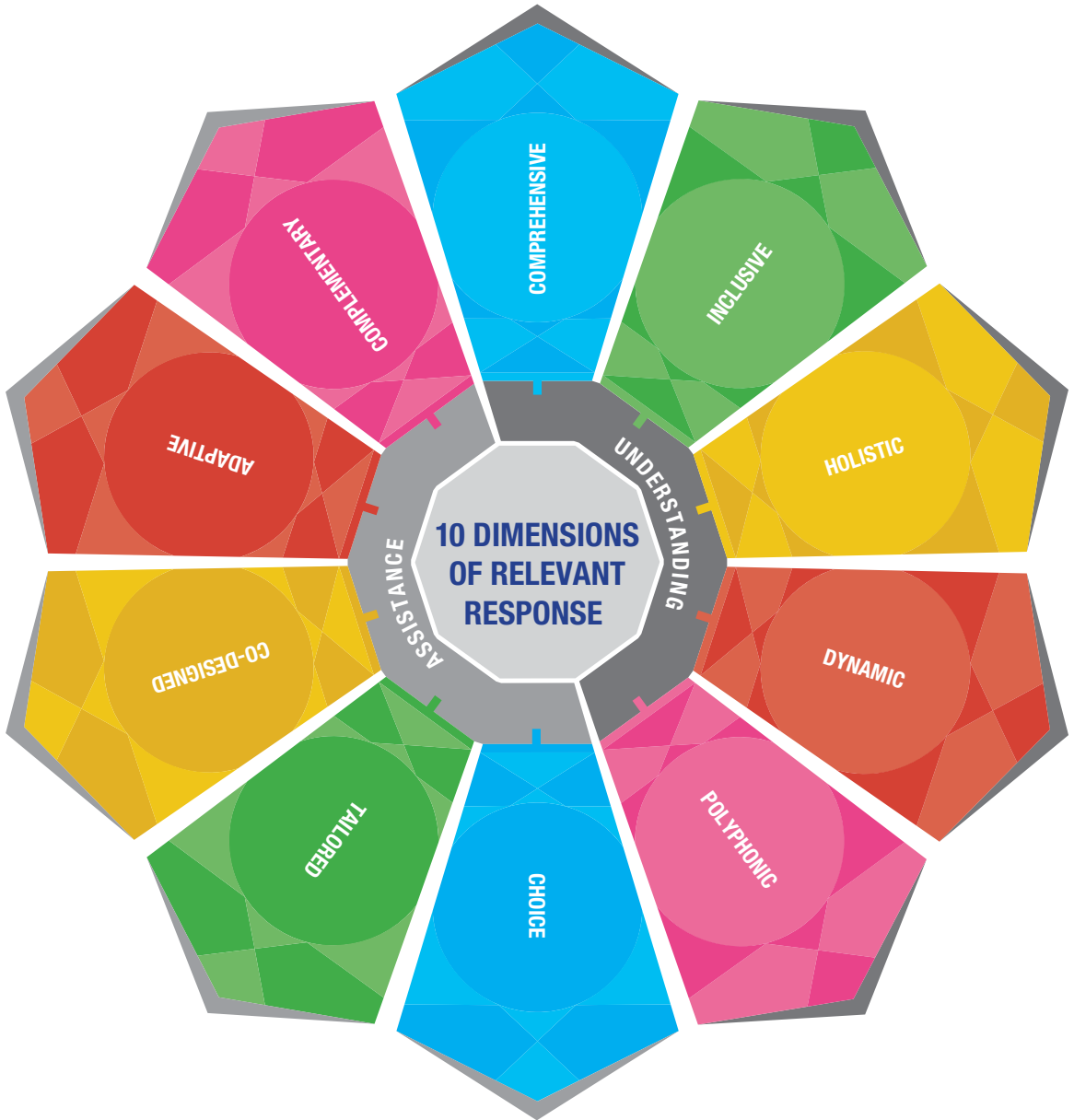
Yet, many clear recommendations for becoming more relevant did emerge from the discussions at the 32nd ALNAP Annual Meeting. These recommendations, which are set out under the 10 dimensions in the ALNAP Study More Relevant?, can be summarised into five broad calls to action for the humanitarian system:

- **to expand the repertoire**
- **to default to inclusion**
- **to assume agency**
- **to work iteratively**
- **to think systemically.**

These calls to action include broad demands for change, as well as practical tools and replicable good practice drawn from the humanitarian and wider social justice sectors.

