



Dynamic gridlock: Adaptive Humanitarian Action in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Alice Obrecht

COUNTRY STUDY

 ALNAP

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Acronyms

| | |
|--------|--|
| ACF | Action contre La Faim |
| ALNAP | Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action |
| ARCC | UNICEF's Alternative Responses for Communities in Crisis programme |
| AVSI | Associazione Volontari per il Servizio Internazionale |
| CHF | Common Humanitarian Fund for DRC |
| CRS | Catholic Relief Services |
| DFID | UK Department for International Development |
| DHF | The DRC Humanitarian Fund (formerly the Common Humanitarian Fund for DRC) |
| DRC | Democratic Republic of Congo |
| GECARR | Good Enough Context Analysis for Rapid Response |
| HCT | Humanitarian Country Team |
| HELP | ALNAP's Humanitarian Learning, Evaluation and Performance Library |
| HRP | Humanitarian Response Plan |
| ICRC | International Committee of the Red Cross |
| IDPs | Internally displaced persons |
| INGOs | International non-governmental organisations |
| KIIs | Key informant interviews |
| MSF | Médecins Sans Frontières |
| MSNA | Multi-sectoral needs assessment |
| MSTC | Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts |
| MYF | Multi-year funding |
| MYP | Multi-year planning |
| NCEs | No-cost-extensions |
| NFIs | Non-food items |
| NGOs | Non-governmental organisations |
| OCHA | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |
| PEAR | Programme of Expanded Assistance to Returns |
| RRM | Rapid Response Mechanism (now RRMP) |
| RRMP | Reponse Rapide aux Mouvements de Population (Rapid Response to Population Movements) |

1. Why this study

Humanitarian action can be understood, in its most basic form, as a principled response to reduce severe human suffering and threat to human life. International humanitarian and national-disaster response agencies remain generally effective at achieving this purpose in rapid onset, short-term crises. Yet, when stretched outside this area of expertise, significant problems in response capacities have emerged. There are three factors that are causing this stretching, which place challenges on humanitarian attempts to form a principled response to reduce severe human suffering and loss of life.

The first of these factors is **time**. Increasingly, humanitarian action takes place in three types of context:

1. protracted emergencies featuring moderate to high ongoing risk of conflict, where there is a long-standing humanitarian presence amid an absence of development actors or a sustained attempt to find political solutions
2. low- or middle-income countries at high risk of cyclical natural hazards
3. migration crises, featuring movements of large numbers of vulnerable populations across borders.

In these settings, where underlying vulnerabilities to crisis remain chronic, humanitarian agencies face longer periods of engagement and must shift this engagement frequently, as immediate threats to life and wellbeing periodically arise and fall away. This longer-term engagement of humanitarians brings with it a second factor of greater **complexity** – or, perhaps more accurately, a greater need to recognise the complexity of the contexts in which humanitarians operate – than is the case in short-term, rapid-onset engagements. Combined with the complexity of chronic vulnerability, longer timeframes present a fundamental challenge of how to respond effectively in the face of **continual change and uncertainty**.

Whether one believes that humanitarian crises are becoming increasingly complex (Valente, 2015; ICRC, 2011), or that humanitarians have ignored the complexity that has always existed in these settings (Ramalingam, 2015), there is a shared diagnosis emerging. From the stalwarts to the revolutionaries and many in between – many humanitarian actors are recognising that they need approaches and ways of thinking that allow them to embrace, rather than ignore, continuous change and help them navigate uncertainty to deliver effective, relevant, high quality humanitarian action (ICRC 2011; Mercy Corps and IRC 2015; Mitchell and Ramalingam, 2014; OCHA, 2015; OCHA, 2016; Fiori et al., 2016).

As the recognition of complexity and the need for greater context-sensitivity has increased, so too has the sense among some practitioners that the procedures and mindsets in humanitarian organisations have been moving in the opposite direction. These processes, while useful for professionalising humanitarian action and making it more accountable to donors, have led many humanitarian actors to become more rigid and less capable of shifting their response as a crisis changes over time (Mercy Corps and IRC, 2015).

Humanitarian funding mechanisms have taken much of the blame for this increased rigidity: long-term and fluctuating humanitarian challenges have largely been addressed through financing that is short-term, slow, and often restricted by earmarking (ALNAP, 2003; High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing 2016). Through the Grand Bargain and other initiatives, major

humanitarian donors are pursuing new financing mechanisms to support greater flexibility across humanitarian agencies and to respond more effectively to protracted crises, slow-onset natural hazards and migration.

However, financing is not the only problem: for enhanced financial flexibility to lead to better humanitarian action, limitations in the capacity of humanitarian actors to respond to fluid and continually changing contexts must be addressed (Adams et al, 2015; Bailey 2015; Haver et al, 2012). Specifically, implementing agencies need to ‘re-wire’ their approaches to be able to adapt programming and operations in response to changes in need, aid recipient preference, context and other factors. Without this, they will be unable to fully capitalise on more flexible funding.

Recent work has indicated at least two areas where humanitarian agencies are weak on their ability to adapt to situations as they change. The first is area is technical: surge capacities of humanitarian actors are being stretched by larger, more complex crises (Austin and O’Neil 2016) and agencies lack adequate programming options for moments where needs are at risk of rising (slow onset) or where needs are falling as a situation improves (early recovery). In slow-onset crises, humanitarian agencies lack adequate response analysis and design for early action, meaning that, even with the right data at hand, they do not know what to do on the basis of this data (Levine 2011.; Maxwell et al, 2013). In countries facing protracted conflict, there remains a lack of clarity on the best approaches for early-recovery or transitional programming and a need to re-think how these activities are prioritised and sequenced (Bailey and Hallován 2009; OECD 2012). The second area of weakness lies in the more general flexibility and responsiveness of humanitarian agencies: when programming does not go to plan, agencies are not well prepared to make the changes necessary for improvement, due to poor monitoring, poor use of feedback from affected populations to inform programme design and improvement, and inflexible or top-down internal approval processes (ALNAP 2003; ALNAP 2014).

Implementing agencies need to develop greater flexibility to be – and remain – effective as situations change. This means having more programming options for the ‘grey’ areas between development programming and emergency response. It also means proactively making changes to programming as situations change or if plans are not working as expected, and building the operational and decision-making systems needed to support this flexibility.

Adaptive management and adaptive programming can offer frameworks for the programmatic, procedural and behavioural changes that are needed to support flexible approaches. Adaptive programming and management is about finding the right solution for the right people at the right time and in the right way, amid continuous change. In the emergent literature on adaptive management in the aid sector, these approaches are variously described as ‘combin[ing] appropriate analysis, structured flexibility, and iterative improvements in the face of contextual and causal complexity’ (Mercy Corps and IRC, 2015: 2), ‘managing over time to reduce uncertainty’ (Mercy Corps, 2015: 1) and as ‘experimentation, in particular where the overall objective is clear but how to achieve it in a given context is

“Implementing agencies need to ‘re-wire’ their approaches to be able to adapt programming and operations in response to changes in need, aid recipient preference, context and other factors.”

unknown or uncertain' (Valters et al., 2016: 5). The prevalence of adaptive management and programming has been on a steady rise in the development aid sector (Valters et al., 2016; Booth et al., 2013). For humanitarians – where uncertainty may be a permanent feature of their operating environment – adaptive management may not reduce uncertainty but instead help agencies more effectively respond to the shifting waves of need.

To better understand both the need for flexible humanitarian action and the best approaches and programming options for achieving this, ALNAP is undertaking exploratory research on the barriers and enablers of flexible and adaptive humanitarian action. Comprised of two country studies, a structured literature review and a final report, the overall study aims to:

- identify the current supportive conditions and practical barriers for adaptive humanitarian response at field and/or country level
- understand the types of changes and fluctuations to which humanitarian actors must be sensitive if they are to deliver effective responses
- begin to identify existing programming options and management approaches within the humanitarian sector that could be scaled up or applied elsewhere to support responses that shift according to changes in need and context
- identify potential tools and approaches from outside the humanitarian sector that those delivering humanitarian assistance can use to build adaptiveness into their operations and respond effectively as needs change over time.

The two country studies in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Kenya explore examples of flexible humanitarian programming in protracted and cyclical slow-onset settings, respectively. They consider the barriers to flexibility and the main triggers for the need to change. The structured literature review provides an overview of relevant theories and approaches to flexible management and implementation in complex and changing environments, and assesses the relevance of these for humanitarian decision-makers. The final report draws together these three pieces, along with insights from interviews with thematic experts, to offer recommendations for how implementing agencies and donors can improve the flexibility of the humanitarian response capacity in protracted and cyclical slow-onset crisis settings.



2. Methodology

This study began with a review of key evaluations and reports on humanitarian action in DRC in the past 15 years. Thirty-four evaluations were identified through a search of recent literature (from the year 2000 onwards) on ALNAP's [HELP Library](#), using search terms 'DRC evaluation' and 'Democratic Republic of Congo evaluation' and 'DRC'. These evaluations were then coded for key terms and phrases related to adaptiveness and flexibility to assess how far current practice is adaptive, the degree to which a lack of flexibility in the face of change was highlighted in humanitarian evaluations, and what barriers were identified. An internal literature review of aid in DRC was also drafted alongside the evaluation analysis.

A 10-day country visit to DRC took place in early March 2017. Forty-four key informants across development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding actors were interviewed, including UN agencies, INGOs, NGOs, and donors. These key informant interviews (KIIs) were transcribed and coded using an inductive method to identify core themes around the barriers to flexibility and the ways in which change and adaptiveness are experienced and understood. All KII data is presented anonymously, with a number reference for the key informant (e.g. KII 5); where permission was granted, the key informant's organisation type is also provided.

General conclusions regarding barriers or trends were drawn when they were supported by more than four sources, and where at least one of these sources was document-based (not an interview). Given the wide degree of variance in the perspectives of key informants in DRC, there were very few general conclusions; in most cases, findings were qualified to reflect that they may come from particular organisations' experiences and are not necessarily indicative of all experiences in DRC.

3. Humanitarian action in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The humanitarian situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo has been both changing and not changing for decades. While many talk of the humanitarian situation in DRC as being 20 years old, both the drivers and consequences of humanitarian crisis have existed in the country since its independence in 1960. After several decades of numerous internal conflicts, and the military rule of Mobutu Sese Seku, life-threatening need in the country spiked in 1994, as a result of the refugee crisis and mass internal conflict sparked by the Rwandan genocide, followed shortly by the outbreak of a 5-year massive regional war in Congo involving multiple rebel groups and national armies. The number of international humanitarian actors operating in the country also rose dramatically during this period; prior to the early 1990s, only a handful of international organisations such as Oxfam, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), had been present in the country; in 2017 there are over 200 humanitarian organisations working in DRC (OCHA 2017).

Overall, DRC remains in a perpetual state of sporadic conflict, with people displaced and chronic absence of adequate infrastructure or government response to address its people's needs. More than 70% of Congolese live below the poverty line, and the DRC consistently sits at the bottom of socio-economic and human development rankings (176 out of 188 on the Human Development Index in 2017 (UNDP 2017)). The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has declared 7.3 million people in need in the country (OCHA, 2017), and while most of these are in areas affected by intermittent conflict, 'even in relatively stable areas the humanitarian

situation is very poor, with indicators of health and wellbeing as bad as or worse than areas affected by conflict.’ (Bailey, 2011: 4).

General descriptions of the DRC do not change much over time: overviews of the context from 15 years ago still apply. However, on a day-to-day basis, the crises that shape the DRC context can vary greatly. The underlying drivers of crisis manifest in different ways, across a geographical space that is half the size of the European Union. For those working in DRC, the context is one of dynamic change, in which many small-to-mid-level, multi-faceted crises arise in different parts of this vast country on a weekly basis: ‘Every day is a new day, and every day we have new problems’ (KII 5).

When the context in DRC is examined on a weekly basis – rather than at the level of overall trends – the narrative becomes more complex. Conflict is not monolithic but arises in diverse forms, ‘generational, interethnic, political/leadership-generated conflicts’ (KII 4), each requiring a different approach to the protection of affected populations and provision of assistance. There are also many other threats and hazards, aside from conflict, which impact households – from disease (measles, cholera, yellow fever, Ebola) to drought, floods, and even locusts, which threaten the maize crop and present a significant risk to food security.

New conflicts and crises continually emerge. In the 12 months from July 2016 to July 2017, the country has seen an unexpected uprising in Kasai Oriental with unprecedented levels of violence for the area, which spread to neighbouring provinces in late 2016; ongoing ethnic conflicts between the Bantu and Twa ethnic groups, rooted in disputes over land and livelihoods; and continuous armed conflicts involving multiple groups and shifting alliances in the North and South Kivu provinces in eastern Congo.

‘I think the thing that’s such a challenge in DRC is that, when it’s called a protracted crisis, that really does disservice to the fact that it’s a series of new acute emergencies every week or month. It’s protracted in that there’s been problems here for many years, but this situation in the Kasais is totally new. The Twa/Bantu problem, it’s always shifting...’ (KII 38)

As with any country receiving long-term international assistance, the DRC has two contexts: the observable context and the narrative context, the latter of which is how international actors think about and tell the story of the DRC (Darcy et al., 2013). For over a decade, DRC was characterised as a ‘post-conflict’ setting, with a focus on transitioning from humanitarian to development assistance. At times, the focus for this narrative has shifted, from recovery and transition (World Bank 2006) to ‘stabilisation’ (Bailey, 2011), and back again. Bilateral donors have invested significant amounts of funding into this narrative, with over US\$2 billion going to the DRC between 2010 and 2015 for humanitarian assistance alone.¹ While post-conflict stabilisation has occurred in pockets of the country at various times over the past decade, DRC as a whole never truly matched the ‘post-conflict’ narrative assigned to it, and this may have negatively affected the impact of these stabilisation efforts. In contrast to other post-conflict societies in West Africa, there has been no formal resolution to the ongoing conflict in DRC, and instead pockets of violence continue to erupt regularly, fuelled also by regional tensions in Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda.

‘I don’t necessarily agree that it’s a very changing context. I think that the narrative is regularly changing, about the context, because there are very strong wishes that the context change, and so when we have small indicators that can make us believe that it goes in a positive direction, then we tend to change our narrative.’ (KII 37)

In the past year, the narrative of post-conflict and transition has shifted to one of aid withdrawal and ‘donor fatigue.’ Development support is being scaled back for DRC, while humanitarian aid budgets are being diverted to more high-profile and politically important emergencies, such as the Syria refugee crisis. Those interviewed in-country expressed a concern that DRC was on a pathway to becoming a ‘forgotten crisis’, with less humanitarian funding available and development investments being scaled back, rather than increased.

Political uncertainty over the transition from the Joseph Kabila’s presidency weigh heavily on the country’s future and has been shaping the approach taken by the international aid community since late 2016. For some, aid strategies and plans are ‘on hold’ until elections are held and the transition is completed; others are insisting on pushing ahead, noting that there are never any purely ‘stable’ moments in the DRC context and the best approach is to work amid uncertainty rather than wait for it to go away.

After 20 years of humanitarian crisis and post-conflict narrative, there is disagreement over what or how to change. But there is wide consensus that new approaches are needed for how humanitarian and development assistance is provided in DRC.



*MONUSCO clears
Unexploded Ordnance
(UXO) in Eastern Democratic
Republic of Congo; Photo: UN
Photo/Sylvain Liechti*

4. What flexible, adaptive humanitarian action looks like in DRC

The ability to adapt to situational changes in DRC is shaped by the actions of multiple actors. The widely varying accounts given by different KIIs and the lack of supporting documentation made it difficult to reach general conclusions for this study. However, two categories emerged that were helpful for understanding the extent to which humanitarian action in DRC was flexible: first, the trigger for change (i.e. what creates the need for adaptation); and secondly, the site of flexibility (i.e. the aspect of humanitarian action that needs to be flexible to respond to the trigger).

4.1 Triggers for change that prompt adaptation

Adaptive programming and management is about finding the right solution for the right people at the right time and in the right way, amid continuous change. This means being able to identify and respond to triggers that will affect the quality and effectiveness of a humanitarian intervention. Despite good intentions, many humanitarian actors in DRC struggle to do this. Instead, due to a variety of incentives and constraints, agencies tend to adapt to the rules and structures through which development and humanitarian assistance is provided, rather than adapting assistance to the needs and realities of the DRC context.

Box 1: Most common triggers for adaptation in DRC identified in KIIs

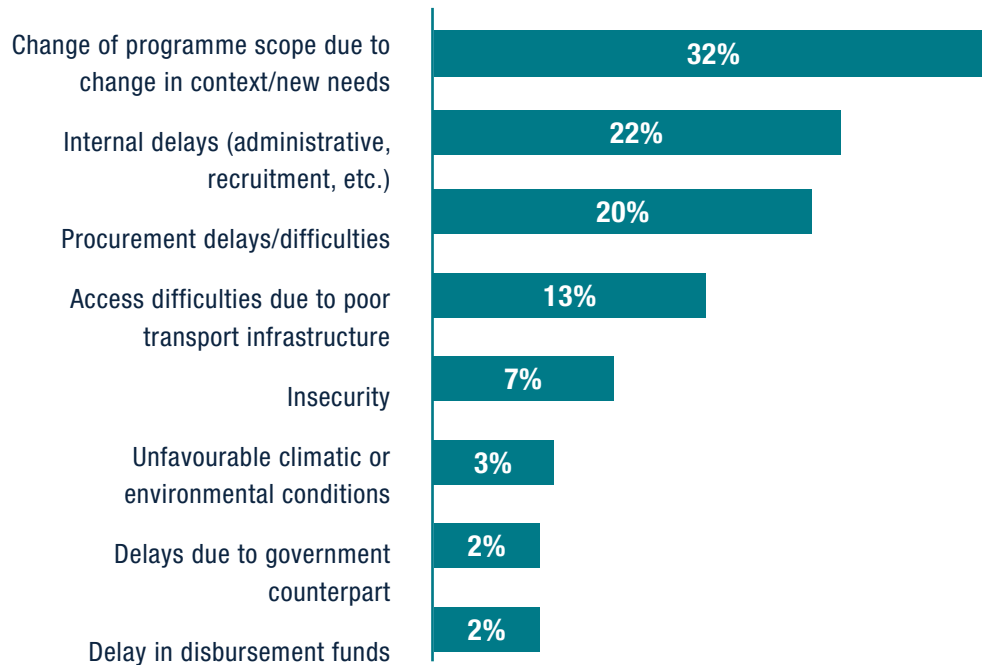
1. Agency policy or framework
2. Security situation worsened
3. Population movement/demographic shift
4. Beneficiary preference or request
5. Differences in implementing context

Evaluations of interventions in DRC from the past 10 years and over 40 KIIs were coded for the 'cause of adaptation' (see Table 1, page 12). This revealed that, while many situational factors act as triggers for change, the most common stimulus for adaptation did not arise from the DRC context itself, but from factors internal to humanitarian organisations. Policy directives made at headquarter or regional level were most frequently cited in interviews and evaluations as leading to changes in how programmes and operations were run on the ground. This finding is echoed in the annual reporting of the DRC Common Humanitarian Fund (now the DRC Humanitarian Fund, DHF), which showed that in 2016, 42% of requested changes to programming were due to factors related to humanitarian actors' procurement processes or internal administrative delays (see Figure 1: Reasons cited by partners when requesting project revisions on page 13).

Table 1: Triggers for adaptiveness

| Type of trigger | Example from DRC context |
|--|---|
| The nature/location of need changes, or prior understandings of need are shown to be false | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insufficient or inaccurate needs assessments at the design stage often results in having to reassess and change planned activities at a later stage (Pantera, 2013) |
| The situation deteriorates | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rise in acute conflict leads to an increase in humanitarian need as internally displaced persons (IDPs) flee the area (Davies, 2014) Disease outbreaks leading to a scale-up of response and/or addition of new response elements Operational constraints, such as security or market capacity, lead to adoption of modalities of aid distribution or to other programming changes, including temporary suspension of activities (Davies, 2014; Grayel, 2014; Murray and Hove, 2014) |
| The situation improves | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stabilisation results in IDPs returning home, requiring a transition back to development programming Disease containment leading to a scale-down of response |
| Programming does not have desired or expected effects, or the effects of a programme in an environment are uncertain | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A gap in current programming leads to actors developing solutions to fill that gap through adding new response elements or repositioning current/ongoing elements of response (Bailey, 2014) An existing element of response is deemed ineffective or in need of improvement (for example, through response evaluation or, less frequently, through feedback from recipients) and is adapted or replaced altogether to better suit its purpose (Bailey, 2013; Cassagnol, 2013; Davies, 2014; Grayel, 2014; Pantera, 2013) |
| When resources, policies or other parts of the humanitarian architecture and internal operations change | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes to resources, whether human or financial, lead to alterations in response planning and programming (Bousquet, 2015 (PUNC II evaluation)) Somewhat related to the previous point, organisational changes, such as organisational restructuring or strategic revision, also necessitate adaptation (van Bruaene et al., 2011) Staff – specifically expatriate staff – propose improvements to current response programming based on their previous experience in the sector and in other countries (van Bruaene et al., 2011) |

Figure 1: Reasons cited by partners when requesting project revisions



Reasons for project revisions in work funded by the CHF/DRC Humanitarian Fund 2016. Source: OCHA, 2016: 12.

The second and third most commonly cited motivations for adaptation were operational factors: the security situation and population movements. A fourth, and much less frequently mentioned, were adaptations made in response to requests or preferences by aid recipients.

‘[For many aid workers in the DRC], it’s the old way of working – where humanitarians come in, see a situation and bring in the aid that they think people need. It’s very well intended, but sometimes this goes wrong, and like I said before, especially when you talk about a chronic, protracted crisis, you need to reassess and see, “What do we need to stop doing? What do we need to change doing? Or what should we start doing to really make change in the context and to get to solving the root problems?”’ (UN Agency)

4.2. The site of flexibility: where adaptation takes place

Examples of flexibility and adaptiveness arise in three main areas: at an operational level, in how humanitarian assistance is delivered; at a programmatic level, in what is being provided; and at a strategic level, in terms of the broader paradigm and modalities for humanitarian action.

1. **Operational adaptation:** Humanitarians adapt where they operate/which populations they serve/ how they deliver activities and services.
2. **Programmatic adaptation:** Humanitarians adapt the content of activities and services being offered.
3. **Strategic adaptation:** Humanitarians adapt their broader role and function, or how they work within a broader institutional system.

4.2.1. Operational changes: changing ‘who’, ‘where’ and ‘how’

While the drivers for crisis in the DRC are largely predictable, specific humanitarian events arise and unfold in unpredictable ways. Operationally, humanitarian organisations will often need to change the ‘who’, ‘where’ and ‘how’ of their activities. Primary examples of operational changes are:

Changes before the start of a project:

- Initial rapid mobilisation of staff and resources to respond quickly to a new ‘flare-up’ or crisis

Changes within a project cycle:

- Shifting geographical location for a project after it began, due to new information in needs assessments or to changes in population movement
- Shifting the targeted beneficiaries, based on changes in need, duplication of aid in the original targeted population, or donor request
- Shifting to remote management approaches, when security situations worsen and direct implementation by NGO staff is no longer possible
- Using, or dropping, community participation-based approaches due to responses from affected people

The 2016 Annual Report for the DRC Humanitarian Fund notes that operational changes – for example, the change in scope of a programme due to an increase in need – were the top reason for requested changes to project plans (Figure 1: Reasons cited by partners when requesting project revisions on page 13). This was also the case with the key informants (see Box 2, 15).

Flexibility to operational change is primarily understood as a matter of speed; this type of flexibility—rapid mobilisation to meet shifting populations and needs within a crisis—is considered by many to be the key function of humanitarian actors. As such, there is broad donor buy-in for humanitarian agencies to have operational flexibility at the outset of a response, and reasonably strong donor support for rapid response capacities in DRC, albeit concentrated on a few mechanisms. Evaluations and KIIs indicate that, for the most part, humanitarian response in the DRC is flexible in this regard, with the RRMP and the Common Humanitarian Fund contributing significantly to this (see Mechanisms and approaches for operational flexibility on page 16).