1. EXPAND THE REPERTOIRE:
taking off the blinkers to respond to peoples' real range of needs

As we've seen in the **comprehensive** section of the Study, this involves moving away from the 'hammer seeking nails'

approach in which humanitarians' understanding of situations is circumscribed by what agencies have to offer. It means becoming less dictated by pre-set sector-driven assessments, and embracing open, multidimensional methods that capture the wide range of people's needs.
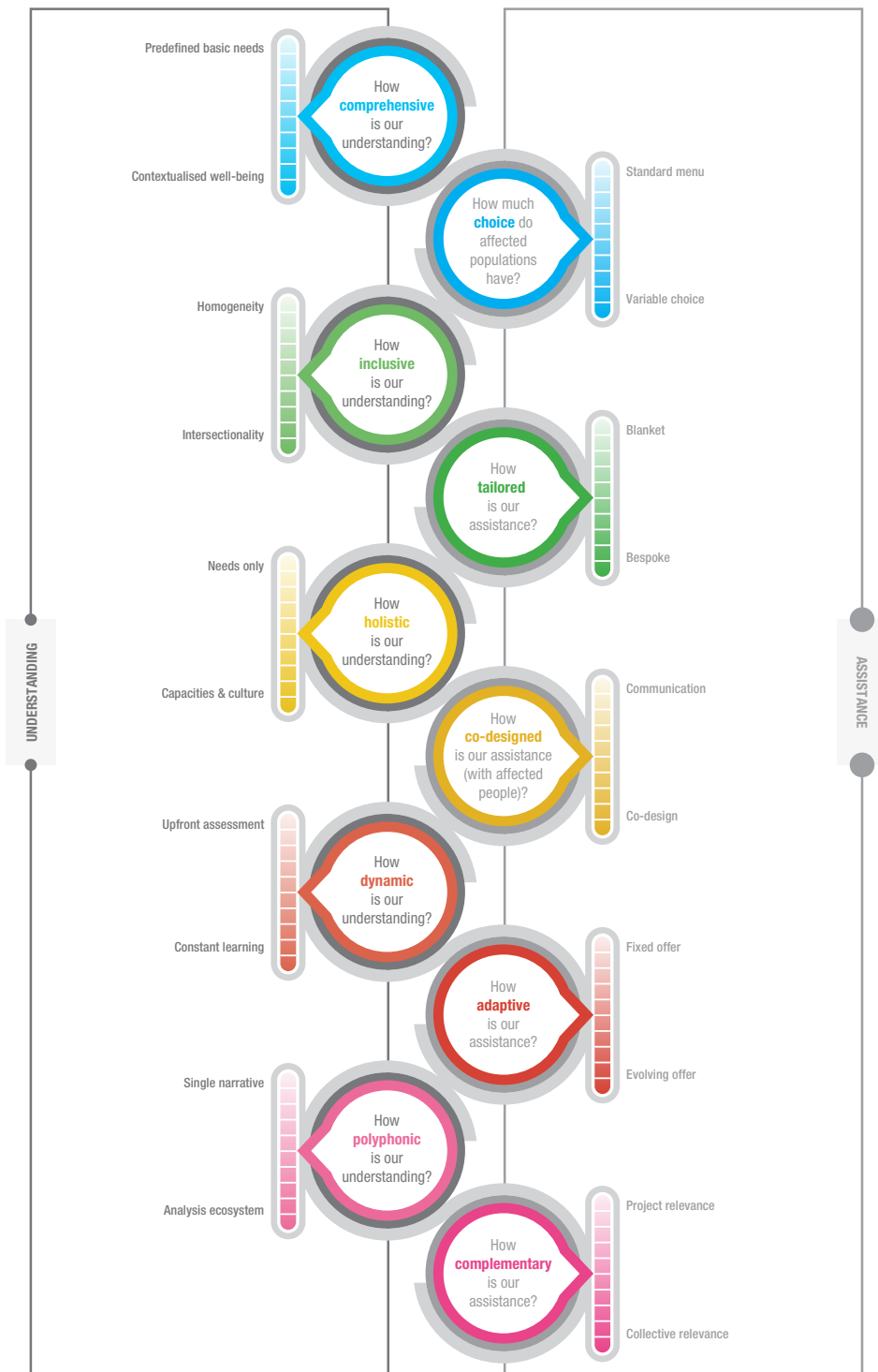
And based on this, as the **choice** section in the Study shows, agencies need to consider their repertoire of provision and support. This can involve offering a wider set of options of assistance – providing goods and services that fall outside the standard package – as well as, offering programming modalities which relocate choice to the people on the receiving end.