Box 2: Interpretations of adaptiveness and flexibility in the DRC

As an exploratory study, this research kept an open approach to defining flexibility or adaptiveness, understanding them broadly as instances in which humanitarian actors change some aspect of what they are doing in response to a change in the external situation. Through the stories and examples provided by key informants, and the desk-based review of evaluations and grey literature on humanitarian action in the DRC in the past decade, four main approaches to adaptiveness emerged. These do not provide a comprehensive framework for what adaptive management and programming should be, but reflect the current practice of adaptiveness in the few examples found in the DRC currently.

Agility: Fast operational capacity, able to make significant changes quickly in response to changes in the environment. When discussing barriers to adaptiveness, many key informants cited factors that slowed down this capacity, such as delays to funding or logistical challenges to stockpiling and moving goods within the DRC.

Anticipation: Anticipating future threats and using preparedness or pre-positioning to allow for fast reaction times. The upside of an anticipatory approach is that it can allow for a faster response, and potentially save on costs by purchasing and moving items before a crisis hits. The strength of an anticipatory approach, however, lies in its ability to anticipate and prepare for a wide range of unexpected events. If resources are limited, it can become costly to try to move pre-positioned goods from one place to another, if a crisis emerges in an unexpected area, or presents an unexpected need.

Research and learning: Embedding research and learning processes within programming to test different programming modalities, monitor performance outcomes and identify 'what works' in a particular context. UNICEF's Alternative Responses for Communities in Crisis (ARCC) programme best met this model of adaptiveness in DRC. Working with their partners, UNICEF identified multiple approaches to cash-based assistance and trialled these to identify which worked most effectively. Tools were developed along the way and then taken 'to scale' through standardisation.

Value/goal-directed: Humanitarian action is guided by a general value or goal, and aims to find the best pathway to achieving this. There are no prescribed activities or outputs, or set time frames. As an example of a potentially new and more explicit approach to this type of adaptive programming, ACF, with funding from DFID, is trialling a new humanitarian programme that builds adaptive management into its approach: teams will deploy for the standard 3-month period for emergency response, however at the end of this period, ACF will conduct a reflections exercise to decide if the response will move into transitional programming, or if it will be extended, and if so, for how long.

Support for operational changes within a project cycle is another matter: once a response has begun, it can be difficult for implementing agencies to request and action changes, though this experience was found to vary widely from agency to agency and donor to donor. The cyclical nature of conflict in DRC means that operational changes within project cycle are most commonly caused by population movements, requiring a change in where the agency operates, or the realisation that there is another aid actor already present, requiring changes in who the operation targets. Organisations reported very different experiences in terms of the ability to make these changes without lengthy donor approval processes. Several implementing agencies and national NGOs operating outside the RRMP facility (see Mechanisms and approaches for operational flexibility on page 16) reported that even minor changes of location or targeted population had to be requested formally, and would take several weeks or months to review. This has a significant impact on projects that are designed to run for only 6-12 months, especially when the context on the ground has changed by the time the initially requested changes are approved.

“Organisations reported very different experiences in terms of the ability to make these changes without lengthy donor approval processes.”

Security and access issues are another major driver for operational changes, and can lead to creative operational solutions. For example, in one case, community members were enlisted to finish latrine-building themselves, when access to the area by the international agency running the project became restricted due to a rise in conflict. Local partners, including religious groups, are often drawn upon to support wider geographical flexibility and to continue humanitarian programming in situations where access becomes constrained.

Mechanisms and approaches for operational flexibility

Rapid response mechanisms

Rapid response mechanisms were commonly understood to support operational flexibility. These mechanisms in fact combine multiple elements, which can support flexibility in some areas while restricting it in others. There are two main rapid response mechanisms within the DRC: the DRC pooled fund, also called the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF) or DRC Humanitarian Fund (DHF) reserve for First Emergency Response and for Emergency Response, managed by OCHA and UNDP; and the RRMP, co-managed by UNICEF and OCHA, and implemented through multiple international NGO partners. At a smaller scale, there is the NGO-managed Start Fund, as well as bilateral donor rapid response funding. As individual organisations, MSF and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) are regarded as highly capable of rapid response, in part because they can use internal funding to pre-position and to shift their operations quickly without extensive approval processes.

Rapid funding is a key component of rapid response mechanisms. For the Start Fund – the fastest funding mechanism in the DRC – members issue alerts for small-scale crises, which are then circulated by email for review. Allocation committees are convened within 24 hours and members then have a further 24 hours to write a proposal. On the third day, there is a meeting in-country to select

Box 3: Using context analysis to support operational flexibility: World Vision International's MSTC and GECARR

World Vision International uses a participatory workshop-based method, Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts (MSTC), to develop a macro-level context analysis for the fragile contexts in which it works. While it provides an in-depth analysis of the political, economic and socio-historical drivers for violence and instability, MSTC can be resource- and time-intensive, and is not used regularly within World Vision International's programme cycle: 45 MSTC workshops have been held since 2003. To complement MSTC and provide a more time-efficient and routine approach to context analysis in fragile contexts, World Vision International has developed the Good Enough Context Analysis for Rapid Response (GECARR) tool. GECARR is described by World Vision International as 'a pragmatic' approach to macro-level context analysis that aims 'to guide INGO response decision-making and external positioning in the initial or urgent phases of a humanitarian response' (internal document). A main part of GECARR analysis is the development of multiple potential scenarios, which are used to support senior country office management to think through different potential responses and prepare for these. While presented as a lighter-touch approach in comparison to MSTC, GECARR still involves significant resourcing. For the last DRC GECARR, the team interviewed 197 key informants across five provinces and held a one-day workshop on scenario planning with World Vision International staff. While GECARR is considered useful to World Vision International, the method does not currently support routine updates, meaning the analysis can quickly become outdated.

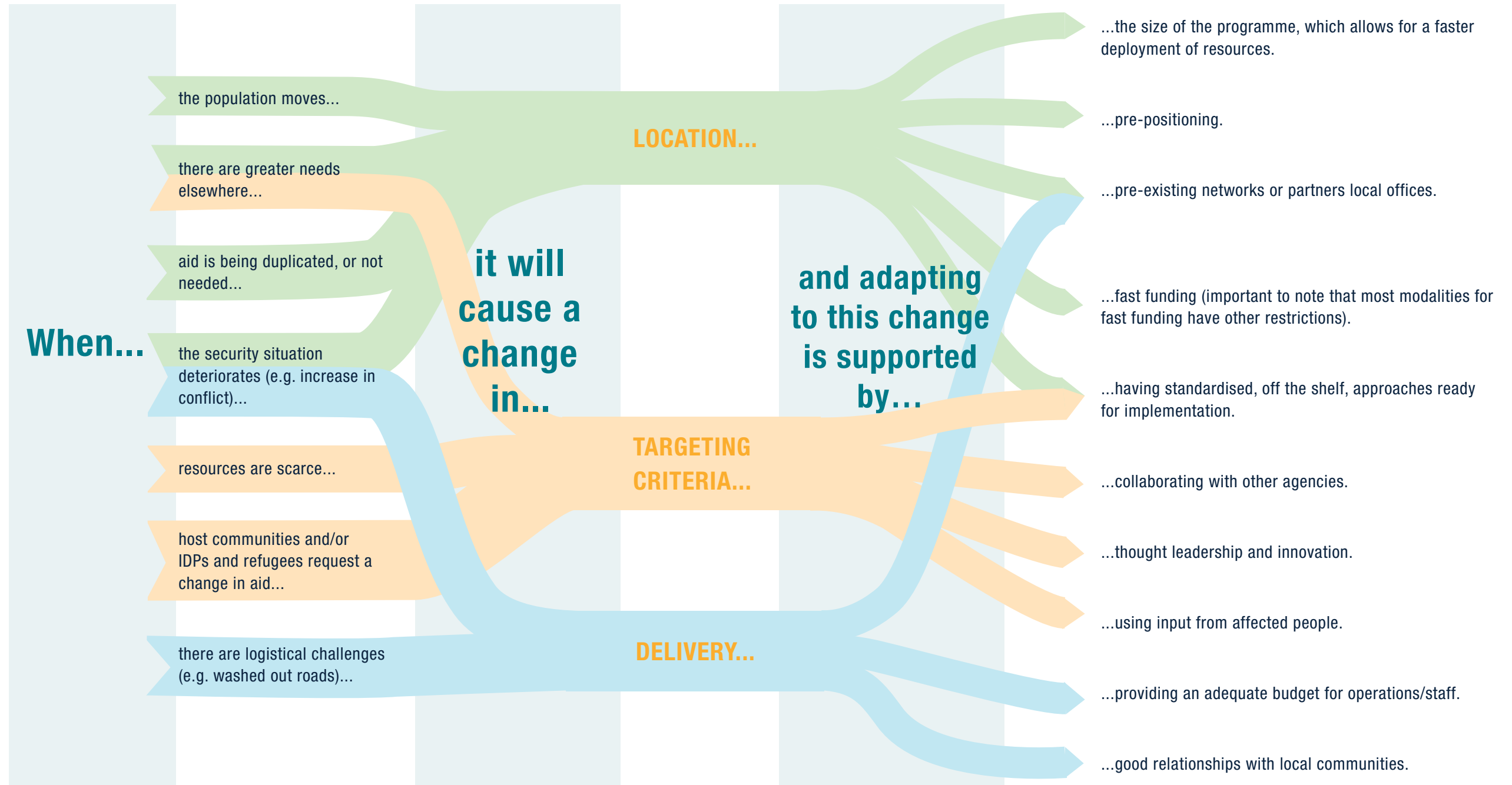
proposals for funding. At the close of the meeting, the transfer of funds is initiated and reaches the organisation in three to seven days.

MSF uses scenario forecasting to work out its budget for the coming year and has the option of requesting further funds from HQ if additional needs arise. The MSF offices in country are also able to shift resources from a planned scenario to a completely new crisis, with little administrative burden. The DHF pre-approves partners and maintains a map of where these partners are located, so that funds can be allocated to organisations more quickly in the case of a crisis.

RRMP uses a blend of pre-positioning and a networked approach to support a fast response to new or evolving crises. RRMP partners are selected prior to a response based on their sectoral experience, capacity and geographical location, with the aim being to provide multi-sectoral intervention capacity at provincial level (see Box 4 on page 20). RRMP is widely regarded as an innovative and successful approach to creating a sustained emergency response capacity, and it has been replicated in several other countries worldwide based on its success in the DRC. RRMP has also supported innovation across its partners, providing funding for trials of new approaches, including NFI voucher fairs piloted in 2008 and mobile-based data collection in 2011 (Baker et al., 2013: 58).

While rapid response mechanisms can support a humanitarian response capacity that is agile enough to respond quickly to unforeseen emergencies, they can also limit adaptiveness through their short implementation timeframes (see section 5.2. on page 36); the DHF has the longest time frame for its 'Première Urgences' (Critical Emergency) allocation window, of six months, while RRMP has a limit of three months for a response, and the Start Fund, the shortest at 45 days.

Figure 2: Types of operational changes, their triggers, and how flexibility towards these is supported



Flexible funding mechanisms Just as important as speed – if not more important – is the flexibility of funding mechanisms to allow for changes to implementation plans once a project is underway. Some bilateral donors in DRC require only a note or email to be sent by an NGO to make minor operational changes. The DHF has been routinely criticised for its lack of timeliness: standard allocations take 3-4 months from the initial call to the allocation of funds, and even the reserves for emergency response can take up to 17 working days, which, for a rapid-onset crisis is a considerable amount of time.

When KIIs were being conducted for this paper, though the active conflict and emergency situation in the Kasai provinces had been ongoing for several months, the DHF had yet to make a decision on dispersing funds. However, the DHF was cited by many KIIs as being highly flexible when it came to making changes within the project cycle. This is also highlighted in the DHF's 2016 Annual Report, which noted that 48 out of 130 projects had approved changes, many of which were adjustments to activities, targeted beneficiaries or project location. These changes were typically based on shifting contextual factors, including the major cholera response along the Congo River in 2016:

‘Cost extensions were granted to enable partners to add new activities or reach more beneficiaries following a change in context giving rise to new needs. This was particularly true for five projects involved in the cholera response along the Congo River, for which the JHFU in collaboration with the concerned clusters requested the partners to move into newly-affected areas, treat more cases, scale-up prevention awareness-raising and adjust the response strategy as the epidemic evolved’ (OCHA, 2016: 11)

Of the 48 projects with approved changes, 31 were no-cost-extensions (NCEs) and 17 were costed extensions. This is an important difference: NCEs support flexibility by allowing implementing agencies to make adjustments to the timelines outlined in their contracts. Yet, seeing as these timelines are arbitrarily fixed by humanitarian funders and agencies, the need for NCEs could be eliminated altogether through more flexible contracting. Costed extensions offer additional resources to meet the changing demands of a crisis and are therefore a more robust form of financial support for adaptive programming.

Longer-term funding was also raised by many key informants as a reform that could support more flexible operations—this issue is explored in more depth in Section 4.2.3. Strategic changes on page 27.

Coordination and a networked response

Logistical issues regarding road access and distance present major challenges to humanitarian operations in the DRC, while sector specialisation – which is increasingly pursued by humanitarian agencies – can limit what forms of programming are available in a given area, as organisations may focus their technical expertise on one or two sectors (e.g. WASH, nutrition). Both these barriers can be addressed by strengthened coordination structures.

Humanitarian agencies in the DRC described using either the Cluster system or the RRMP mechanism to channel new needs and requests for programming to other agencies who were better equipped to deliver. OCHA's 2017-2019 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for DRC seeks to strengthen this further by building a multi-sectoral approach across the DRC that creates partnerships between different agencies to ensure a full sectoral coverage in each province.

Box 4: Rapid Response to Movement of Populations

In 2004, UNICEF, OCHA and DFID developed the RRM (Rapid Response Mechanism): a mechanism for enhancing the emergency response capacity in the DRC for acute, life-threatening crises (Baker et al 2013). In 2010, RRM merged with another UNICEF initiative, the Programme of Expanded Assistance to Returns (PEAR) to become the Rapid Response to Movements of Population (RRMP), which delivers large-scale, rapid, multi-sectoral assistance in WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), health, child protection, education and NFI (Non-Food Items) to recently displaced persons, returnees, and those vulnerable among the host families. The overall objective of RRMP is to provide a standby emergency response capacity that ‘contributes to the improvement of living conditions of people in situations of acute vulnerability as a result of displacement/return due to armed conflict.’ (RRMP 2017) RRMP is currently the largest humanitarian response programme in DRC, reaching 1.2 million people in 2016 (UNICEF 2017: 3).

Partners and sectors have expanded over the cycles and additional donors have contributed to the mechanism. The current programme—RRMP 8—which began June 2017 and will run through May of 2018—started with an open call for partners and resulted in three large consortiums of NGOs being selected. Partners are selected for their logistical capacity to respond quickly to spikes in vulnerability, and for their geographical location (RRMP aims to have a partner with the capacity to respond in each of the conflict-affected provinces in eastern/south-eastern DRC). Once selected, partners are provided with funds up front to mobilise teams, position logistics capacity and carry out rapid needs assessments if there is an alert in their area of responsibility. UNICEF handles procurement and provides all supplies to its partners.

Alerts are collected from a variety of sources and analysed jointly by OCHA, UNICEF and the RRMP partners in weekly meetings at provincial level by the provincial RRMP Steering Committees. Based on these discussions, and the level and credibility of the information in the alerts, a partner may be selected to carry out a rapid multi-sectoral assessment (MSA) or to deploy technical teams to start an intervention. These assessments gather ‘red-flag’ indicators across sectors and focus on vulnerability levels of the affected population across sectors. RRMP has developed these tools specifically for the DRC context and standardised them across all RRMP partners in order to facilitate a rapid mobilization of teams and response upon the onset of new emergencies.

The findings from the assessments are then used by the Steering Committee to decide whether or not a crisis meets the threshold criteria for an RRMP response. These threshold criteria are set in order to support prioritisation of displacement crises, so that RRMP capacity is only used for the most urgent situations. RRMP uses a set of over 20 criteria, which include:

- Type of displacement, including rate of movement and probability of return
- Pressure of displacement on the host population
- A minimum number of households affected; these thresholds vary from one province/zone to another.
- Cross- sectoral vulnerability scores (target scores vary from sector to sector)

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Once a decision is taken to use the RRMP to respond, the provincial partner can use their funds to deliver a 90 day response to the crisis.

A 2013 evaluation of RRMP found that overall it was timely and highly effective as an emergency response capacity, with the typical estimated time between an alert and the start of an RRMP intervention being 35 days (Baker et al 2013: 32). However, some of RRMP's defining features limit the kind of response that its partners deliver, the primary feature being that the mechanism is decidedly short term. RRMP interventions are limited to a 3 month maximum although some exceptions have been made, particularly in WASH and Health sectors where vulnerability levels are particularly high and no other actors have positioned themselves to respond. While RRMP has attempted to work with other cluster actors to 'hand-over' to other organizations, this is not always possible, and in the end there is little support provided for exit strategy or transitional programming. A second limitation lies in the short-term funding for RRMP. Contracts with partners must be amended at least once a year, as UNICEF do not have a full picture of what their annual budget for RRMP will be. While these frequent amendments allow for flexibility, to add capacities and revised targets, there are trade-offs with the predictability of funding needed to ensure a rapid response capacity for the entire year. Those involved with RRMP felt that longer term funding would help ensure a minimum capacity for a full year and also allow for the planning of long-term activities to strengthen the links between emergency and transition.

These approaches reflect a 'systemic network' ethos (Seybolt, 2009; Ramalingam, 2013). Systemic networks offer an effective approach to managing complexity, in which an individual organisation recognises that it cannot, on its own, fully manage the range of factors that shape the environment in which it seeks to achieve its 'task requirements'. Instead, the organisation works through, and in conjunction with, a broader network of actors that allocates tasks between them. Coordination structures can support this networked response. However, in DRC this happens more slowly than is desired, and often depends heavily on the flexibility afforded to operating agencies by their donors. While the multi-sectoral approach adopted by the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) for 2017-2019 has the potential to help humanitarian agencies achieve greater impact, it may need to be accompanied with lighter, faster decision-making structures so that this networked approach can be both holistic and timely.

Extending the model of networked action even further, there is willingness and enthusiasm among many humanitarian and development actors in DRC to find a 'new way of working' that brings together both humanitarian and development actors. While much of this dialogue has been influenced by the World Humanitarian Summit language around strengthening the humanitarian-development nexus, many actors in DRC felt that the WHS focus on this issue reflected their operational reality, rather than this being a theme that is applied top-down from policy desks at international agencies. Current handovers are widely considered to be weak and not well practiced, with development actors claiming that humanitarians operate in their own world and do not communicate, and humanitarians pointing to the absence of development actors in many areas of return. The hope is that new approaches may improve handover between humanitarian and development actors, as situations worsen due to a break-out of conflict or disease, or as situations

improve, with stabilisation and a return of IDPs to their homes. To help coordination across the different silos, OCHA has proposed a '9Ws' – extending the '3W' information sheets used for humanitarian coordination to peacebuilding and development actors so as to share information on who is doing what at a provincial level. OCHA has also taken strides to engage more strongly with key development actors in the DRC, including the strong involvement of UNDP and others in the process to develop the 3-year HRP. Finally, the decision to move to a 3-year HRP was itself also driven by the aim of finding better ways to communicate goals and plans between the humanitarian and development communities. While at the strategic level these efforts have been positive, given the lack of proven approaches for field coordination between development and humanitarian actors, there is still much uncertainty on how best to achieve better handover and division of labour at an operational level.

Staffing

In addition to the logistics of moving supplies, staffing is a major area that shapes operational flexibility. The size of DRC, combined with its lack of infrastructure, present major challenges to rapid movement of staff. Many organisations in DRC reported struggling with trying to find a cost-effective model for maintaining a surge capacity that could respond to crises as they arise across a wide geographical expanse.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS), previously an RRMP partner (2006 – 2012) and presently an ARCC partner, was praised by many for its wide reach in DRC, has achieved this coverage through its membership in a wider faith-based network of Catholic dioceses and Caritas organisations. Meanwhile, Action contre La Faim (ACF) and Mercy Corps have tried to improve their flexibility by recruiting for individuals with multiple skillsets, who can 'pivot' from one type of crisis to another, or carry out multiple functions within a single response to ensure that, for instance, monitoring and learning is happening alongside implementation.

In key informant interviews, Mercy Corps and UNHCR both described changes to field-staff placement policies that had influenced the flexibility of their response capacities. Mercy Corps created a mobile emergency team, which is not formally based in any particular geographical area and therefore means they do not pay per diems to staff who have to travel to another province for a response. This builds more efficient geographical flexibility for the organisation. It also sets clear expectations and a different compensation system for field staff; rather than assuming that they will be primarily based in one particular area, the working assumption is that crises can emerge in many different parts of DRC and staff will be deployed to where they are most needed.

4.2.2. Programmatic changes

Programmatic changes focus on the 'what' of humanitarian assistance. Commonly, changes to activities and projects in DRC consist of smaller adjustments to standard response packages to fit the local setting, the security situation or, more rarely, the preferences of the targeted population. The most common programming change is a shift from cash to in-kind, or from voucher fairs to direct distribution, depending on the security situation. In some cases, unconditional cash distribution shifted to NFI fairs due to a lack of quality financial service providers in the affected region. In other cases, fairs were changed to direct distribution, as this was considered more secure. Even these changes often required pre-approval. One INGO described an arrangement with the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and a donor by which they agreed in advance the potential programming

changes that would be allowed and on what conditions, so that these shifts were ‘pre-approved.’ Without this prior agreement, shifting from a voucher fair to cash or to direct distribution would require waiting at least a month for approval.

These shifts in activities were often described as changes that ‘stayed within the box’ of how humanitarian programming is planned and supplied. Less common were adaptations ‘outside the box’ – that is, re-design of activities or interventions – particularly if these involved changing from one sector to another, or providing a form of assistance that the implementing agency was not prepared to deliver. *‘Outside of what is agreed on, it’s difficult to, you know, kind of re-programme. It has to go through all these agreements, which take maybe, a month, you see? So, it’s kind of difficult to shift from what is agreed on.’* (INGO, KII 18). Only one example of a sectoral change was given: from emergency response programming to resilience programming, which was funded by a small donor. However, this was unconfirmed by project documents.

Based on the experiences reported in DRC, flexible programming can vary in degree, from low to high flexibility:

1. **Least flexible (common):** outputs and outcomes are fixed; any changes to outputs must be approved by donor.
2. **Moderate flexibility (common):** agencies have flexibility on outputs and can make changes to activities or numbers of activities, provided they stay within the parameters of an agreed outcome that is well defined and sector-specific.
3. **High flexibility (rare):** outcomes are broadly defined, and outputs left to the agency to determine, which allows for a shift across sectors, if appropriate.

‘It has to be based on what the actual needs are, and you have to make kind of a justification of why you want to change. Ultimately, there’s still less flexibility in terms of sectors, and in terms of the specific, kind of, typical package of activities that you would want to do, but you know, we’re not required to do ten latrines, ten water sources, ten – like, the number of activities, the types of specific activities is [sic] rehabilitating a water source versus, you know, repairing a well. That’s all within our control and flexibility.’ (KII 19, INGO)

One main reason why higher programmatic flexibility may be less common is the inverse relationship between complexity-sensitive approaches to programming and the humanitarian objectives of scale and speed. ‘Outside the box’ programming that is tailored specifically to a context will require more time, as an agency must open itself up to complexity, seek to understand local dynamics and conduct open discussions with affected people around their problems, and identify the best solutions. It is difficult to do this quickly, and at scale, in multiple locations for large populations at the same time.

To achieve scale and speed, individual humanitarian organisations have instead sought to reduce the complexity of their work, primarily in two ways: standardisation and specialisation. Both strategies can work against flexible, adaptive response unless certain supporting conditions are in place –namely, coordination

“One main reason why higher programmatic flexibility may be less common is the inverse relationship between complexity-sensitive approaches to programming and the humanitarian objectives of scale and speed.”

structures that support a networked and multi-sectoral response (see 5. Trade-offs and barriers to greater adaptiveness on page 32).

Mechanisms and approaches to flexible programming

The clearest examples of programming that adapt to meet a range of needs over time were: cash-based programming; programming tied to operational research or a clear ‘innovation’ process; and ‘transitional’ programming within the humanitarian–development nexus.