Communication is key, as it is to all the dimensions of relevance. A more comprehensive understanding of what people really need, must be accompanied by an 'ethics of refusal' when agencies are unable to provide accordingly. And where options are available, choice must be supported by sharing information, technical expertise and knowledge.

[We need to] move away from the 'hammer seeking nail' approach in which humanitarians' understanding of situations is circumscribed by what agencies have to offer and embrace open, multidimensional methods that capture the wide range of people's needs. Photo credit: ALNAP (32nd Annual Meeting)

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

2. DEFAULT TO INCLUSION:
ensuring a fair response for marginalised members of society

Discussions on **inclusive understanding** revealed how agencies need to invest in implementing their many guidelines on reaching marginalised people but do so in a way that doesn't reduce them to tick-boxed vulnerable groups. Emerging approaches to intersectionality, which incorporate multiple social factors, offer a way forward. And while granular data can be critical to identifying 'invisible' people and needs, its absence shouldn't prevent a default to inclusion from the outset: there are good examples of pre-positioned information about demographics and culture supporting reasonable working assumptions ahead of more detailed assessments.

The purpose of **tailoring assistance** is to achieve equity in a response, wherein a person's outcomes are not defined by their identity. A design-thinking mindset enables teams to generate and test solutions that best fit all segments of society. Two practical models for tailoring were raised at the Annual Meeting: universal design, which consciously factors in access for all into generic solutions; and user-centred design, which purposively creates sets of representative user-profiles and customises to these.

Ultimately, diversity within humanitarian organisations is fundamental for an inclusive worldview and equitable action. This demands an honest look at the profiles and hierarchies of staff and of partners

– that is, who is hired and how they are valued. This needs to happen right from the highest echelons of leadership to the direct face of delivery, alongside the creation of a culture of open reflection on power, prejudice and inequality.

3. ASSUME AGENCY:
working with people's own capacities and expertise

A **holistic understanding** begins by seeing people in terms of what they have – support mechanisms, expertise, rights – as well as what they lack. It challenges the 'deficit needs' model of much humanitarian assessment. Building on the self-recovery assumptions that are already used in some sectors, this holistic understanding doesn't only gather metrics on needs but also asks: 'What are you already doing and what assets, ideas and skills can we support?'

This mindset is the foundation of **co-designed assistance**, which offers people the chance to genuinely participate in shaping assistance most relevant to their situation. Co-designing involves trusting and supporting people's expertise, shifting from an approach of 'imposing aid' to one that facilitates problem-solving and sharing power. This spectrum of co-design and power-sharing spans from radical handover of decision-making in 'peer-allocated funding', to collaborative models where people generate solutions that inform programmes, or where they customise the design of what assistance they receive. Scaling up these models will require organisations to build different skill sets, wherein the abilities to listen to, negotiate

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and support others' expertise are as sought-after as technical delivery expertise.

In all this, international humanitarians can learn from community action and public service models on their own doorsteps. Doing so is not only an exercise in encouraging basic empathy – prompting foreign aid workers to ask, 'What would I want aid to look like if it were in my community?' – but it also provides transferrable models of civic participation such as equity-centred design, showcased at the Annual Meeting.

4. WORK ITERATIVELY: keeping up with changing requirements to stay relevant

Working in protracted volatile settings is the humanitarian normal, with contexts, circumstances and priorities changing over the course of a crisis. This demands a **dynamic understanding**, which would see humanitarians shift from a dependence on resource-intensive, up-front assessments to an ongoing learning process. The Annual

Meeting heard how growing investments in gathering feedback and how situation monitoring tools both need to become routine and challenge the linear tyranny of the log frame programming approach.

Unless they are integral to an **adaptive** approach, however, ongoing monitoring and feedback are at best wasteful and at worst counterproductive to relevance. Ongoing investment therefore needs to be equally placed in gathering feedback and information and in analysing and course-correcting in response to this and in closing the feedback loop.