Cash-based programming

Cash-based programming, particularly unconditional cash transfer (UCT), provides affected people with a form of assistance that can be converted into a wide range of goods and services, and thus meets a variety of needs. In this sense, cash programming has in-built adaptability, relieving aid agencies from the need to pivot from one sector, or one set of activities, to another. At the same time, this adaptability is limited by the strength of the local market and to delivering outputs at an individual/household level (that is, cash will not build a water system). Cash-based programming also requires a set of analysis tools to ensure that an injection of cash does not raise protection issues or create market distortions that lead to price rises. In DRC, there has been significant investment in understanding which modalities of cash-based programming—vouchers, UCT—are most appropriate and effective at achieving particular sectoral outcomes (see Box 5, page 25)

Operational research

ARCC stood out within DRC as a programme that incorporated an explicit operational research component to understand the effectiveness of its projects and undertake re-designs based on this learning. Operational research refers to research that is carried out on a programme or project during its implementation, typically to understand its effectiveness. Operational research can be particularly helpful for trialling different types of programming to see what works best in a given context.

In both of its phases (See Box 5, page 25), UNICEF, working with INGO partners, has looked at adapting current transfer mechanisms, such as NFI voucher fairs or value vouchers, to new areas of DRC or affected populations. Here, the focus of learning is on how to adapt previously successful programming modalities to a new population group. ARCC has also sought to measure the outcomes of different transfer mechanisms, such as comparing a single payment to multiple payments or comparing unconditional cash transfers with value vouchers. The programme has included two impact studies and a process evaluation. Alongside monitoring data from the implementing partners, these studies have enabled the ARCC partners to refine and adapt what they are doing, before then standardising a set of tools and approaches for cash programming. Many of the learnings from the programme – for example, that mobile-based money is ineffective in many parts of DRC due to lack of capacity in local financing institutions for mobile banking – have supported an adapted approach specific to the DRC context.

RRMP has a similar component, at a smaller scale: it funds innovations across its partners and provides a platform to diffuse these tools and approaches if the pilots are successful.

Box 5: Alternative Responses for Communities in Crisis (ARCC)

The ARCC programme grew out of the successful experiences of UNICEF and its partners piloting voucher fairs for NFI in DRC (Global Shelter Cluster 2017). Launched in 2011 with funding from UK Department for International Development (DFID), ARCC aimed to further develop and adapt the voucher fair for new populations in DRC, as well as explore different forms of unconditional and multi-purpose cash-based programming to understand which, if any, modalities and mechanisms were most effective at reducing humanitarian vulnerabilities across multiple sectors. To date ARCC has had three iterations:

ARCC I (2011-2013)

The ARCC I programme expanded the use of the NFI voucher fairs and also featured an operational research component looking at unconditional cash transfers (UCTs). Three small pilots were carried out with Concern Worldwide, Solidarités, and Associazione Volontari per il Servizio Internazionale (AVSI). While the projects were small (fewer than 10,000 households were targeted across the three partners), ARCC I was among the first to use UCT in the DRC. There were four components to this phase:

- adapting the NFI fair approach to include new areas and beneficiary groups
- one pilot project exploring the use of vouchers in existing markets (rather than in fairs) with Solidarités International in Orientale province
- two pilots using unconditional cash transfers – one in North Kivu and another in South Kivu.

For their pilot project, Concern Worldwide partnered with Tufts University to carry out a randomised control trial comparing the outcomes of multi-sectoral vouchers with UCTs.

ARCC II (2013-2015)

ARCC II expanded the programme's reach, and further explored the different mechanisms for unconditional cash transfers to understand which worked best. Its operational research component aimed to understand which delivery plans (e.g. receiving one lump sum or multiple payments), delivery mechanisms (e.g. cash vs. voucher) and targets for the transfer (e.g. wife or husband) achieved the best outcomes. The outcomes ARCC II focused on were:

1. Changes in participating families' wellbeing, as defined as an increase in access to basic needs, services, and livelihood opportunities and reductions in use of negative coping strategies; and
2. Detailed purchasing pattern analysis

To achieve this, the ARCC II partners for the main programmatic output (Solidarités, Concern, and AVSI) developed with UNICEF a shared monitoring framework which was used to collect data on programme performance. Randomised control trials were also undertaken to understand the different impact of delivering humanitarian cash assistance in one or three tranches; and to understand the implications of registering the wife, the husband as primary recipient, or leaving the family to choose on this matter.

With different partners--Save the Children, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and Caritas Goma--ARCC II also included separate pilots and studies to look at the effectiveness of cash transfers on sectoral outcomes in Nutrition, Education and GBV. Multiple learning papers have been produced as part of ARCC II (Grellety et al 2017; Bonilla et al 2017).

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ARCC III (2016-2017)

ARCC III consolidated the learning from the previous two phases into a set of tools and approaches for conducting market analysis and vulnerability assessments, and for delivering effective cash-based assistance in DRC. While learning is still an ongoing part of the ARCC programme, the focus has shifted more towards large-scale implementation of the approaches for which the previous two phases generated evidence. ARCC III operates similarly to RRMP, with standby partners (CRS, Mercy Corps and AVSI) able to intervene to assist communities across an entire province. In early 2017, with additional donor funds, UNICEF and CRS were able to adapt ARCC and mobilize the programme to respond in the Kasai crisis on a large-scale.

Programming within the humanitarian–development nexus: transitional programming

Many actors in DRC believe that, after 20 years, a new approach to humanitarian action is needed to effectively address chronic, cyclical vulnerability of affected populations. This is primarily a matter of strategic adaptation – changing how humanitarian action is planned for and delivered (see 4.2.3. Strategic changes on page 27) – but it also has programmatic implications and therefore merits consideration at this level.

Several key informants whose organisations have strategically embraced an early recovery role for humanitarians discussed the lack of options for ‘transitional’ programming. Transitional programming allows emergency responders to follow IDPs for a short period as they transition out of emergency, and potentially return to their homes and resume their lives. When asked for examples of this type of programming, several key informants said there was little available in terms of response design options, while others said there could be potential approaches but no funding from humanitarian donors to implement them. Mechanisms such as ARCC, which in the past would allow for two weeks of transitional programming, have recently ended this option for their partners, reflecting a greater focus by humanitarian donors in DRC on strictly ‘life-saving’ activities.

‘There’s probably room to have research or better understanding of how to assist, and how to work with communities that are in this sort of chronic cycle of displacement and returning. And are there – because [...] you need to have interventions that can respond, that are flexible and adaptable enough that they can at once help a community that can be stable for a period of time, but then if that community has to be displaced, they can then accompany that community into the displacement, if possible. And then help them when they’re coming back. Or be short term enough that if you have a population that’s stable for six months, then you can actually still implement something.’ (KII 34)

National NGOs working in communities

Several key informants reported that national NGOs lacked capacity in areas such as procurement and compliance, but had strong technical skills and capacity to design and deliver programming. Staff from these NGOs described an approach to communities that shifted back and forth between emergency assistance and longer-term community development, and focused on problem identification and solution with communities. Typically, this shift was achieved by using development

funders, or private funders such as the Eastern Congo Initiative. National NGOs, such as Children’s Voice, use various strategies to design their activities with communities – for example, embedding focal points within communities and facilitating open and critical discussions around priorities:

‘What I like in this process is how the community themselves find the problem, because this is our role, to help them to see, or to discover, the problem, and themselves to bring some solution in the first time. And then we can come with other solutions, but themselves, they, they have to think about what to do, and, “What do we need you to help us with?”’ (National NGO interview, KII 9)

“One notion is that humanitarians should adapt their planning and coordination to offer a fully networked response to sudden and unanticipated flare-ups of disease and conflict, and to improve how they coordinate with development actors.”

4.2.3. Strategic changes

Twenty years of humanitarian response in the DRC raises questions about whether the function and modus operandi of humanitarian actors in the DRC are fit for purpose, or if new strategy is required. This is not a new question; the literature review and interviews with key informants who have decades of experience in DRC show that talk of ‘transition’ and ‘early recovery’ has been a feature of the discourse around DRC since the late 1990s. Yet new factors are starting to shape this debate, such as the increased global policy rhetoric from the World Humanitarian Summit and 2030 Agenda on building ‘New Ways of Working’ between humanitarian and development actors and creating a more coherent approach to fragile states. There are also deeply felt frustrations with the limits of repeated, short-term responses to a situation of chronic need.

Strategic adaptation is a reworking of the aims, role, and/or rules of humanitarian action. It is typically driven more by changes in narratives or understandings of the context than by changes in the context itself. At a deeper level, strategic adaptation may be a response to the perception that current approaches are not working well enough, and that a different mental model is needed. While all actors seem to agree that such a change is needed in the DRC, there is disagreement over what exactly that change is, and what it means for humanitarian action in the country. In DRC, two distinct approaches emerged as forms of strategic adaptation.

The first is based on the notion that humanitarians should adapt their planning and coordination to offer a fully networked response to sudden and unanticipated flare-ups of disease and conflict, and to improve how they coordinate with development actors. This networked approach reflects a particular strategic response to continuous change in DRC: recognising that single agencies cannot deliver all forms of programming to everyone, the networked approach focuses on improving the menu of programming options available to affected people. It does this through multi-sectoral coordination structures, and finding better ways to ‘pass the baton’ between humanitarian and development actors when affected people move in and out of crisis.

A second approach is to rethink the role and aims of humanitarian actors in the modern era of fragile states, and consider what this means for humanitarians, both

operationally and programmatically. This approach to strategic adaptation is ambitious; it looks for programming options and operational modalities in which humanitarians take an active role in reducing the cyclical nature of crisis over time.

The humanitarian community in DRC is split on which approach they prefer, leading to different interpretations of the new 3-year HRP and different goals for the relationship between humanitarian and development actors.

Mechanisms and approaches

Durable solutions

‘Durable solutions’ is a policy term coined in the 2003 UNHCR Framework for Durable Solutions for Refugees and Displaced People, and reflects the second kind of strategic adaptation described in the previous paragraph. It seeks to re-think how humanitarian actors work with governments in contexts featuring chronic internal displacement, seeking non-camp solutions for long-term displacement. A durable solution:

‘...is achieved when internally displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement’ (IASC 2010: A1)

Through the durable solutions framework, UNHCR works with governments and communities to identify for each IDP or refugee which of three options is possible: full integration and settlement into their current location; voluntary return to their previous home; or movement to a new third area or country. Within DRC, a durable solution has two dimensions. The first is focused on repatriating DRC refugees who have been living in Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, while the second looks at better solutions to the cyclical internal displacement in the country caused by conflict. For the latter, the Congolese government has set up the Forum Pour Solution Durable, in partnership with UNHCR and other actors. Through this Forum, UNHCR is exploring the conversion of two IDP settlements into formalised villages.

The durable solutions approach to IDPs is controversial in the DRC, and this controversy highlights the challenges in adapting humanitarian policies and programming to better address protracted crises. Several humanitarian actors rejected or expressed concern over the durable solutions approach, claiming it provided a framework for local governments to permanently force out ‘undesirable’ demographic groups within their constituencies and consolidate their power at provincial or local level. Others felt it was a top-down framework imposed by UNHCR that had not been well-adapted to the DRC context. There were also more practical concerns around the feasibility of finding an appropriate long-term solution for each IDP, as people within DRC migrate frequently, for a variety of reasons, and with a variety of aims:

‘Many people in displacement here have no way of returning home, no way of settling where they are, and no way of being relocated elsewhere. They’re simply on the move, and there is no durable solution available to them in the immediate term. For those people, we need to provide immediate assistance, and we need to know that they will continue to move, and we have to find the best way to help them cope.’ (KII 22, UN Agency)

Multi-year financing and multi-year planning

In terms of mechanisms or approaches that reflected strategic adaptation, far and away the most prominent in DRC are multi-year funding (MYF) and multi-year planning (MYP). It is important to separate the two concepts when considering them as mechanisms that support greater adaptiveness and flexibility. The proposed benefits of multi-year planning rely heavily on being accompanied by multi-year funding, while multi-year funding can contribute to flexibility through a variety of mechanisms, one of which being multi-year planning.

To some degree, the relationship between MYP and adaptiveness can be counterintuitive: making longer-term plans can introduce greater rigidity and limit the ability to make changes to plans as conditions change over time. However, key informants explained several ways in which they viewed multi-year planning, particularly when paired with multi-year funding, as supportive of more agile approaches to humanitarian action. Three of these explanations are described below. It should be noted, however, that these explanations are largely based on opinion or one-off agency experiences rather than supported by research or evaluation.

Explanation 1: MYF and MYP support adaptiveness by freeing up time and resource to dedicate to monitoring the context as it changes over time and adapting responses to this.

Hiring and contracting staff, writing proposals and final reports, and conducting needs assessments are all process costs that consume agency time and attention. The intuitive appeal for multi-year funding is that it lowers the frequency of these processes, from an annual or quarterly basis to a two- to three-year basis. While this may or may not produce savings in costs (Sida and Cabot Venton, 2017 note that there is no strong baseline for this), it can save time and headspace for humanitarian actors, allowing them to consider activities beyond proposal writing and reporting, such as situational monitoring or performance monitoring and learning, which can be used to directly support changes and adaptations.

Multi-year planning may have similar effects. Currently, much of the data collection and analysis in humanitarian action is front-loaded, taking place in a five-month period leading up to the next annual project cycle for bilateral donors (and these cycles vary from donor to donor). Multi-year planning and funding allows organisations to downshift these resources into the ongoing monitoring of the actual programme itself, a practice that is currently considered critical to programme effectiveness yet often under-resourced because of time constraints. This was cited as being particularly important for DRC's HRP process (Box 5 on page 25), which many key informants felt had become burdensome as an annual planning process. While planning for the three-year HRP was also highly resource intensive, the belief is that this will be a one-off planning process that does not have to be revisited in the same level of detail until the end of the current three-year plan. This would allow time spent on the HRP process to be devoted to other forms of analysis.

'Rather than be a straightjacket, I think that [MYP] frees up energy to concentrate on [...] ensuring that we, at any given point in time, are concentrating in the right parts of the country, on the right types of issues, [...] But again, it requires a whole series of other things to come alongside that, so if, at the same time, we were able then also to have funding that was allocated on a three-year basis, to agencies with a clear understanding [...] I mean, the headline in the grant agreement should be, "We allocate X million dollars to this agency to work in the area of health, we understand that their geographical area of focus is the DRC, and the population in greatest need at any given point in time".' (KII 24)

In short, by reducing process costs, humanitarians may not only reduce actual monetary expenditure, but also create time and mental space to shift their focus towards their operating context. MYP encourages anticipatory planning processes, making projections of need, considering potential future scenarios, and developing contingency plans. This can help actors to respond more quickly when events change, or make changes when assumptions turn out to be false. Longer-term planning may also help to ‘force’ the issue of adaptiveness. Annual or six-month cycles allow agencies to ‘start all over again’, but do not give agencies the chance to make changes to ongoing projects and see improvement. Multi-year planning may create both the need, and therefore greater efforts for, learning and adapting a response over time. However, this relies on humanitarian agencies having strong internal commitments and systems for monitoring and learning – a key factor that cannot be assumed.

Explanation 2: MYF frees humanitarian programming from arbitrary timelines and allows actors to prepare for and deliver the right response at the right time.

Agencies with experience in delivering multi-year funded projects described several ways in which the longer time frame for funding supported a more context-appropriate response. MYF allows organisations to prepare better for emergency response by building larger reserves of supplies that can then be diverted to address unanticipated shocks:

‘When you have a multi-year project, if we have a project starting in three weeks’ time that was not anticipated, then if you have a three-year nutritional input stock, you can take 500 boxes of Plumpy Nut and ship them, it’s okay.’ (KII 25)

Many actors also spoke of the fact that humanitarian programmes do not fit into ‘tidy’ timeframes, and therefore having a longer period of funding allows them to adapt the length of an intervention based on needs:

‘[Annual funding is] so much less effective because you have so much time in between the interventions that are like, “Okay, so we can’t start a new one here, because the contract is ending now” but then, when the contract is starting again, we don’t have the supplies to directly go for it, so it’s like you have this dead time of, say, six months, where you [...] practically can’t do anything about it.’ (KII 25)

Explanation 3: MYP can support better coordination between peacebuilding and development actors, who offer a wider range of solutions as a situation changes over time.

MYP can provide a platform from which to work better with government officials and development actors, allowing for smoother transitions between emergency programming and development assistance, and for better transitional or early-recovery programming. However, the exact way in which MYP supports better adaptiveness across humanitarian and development approaches to protracted vulnerability is a matter of disagreement, as seen in the widely diverging views on the multi-year HRP:

‘It’s just [about] clearly articulating, what do we consider humanitarian need? And if we’re saying, “Well, we think we should include resilience and transition to development,” that’s fine, [...] but let’s make sure that’s clearly articulated. [...] This HRP – I don’t think it’s particularly better or worse than the ones in the past – but it doesn’t, sort of, lay that out at

Box 6: An exercise in multi-year planning - the 2017-2019 HRP

The new 2017-2019, three-year HRP was launched during the field research for this study, and is a vivid example of the potential strengths and challenges of multi-year humanitarian planning. There was general enthusiasm for the multi-year HRP. And, while some had significant concerns, a large majority of key informants across all types of organisations – including those with only peripheral knowledge of the HRP – praised the multi-year approach and noted with appreciation the strong leadership of the in-country OCHA team in achieving this. The multi-year HRP was also perceived as being a potential support factor for greater flexibility and adaptiveness in humanitarian action in DRC, for the reasons outlined in this report in section 4.2.3.

While support for the multi-year approach was strong, there are several caveats to its potential to support flexible humanitarian action in the future – some related to the particular process for the 2017-2019 plan, and some more general to the model of multi-year planning. First is the reliability of the data used to construct the predictions in the multi-year HRP. OCHA organised workshops at provincial level to synthesise reporting from multiple agencies, but the quality and source of these reports was not clear to many actors both inside and outside the Clusters. It was also unclear on what basis their projections of future humanitarian need were being made, and the published HRP does not describe the methodology used. A minority of those familiar with the HRP process questioned the value of the projections, given how likely they are to change. But for OCHA and others in the HCT, the purpose of the projections is to identify broader trends and likely vulnerabilities in DRC rather than make specific quantitative predictions.

‘It remains [...] looking into a glass ball regardless, right? But the reality is, in 20 plus years of humanitarian crisis here, the fundamentals of the crisis have not changed. We are still dealing with needs related to IDPs, with needs related to displacement and more generally, like, sudden shocks.’ (KII 35)

‘I think they need to demonstrate how you may need support over three years and they should demonstrate how that support is going to decrease every year to tell a convincing narrative. I also believe that the humanitarian community needs to be able to say, what is the exit strategy, and at the end of the day are we going to be here another 20 years?’ (Development actor)

Secondly, there are also communication challenges to using multi-year planning as a link between humanitarian and development actors due to the differences in how both sides approach performance. The projections in the DRC HRP assume that need and vulnerability will grow over the three-year period – an assumption that development actors have found confusing and counterproductive, as it indicates to them an ongoing failure of humanitarian actors to reduce the case load over time. This may reflect a misunderstanding of the purpose and objectives of humanitarian assistance: humanitarians focus on amount of need addressed or reached by humanitarian assistance, but cannot plan for a reduction in needs overall, as the drivers for these needs rest in root causes that are classically within the domain of peacekeeping and development actors. However, this message can be difficult to convey to development actors, who are accustomed to performance indicators set on the assumption that overall outcomes (e.g. total number of people in need) should improve over time.

Finally, there was little involvement of affected people in the process used to create the three-year HRP. While it is reasonably difficult to find a meaningful way to engage affected populations in such a high-level planning process, the shift to a multi-year plan could have offered more opportunities for doing this, particularly in terms of using inputs from affected people to strengthen the needs assessments used for the HNO.

the beginning. And for me, that would be the first thing. We're dealing with a failed state where the government ability to provide social services is already very limited. [...] Now, on top of that, there are humanitarian needs, so how do we tease out which ones are we going to respond to, which ones aren't we? What's in and what's not? And I don't think that we ever really successfully articulate that.' (KII 38, UN Agency)

The 2017-2019 HRP was interpreted by some key informants as an example of the first type of strategic adaptation described above: as a planning and a communication tool to co-plan with development and peacekeeping actors while retaining a purely emergency response function for humanitarian actors. For others, the multi-year HRP was a paradigm of the second approach to strategic adaptation – an opportunity to better articulate how humanitarians engage in such activities as resilience-building or early recovery and rehabilitation, and to strategically re-think the role of humanitarian action in a protracted crisis. Again, these two perspectives reflect two very different forms of strategic adaptation: adapting by handing over to other actors as a situation improves or worsens, or adapting through significant programmatic adaptations to humanitarian services. While MYP can support either of these, it is not clear that it can support both at the same time, especially when roles and responsibilities of humanitarian and development actors remain contested.

5. Trade-offs and barriers to greater adaptiveness

Why don't humanitarian actors adapt their programming based on changes in need, context or programme performance? This exploratory study found that, in some cases, adaptiveness is blocked by a specific barrier in the humanitarian space in DRC, while in other cases adaptiveness is perceived as a trade-off against another priority. Importantly, while funding plays a role in shaping agency behaviour, implementing humanitarian actors have shared responsibility for these barriers, as they have developed their own processes that can restrict their ability to make informed and critical changes to programming on an as-needed basis.

Relationships played a major mitigating factor across all the barriers described in KIIs. In cases where relationships were strong and trust had been built – be it donor–NGO, government–UN agency, or across different implementing agencies – humanitarian actors were able to overcome barriers to adapt and find a solution to emerging changes in need. This chapter reviews the trade-offs that surfaced around adaptiveness and flexibility in DRC (see 5.1. Trade-offs on page 32), and then reviews the key barriers (see 5.2. Exploring gridlock: barriers to flexible, adaptive humanitarian action on page 36).

5.1. Trade-offs

5.1.1. Anticipated vs unexpected: pre-positioning or remaining open?

There is anecdotal evidence that pre-positioning is valuable because, by allowing goods to be purchased in advance, it significantly reduces costs for humanitarian response (Sida and Cabot-Venton, 2017). The relationship between pre-positioning and flexibility, however, is more complicated. If speed of response is considered a key component to operational flexibility, then pre-positioning appears to play a strong supportive role. Not only did RRMP – the fastest inter-agency response mechanism in the country – feature pre-positioning, but MSF – the agency considered to have the greatest operational flexibility and speed in DRC – also relies on scenario forecasting and the pre-positioning of teams and supplies.

However, if the predictions and assumptions that underlie pre-positioning turn out to be incorrect, or if crises arise in unexpected areas or sectors, pre-positioning may also limit operational flexibility. For example, during the study period, the crisis in the Kasai provinces (Kasai, Kasai Centrale, Kasai-Oriental) took humanitarian actors by surprise. These provinces had, until recently, been considered reasonably stable: in the multi-year HRP, for example, these three provinces combined made up less than 10% of the total estimated people in need in DRC. An uprising in August 2016 led to an escalation of violence between militia and government military groups that was unprecedented for the area. As of April 2017, more than one million people had been displaced from the area.

The Kasai crisis fell outside the geographical scope covered by RRMP. The ability of RRMP to respond to Kasai was therefore initially limited by the mechanism's lack of resources and coordination structures for undertaking large-scale interventions outside the east and southeastern provinces.

*The road just before Mwenga.
Logistic constraints on access, 61
vehicles blocked, at more than
2 m depth, in South Kivu;
Photo: Oxfam UK*



Instead, ARCC was able to support a fast, cash-based response in the Kasai region, working through ARCC partner CRS. CRS, cited by many in DRC as an INGO with a strong capacity for rapid response, could ‘piggy-back’ on its ongoing development work in the Kasai provinces, and draw on its network of Catholic dioceses in the area through the Caritas system. Later in 2017, with support from donors like USAID/OFDA and UK DFID, UNICEF developed a streamlined version of RRMP for the crisis in the Kasai provinces.

This is not necessarily a criticism of the RRMP mechanism, as it was not designed to respond to crises across the entire country and, despite this, still managed to mobilise a response to the Kasai provinces. However, it highlights how pre-positioning as a support factor for flexibility relies heavily on good anticipation. When the assumptions underpinning pre-positioning turn out to be true, pre-positioning ensures a more rapid response; but in cases where these assumptions are not true, or where a crisis emerges outside the scope of existing emergency response preparedness plans, it can be costly or take time to mobilise resources.