Flexible action relies on flexible funding from donors who are open to embracing uncertainty and iterative solutions, rather than being fixated by rigid outputs. The Annual Meeting heard how this can make a real difference to staying relevant if it goes hand in hand with adaptive management approaches, which start with assumptions that programmes will have to change, regularly test and revisit alternatives, and allow space for local partners to 'navigate by judgement'.

5. THINK SYSTEMICALLY: connecting the dots for collective relevance

Polyphonic understanding is about hearing and handling multiple perspectives, instead of trying to impose simplicity on complexity by 'editing' these out. Annual Meeting participants shared a range of tools for actively listening to the diverse and divergent viewpoints of affected people, including in-depth and open-ended enquiry methods. They also stressed the importance of investing as much in meaningful analysis as in gathering information. When it comes to synthesising all these analyses, the humanitarian system still has the impulse to establish a single over-arching narrative of needs, often controlled by the dominant aid providers. Instead, independent analysis has a role to inform decision-makers who should have the analytical maturity to review multiple contrasting and complementary perspectives.

Responding to these many perspectives is, of course, beyond the scope of any single programme, agency or sector. Relevance is usually judged at the programme level and yet no part of the response can 'do relevance' in isolation. It demands **complementary assistance**, where connections are made between and beyond humanitarians. The Annual Meeting heard many examples of promoting this collective relevance, whether through collaborative multi-agency approaches to two-way communication and to cash programming, or wider attempts to put the humanitarian-development-peace nexus into practice.

Running throughout these discussions was the call for true complementarity with local partners, for partnership based on a genuine consideration of the added value of each party. This needs to be based on solidarity, trust and equality, rather than paternalism and subcontracting.

GETTING RADICAL ABOUT RELEVANCE

Being open to these ways forward means being open to significant changes in the who, what and how of humanitarian action. 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. But addressing some of the most entrenched constraints and thorniest dilemmas implies a disruptive 'upending' of the system. Discussions at the Annual Meeting were both honest about the reasons for irrelevant aid and ambitious in proposing how to be more relevant. Participants spoke of the need to 'turn the business model upside down' and urged 'subversion'.

Many at the Annual Meeting called for a radical role change for international humanitarians. This includes transcending the sector-based system, but it also goes much further. It involves turning over power and resources to those who are best placed to judge what's relevant and involves using expertise to support others to make decisions, rather than impose decision-making.

Many participants spoke of the need for international humanitarians to shift from seeing themselves as providers to becoming facilitators, brokers and bridge-builders (Power and inequality session; 'Story in 5': Decolonising project management; Feedback and closing panel; Innovative design session, 1.3; Protection roundtable, 3.4). Reflecting on their experience of community-led action on education in emergencies, one presenter said: 'The journey of self-recovery starts before outsiders come in, and it continues after we go, so I learnt a lot about us having a facilitation role, but not providing solutions' (Life-saving panel, 2.1). Another stated starkly: 'The only way to get to relevance in the eye of the one who's supposed to benefit from what we do, would be to turn over decision-making and resources to people themselves' (Power and inequality session). This is hardly a new call and it links closely to the demand for more genuinely locally-led response that ran throughout the Annual Meeting. But the fact that it is well-rehearsed – and less well-realised – should not mean that it is omitted from an agenda for relevance. Limiting the way forward to being about operational approaches, and not about power, would be to limit the extent to which humanitarian assistance can become more relevant.

The Annual Meeting should be the start of a conversation about relevance – one that brings it into plain sight, from being a side-lined evaluation criterion to becoming an explicit guiding objective for humanitarian response. The Meeting began to bring together the many dimensions and initiatives that contribute to making aid more relevant, seeing the bigger picture by joining the dots from cash, to accountability to diversity. And it provided the space for a hard, honest and open look at the privileges and prejudices that get in the way. While a two-day Meeting can't do justice to the substance or to the implications of all of these, it can catalyse a new level and quality of consciousness for the sector to take forward to improve its relevance. Making sure that the relevance test is always front and centre will be critical if the humanitarian system is to improve, engaging recipients, agencies, and donors in routinely asking how humanitarian aid can be more relevant to what people really need. After all, for those who aim to support others through crises, there can be no question more fundamental than: 'Are we doing the right thing?'

The ALNAP Study *More Relevant? 10 ways to approach what people really need* and other ALNAP 32nd Annual Meeting resources are available at:
alnap.org/32am

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