‘This year we have this crisis in Kasai that is quite exceptional, and this is a lesson learned that you need to be ready to intervene in other areas.’ (RRMP coordinator)

5.1.2. Standardisation vs programmatic flexibility

Operational flexibility is primarily about speed: how quickly can humanitarian actors change what they are doing to improve humanitarian response. A separate operational concern is size: how to reach as many people in need as possible, to maximise humanitarian coverage. To achieve speed or economies of scale, agencies require standardised approaches that can be reproduced and rolled out quickly at low cost. This standardisation can inhibit the ability to change or adapt activities and tools to particular communities, beyond basic adjustments.

‘What we’re looking at now, with situations like the Kasai, is [putting] even more focus on flexibility... I wouldn’t say it’s prescribed, but all the RRMP partners [have a particular approach]. Because what we’re sort of selling to a donor is the quality of the response. The actual package of assistance, how they do NFI fairs, how they do mobile clinics, how they do WASH, is sort of [...] flexible based on context analysis, and not just [...] cookie-cutter responses. But what we’re sort of presenting – and I think this is what organisations like MSF and ICRC are doing as well – they’re saying, “We ensure the quality of response, we’ve got the tools, our partners are trained, our teams are trained, but what we don’t know is exactly where we’re going to need to intervene, and we do need to have some flexibility to adapt it.”’ (UN Agency)

In practice, few actors saw an issue with using standardised tools as it related to reducing flexibility—and many indicated that standardised tools were used with some degree of adaptation to each individual response. An outlying question from this research is the degree of adaptation that occurs in these individual situations and how responsive these changes are to preferences and views of targeted beneficiaries.

5.1.3. Efficiency vs adaptive programming

As well as standardisation, one of the driving factors for speed is the pressure to demonstrate efficiency to donors. This is becoming a significant factor in the DRC as donor budgets are shrinking or collapsing entirely, while implementing agencies are being asked to do more - more monitoring, more households - in shorter time frames:

‘I think there’s definitely a trade-off, there are sometimes these requirements where they want more information, more understanding, but they also want shorter intervention, shorter this, shorter that, and it comes to a point where you just say, it does not work anymore. It’s not working. I can balance, but up to a point. And it’s becoming difficult, because they want to pay less, they want more, and they want it faster. We understand these aspects of efficiency, but sometimes we just have unrealistic expectations, and it makes us compromise on one or the other, and usually it compromises on quality or understanding.’ (KII 25, INGO)

‘I think there is a limit to what you can expect when resources are finite, or are insufficient, to be quite frank. Because you get to the point where you’re asking people to do more with less, which generally becomes very difficult... Asking people to do more with the same? You can expect that. More with less? - I think that’s when you start getting a significant pushback, which I think is pretty justified.’ (KII 26, donor agency)

This leads to an environment in which implementing agencies are incentivised to cut any process costs possible, which typically means they will spend less time on needs assessments, less time on consultation with affected populations, and less time on monitoring - all of which are elements that could support a context-relevant response.

While adaptation by humanitarian actors may currently be seen in trade-off with cost-efficiency, in reality, adaptive managing and changes to programming to anticipate and respond to shifts in the context are likely to produce significant cost savings. Responding earlier and using forms of programming that work well for a situation, rather than continuing to invest in programming that isn’t working, are more likely to lead to cost-effectiveness savings than implementing inappropriate and late programming more efficiently. Strong evidence on this is difficult to produce, though promising methods and approaches to demonstrating these cost savings are on the rise in the early action literature (Cabot-Venton et al., 2012; Cabot-Venton, 2013).

“While funding plays a role in shaping agency behaviour, implementing humanitarian actors have shared responsibility for these barriers, as they have developed their own processes that can restrict their ability to make informed and critical changes to programming on an as-needed basis.”

5.2. Exploring gridlock: barriers to flexible, adaptive humanitarian action

‘I think we’ve got a context here which has driven people to become quite reactive. So, you’ve got these mechanisms (e.g. RRMP), of repeat action, it’s a response... It doesn’t necessarily mean that people are thinking in a different way, in a more innovative way, challenging, looking at how we can do things differently. That, I don’t see coming through.’ (KII 26, donor)

In addition to trade-offs, there are eight direct barriers to adaptiveness that were raised by key informants and in evaluations.

Barrier 1: Lack of investment and incentives for problem-solving and adaptive learning

While funding is frequently mentioned by UN agencies and INGOs as a key barrier to their adaptiveness, mindsets and mental models within the staff in these agencies also play a significant role in limiting adaptiveness. Several donors believe that agencies do not invest strongly enough in staff with critical thinking skills, or in good context analysis and data collection. For example, it is sometimes donors who must push implementing agencies to shift their operations in the face of changes on the ground:

‘If, for example, you put a programme in the Kasais a year ago, and all of a sudden you get the Kasais which blow up this intensity of conflict, if the partners hadn’t come back to me and said, “Actually, we think we need to do things a little bit differently,” and either we can or we can’t, I would be calling them and saying, “Well, what’s going on?” and I would have a concern that they’re not adapting their programming.’ (Donor)

Several INGO key informants also highlighted the importance of their own staff’s mindsets and approach to supporting adaptive learning and programmatic flexibility:

‘Again, it requires a strong dialogue with donors, but it also requires, kind of, constant reflection on, “Is this programming appropriate for any given context?” and of course starting new programmes, that’s always an opportunity to reflect on lessons learned, and how to, again, be more appropriate, based on an evolving context.’ (KII 19)

International NGOs can find it challenging to hire staff with the right attitude and openness for adapting and improving their work as they go. As one INGO put it, these are skills that ‘you cannot teach; you just have to hire the right person’. Yet delays in funding and the types of people that are interested in short-term contracts make it difficult to find such candidates. Other key informants spoke of field staff who viewed the role ‘simply as a job’ and were not inclined to think critically or creatively to problem-solve, unless it was key to their performance appraisal. Even where such staff are hired, they are implicitly incentivised to focus on supply-driven delivery objectives rather than on solving problems they see in on the ground.

‘Now, most donors tend to be relatively flexible, but some of the organisations aren’t necessarily. They’ve set up their base office, they’ve started doing their registration list, they don’t want to be – unfortunately – bothered sometimes with changes and [the] need to adapt.’ (KII 30, UN Agency)

Several INGOs are attempting to address these challenges. One described its attempts to support and encourage critical reflection by sending a short questionnaire to field staff to prompt reflections on what was going well and what could be done better.

For those who may be more inclined to think critically, the sheer volume of humanitarian need in a protracted setting such as DRC can be overwhelming, and closes off thinking about how to potentially improve a response:

‘Even if, in our end-line surveys, it comes up that there’s still tremendous need that is not necessarily going to change what we do, because we don’t necessarily have an opportunity to do something greater. And I think yes, we probably do get desensitised from the fact that there’s so much need everywhere.’ (KII 14)

Barrier 2: Rigid donor contracts and weak donor-partner relationships

Funding emerged as the primary issue for most key informants when discussing barriers to flexible and adaptive humanitarian response in the DRC. Donors reasonably seek accountability for the funds they provide for humanitarian assistance. However, these accountability practices lead to rigid contracts that prevent agencies from making necessary changes to their programming in the face of changing contexts. Also, the focus of these accountability practices is on activities and outputs, and not wellbeing outcomes or longer-term impacts. Even donor ‘outcome indicators’ remain heavily activity- and output-oriented, focusing on the percentage coverage of sectoral services – for example, ‘% of target facilities (PHU, schools, markets) with basic WASH services functioning’ (ECHO, 2017).

When contractual accountabilities are structured around the delivery of activities and outputs, this orients humanitarian actors to solve the problem statement that existed when those activities and outputs were identified – and often this problem statement is no longer true, or has changed significantly. Humanitarian action then must adapt to the project as agreed between the international agency and the donor, rather than to the realities in which the activities are being implemented.

‘Even in terms of the way that the reporting templates are set out, you have to very clearly report on, “This activity has met this output,” and I think there doesn’t seem to be that [...] change, either in terms of how you’re planning or how you’re reporting. And if you did want to steer away from that, then you have to go through the process of justifying it to the donor, and then having their justification before you can make that change. [There] tends to always be very set [...] outputs – for example, for [some donors], they have their indicators that you have to then choose from. So, there isn’t that kind of flexibility, even to be able to design the indicators yourself.’ (INGO dual mandate)

While contract rigidity was cited as one of the greatest barriers to flexible humanitarian action, experiences also varied significantly from donor to donor, and across implementing agencies. While some agencies found it impossible to make changes to proposals with certain donors, other agencies, and several donors, described these operational changes as being relatively easy to make. In these cases, relationships between implementing agencies and donors appeared to be strong, with frequent communication or a long history of partnership. Several key informants said that the most flexible donors were those who invested in understanding the context at the local and/or project level, and

with whom they were in regular contact. Similarly, donors who were more flexible spoke of wanting to see good arguments from their partners to back up their request for a change, but also said that, for long-term partners they could trust, they knew right context analysis was being used to inform requests for changes.

This relationship building does not come easily. For DFID, close contact between DFID country staff and partners has involved significant human resource investment within the donor country office. However, it has resulted in arguably the strongest examples of flexible and adaptive programming in DRC – as DFID is a major funder to both ARCC and RRMP, as well as a multi-year programme with flexible timelines run by ACF.

For those donors cited as less flexible, the donor and its partners had divergent accounts of the same processes. In one case, a donor that had been described as one of the least flexible explained the very quick and simple process that was required to make operational changes within a project cycle, and nothing more, with no formal approval process. This study was unable to verify the accounts on either side to ascertain which was accurate; it may be the case that both are correct, which would reflect a deep misunderstanding between the donor and its partners on the expected protocols for requesting and making changes within a project cycle.

‘So we’re going in to respond to 3,000 households, to 4,000, whatever it is, but there are so many more people. We asked [Donor X] if they would be interested in giving us new resources, or just going ahead and providing us additional capacity from our fourth year, and [...] the answer was no. You know, there’s proposal processes, there’s check boxes you have to check, and all this stuff, and so that wasn’t going to be a possibility, to get assistance now. They were sort of like, “Well, we could commit to you, but you’d have to do X, Y and Z, and it’ll take six months to review the proposal,” and by that point, you know.... So, I would say that’s an example where we’re still – we’re not being very – I mean, we see that there’s a disaster there and there are people in need, and yet we’re still operating in these very constrained environments. We can’t just say, “Let’s move things around and let’s do what makes most sense in order to respond to this”.’ (INGO)

This indicates that the flexibility of donors in-country is based more on interpersonal and inter-organisational dynamics than on formal rules and regulations; donors can make the case for changes within their own institutions when they feel it is warranted. Due to their own internal accountability processes, donor staff in-country may feel they are putting themselves at risk on behalf of implementing agencies when approving changes. As such, they may be more willing to do this when there is a trusted relationship between them, and the implementing agency has a proven track record.

Barrier 3: Short-term and arbitrary programming timelines

Even where funding is not restricted to particular activities or outputs, it may be rigid in other ways. The most problematic of these are the short-term timelines for humanitarian assistance that are set without reference to what the context or crisis might require. On this issue, rapid response mechanisms can be highly inflexible, as they require implementation to take place within a tightly proscribed period of time with a fixed end point.

For the Start Fund – which has a 45-day limit for implementation – the intention is for the funding to be used as a stop-gap measure, allowing an organisation to initiate their response quickly while

securing other funds to extend their response over a longer period. However, organisations receiving Start Funds may not necessarily view the response mechanism in these terms. Start funding comes with its own reporting processes which, while less involved than most, can ‘project-ise’ funding in the minds of grantees, who treat rapid response more like a 45-day project than 45 days of early response activities that are carried over into a longer-term project once other funds are secured.

For other rapid response mechanisms, the time limit is used to define the boundaries of humanitarian need and assistance. When asked what distinguished ‘emergency’ life-saving from other forms of assistance in DRC, many key informants defined them according to differences in timeframe, rather than substantive differences in the activities carried out by development or humanitarian actors.

The short time limits operate in some cases as a proxy for level of vulnerability, ensuring that humanitarian funding goes only to acute needs. Some donors believe that a 90-day timeframe ensures only urgent needs are being addressed, with no humanitarian funds being used to support IDPs once they have returned or if their situation has stabilised – which would be classed as ‘development’ activities. Others expressed concern that, if humanitarians were to stay in an area for longer, they would ‘send the wrong signals’ and simply become long-term replacements for the government.

In reality, day 45 or day 90 looks very similar to day 46 or day 91 for a humanitarian response. Arbitrary time limits impose adjustments in humanitarian operations based on funding rules rather than changes in the actual population in need or the operating environment. One agency described a project where, at the end of the six-month time frame, registration rates for a malnutrition programme were higher than they were at the outset of implementation, due to increasing referral rates in a targeted population where malnutrition was chronic. While the 2013 evaluation of RRMP found that there was general satisfaction with the three-month limit for RRMP projects, it also noted that ‘evidence from post monitoring, observation and interviews suggest that one-off short-term interventions are likely to have a very limited impact and not address priority needs’ and that ‘in most cases encountered, systematic follow up is often lacking.’ (Baker et al., 2013: 24). Instead, RRMP partners have had to find internal funding to support transitional programming for IDPs after an RRMP-funded response.

While timeframes are commonly used as a proxy indicator for level of vulnerability, there is no evidence to support this. Instead, tools developed for the explicit purpose of assessing vulnerability would serve as a better proxy for whether humanitarian response is meeting ‘humanitarian’ needs and when the requirement for such a response has ceased. It is also not clear that shorter timeframes support the timeliness of an rapid response mechanism: both the Start Fund and RRMP have pioneered effective monitoring and decision-making processes that allow for a timely rapid response to emergency; there is no suggestion that the length of the intervention makes any contribution to the speed of the decision-making.

Barrier 4: Time in between project cycles for agencies to reflect and learn is inadequate

The lack of time for continuous learning is a perennial issue for humanitarian actors; programme monitoring is used primarily for donor reporting rather than to improve programmes. While short timeframes pose challenges to humanitarian operations, they do offer a significant opportunity for adaptiveness that is not available to many development actors due to their long-term funding contracts. If humanitarian contracts are kept short – at one-year, six- or three-month cycles,

Box 7: Changing projects between proposal approval and implementation: a common case of adaptiveness

This research looked at where in the humanitarian project cycle adaptations are most likely to occur or be needed. Surprisingly, most adaptations mentioned by key informants occurred at the very outset of a project, between the proposal being accepted by the donor and the beginning of implementation. The need for plans to change before implementation even begins could either be interpreted as an expected consequence of the rapid and dynamic nature of humanitarian crises, or an indication that something is seriously amiss in the way that agencies collect and use situational and needs analysis for programme design.

Many implementing agencies pointed to delays in funding as a major driving factor for the need to adapt their project plans. When funding is delayed, there is a greater likelihood that operational adaptations will be required due to shifts in population movement or the emergence of other aid actors serving the same population. Many donors, however, spoke of proposals being submitted with poor quality needs assessments, or none at all. For several donors, the need to change a project proposal at the outset can indicate that the agency has not undertaken appropriate needs assessment or context analysis.

Donors are more likely to be open to operational adaptations at the outset of implementation, particularly if there is a good case for shifting aid from one population or region to another based on considerations of need. However, there may be exceptions: some donors have declined agencies' requests to move aid based on considerations of where need was greatest. One reason given for this refusal was the desire for the donor to maintain country-wide coverage through its partners: movement by a partner from one area to another would leave a gap in the donor's country-wide coverage and was therefore refused.

implementing agencies could be using the breaks in between to reflect and learn, improving on prior experience. Some agencies reported examples of this, where programmes were adjusted for future implementation based on lessons learned. But it does not seem to happen to the degree that it could. One reason implementing agencies cited was rapid staff turn-over, which is in part fuelled by short-term funding periods because they limit agencies to short-term contracting of staff. Others indicated that relevance of lessons learned becomes an issue if an agency does not know whether it will be working with the same community in the future. While they can incorporate adaptations or lessons learned into a future project elsewhere, this will not have the same impact as using the learning directly to shape ongoing programming in the same area:

'It is difficult to do the monitoring at the end of a project if there isn't a follow-up project to be taking place [...]. Sometimes, projects stop and we end up with final evaluations. Sometimes, other organisations will work in communities where our intervention is over. We cannot guarantee that they will operate the same strategies that we implemented. It is easier to do the monitoring when we continue working with communities with which we already established our projects.' (GOMA 20, INGO)

While these are considerable barriers, agencies could be doing much more to support their own internal learning processes. While donor funding practices will have an understandable influence on agency practices, the lack of internal resourcing for learning and adaptation between project cycles is a choice that also rests with the implementing agency. Whether it is for structural or personality reasons, many field and country offices in DRC did not feel they had the time or support within their international organisation use the breaks between short projects to adapt and improve their programming.

Barrier 5: Costly and slow programme or situational monitoring systems

The timely collection of relevant information is critical for adaptiveness. Situational monitoring and regularly updated context analysis are important for identifying new conflicts or disease outbreaks quickly. Programme monitoring is equally important to understand real-time effects of programming and whether adjustments are needed.

In DRC, the geographical size of the country, coupled with decentralised coordination and data collection models, make it difficult to feed relevant information up to the national level in a timely manner. To some degree, this reflects the fact that, while data collection and coordination may be decentralised, major decision-making that affects programming is still highly centralised within the DRC, requiring approvals and inputs from Kinshasa. Even when monitoring data is available at head offices in the capital, it is often not acted upon for weeks or months, as was seen in the Kasai region in late 2016, early 2017.

‘The system is so slow, so complicated, takes so much time to find someone to actually listen to you and decide, “Okay, we’re doing more analysis, and these are the results, so take action.” And there are so many crises at the same time, that [it is difficult to get] attention to places that are not so used to being a crisis. Mainly, our attention is on the east. Everything is out of the east. You have to shout very loud to [get] a little attention and it’s always late. Even for cholera, we had the big floods [at the] end of 2015 and beginning of 2016. And we said: “If we take action, this is [what will happen]. If we don’t take action, it’s this.” It took four months, five months, to make a decision. So, we are not fast in adapting what we are doing to what is new in the environment. Because the funds were for cholera for the east and not for the west.’ (KII 29)

World Vision International provided one of the few examples of INGOs engaging in structured context analysis, but this analysis was not routinely updated (see Box 3 17). Programme monitoring also faces challenges: several agencies described difficulties in incentivising field staff or partners to provide them with timely and high-quality monitoring data. When this did happen, data on programme performance focused on outputs instead of outcomes, and did not lead to fast decisions. In part, this was because national level staff preferred to weigh different options before making major changes to programming.

“In reality, day 45 or day 90 looks very similar to day 46 or day 91 for a humanitarian response. Arbitrary time limits impose adjustments in humanitarian operations based on funding rules rather than changes in the actual population in need or the operating environment.”

‘There is distance in terms of kilometres but also in terms of communication, between your field office and HQ. And then it’s true that it takes time maybe to get precise information. That’s not to say [...] the staff is not good, but when you do an analysis, you need to be sure of what you see. Then when you get information, it’s not that you can just say, “Oh well everything has changed.” You will have millions of questions before saying, “Okay, we want to change a project,” because you don’t want to show yourself [to be too] quickly thinking. You want [to be] deeply thinking. And with humanitarian projects, yes, it can be a bit difficult.’ (KII 37)

Barrier 6: Absence of strong analysis and input from affected people in response design

Ideally, humanitarian action should be highly adaptive to the preferences of crisis affected people, responding to their problems and meeting their priority needs. While there are individuals within agencies who push strongly for improving the use of input from affected people, there are also cultural mindsets within the humanitarian sector that are averse to listening to affected people or affording them a stronger role in programme design. In some cases, this is due to legitimate concerns about the impartiality of aid. In other cases, humanitarian staff would like to spend more time consulting with affected people but feel that donors prefer to see speed and efficiency over consultation. As such, this research found very few examples of a response designed in consultation with affected people that stepped outside of the standard needs-assessment framework based on sectoral definitions. Where there were, they tended to occur more in projects that straddled the peacebuilding or development sectors, such as SECC (Box 7 on page 40).

The limited engagement of affected people in programme choice and design is embedded in a broader set of behaviours and practices that make up response analysis and response design. To a large degree, response analysis – which identifies the form of programming most suitable for a given crisis response – does not happen in any consistent or structured way. When asked, most key informants working in implementing agencies could not explain why certain forms of programming were chosen over others, or explain how these projects were designed, indicating that they tended to be ‘off-the-shelf’, standard responses that were applied depending on the donor.

Specialists working in education and cash expressed how difficult it was to get support for cash or education programming from certain donors, despite these being frequently requested by affected people. While tailoring programmes to individual affected persons would be unrealistic, there is a need to expand the menu of programming options available to humanitarians in these contexts. There also a need to understand the evidence base for these options in terms of desired outcomes and preferences of affected people. A primary exception to this is cash-based programming, which has developed a range of tools to analyse crisis situations and identify whether, and which form, of cash-based assistance would be most appropriate for an individual area or response.

Barrier 7: Aid silos preventing humanitarian agencies from responding to needs as they shift

Divisions between development and humanitarian aid actors and financing mechanisms inhibit adaptiveness by shutting off options for transitional programming and inhibiting the communication between actors that is necessary for handover. The OCHA country office, through its HRP process, has attempted to break down these silos in multiple ways. The intention of developing a multi-year plan for humanitarian action is to provide a longer-term outlook for humanitarian needs and activities in DRC, which can be used as the basis for discussion and co-planning with development and peacekeeping actors. Development actors, such as UNDP and the World Bank, were also engaged in the discussions leading up to the HRP.

While many key informants agreed that these were important steps in the right direction, big challenges remain. Education and cash-based programming are not widely supported across humanitarian donors in DRC because they are not viewed as central to ‘life saving’ and are therefore considered to be development programming. This is despite wide acknowledgment of cash and education as legitimate areas of humanitarian programming in other contexts. As discussed, transitional programming – activities that serve IDPs once their situation has stabilised and they return to their homes – has been identified in multiple studies and evaluations as potentially supporting the longer-term reduction of vulnerability in DRC (World Vision, 2014). Yet this is increasingly a ‘no-go’ area for those receiving humanitarian funds. Key informants described donors being ‘categorically against’ any attempt to use humanitarian funds for early recovery programming or to draw stronger links and collaborations with development actors.

‘I don’t sense much resistance; there’s some basic limits, on humanitarian principles on one side, and development effectiveness on the other [...] That’s sort of the boundaries. But in between, there’s a lot of overlap for collaboration, I think. [...] My, sort of, hypothesis, is that it’s lack of information. People aren’t connecting the dots, and they work in different worlds, right? They work in different realms, and their financing comes from somewhat different sources, and their accountabilities are different, and so they don’t actually have to talk to each other, and we’re trying to change that.’ (KII 39)

‘I think that the humanitarian response is still quite traditional in nature [...] It’s very reactive, and there’s very little on how do we build resilience among some of these communities, where we know that they’re going to go through multiple rounds of displacement, or a community will receive multiple rounds of, you know, new displaced populations and what not... I think there’s not enough emphasis on that by the traditional humanitarian donors, of how do we do humanitarian response, but then also a little bit more on making communities more resilient to these recurring shocks that we know will happen?’ (GOMA 19)

To some degree, the retrenching of aid silos is surprising, given the dominant narrative for many years of DRC as a ‘post-conflict’ state on its way to transition and stabilisation. This would seem to indicate that more funding should go towards transitional programming and collaborative work between humanitarian and development actors. Instead, with the exception of the support to the UN Mission de l’Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République Démocratique du Congo (‘MONUSCO’) stabilisation plan, both development and humanitarian financing to the country are being scaled back significantly – ECHO’s humanitarian budget alone is being cut by 50% for 2017/18.

As humanitarian funds shrink, actors in this system do not want to see their funds diverted to development actors. As well as good, principle-based arguments for maintaining humanitarian assistance in DRC, there are also self-interested arguments, which block the exploration of transitional programming.

‘Many humanitarians conclude that we need to work on resilience. We need to do other stuff that other actors are not doing, because if I don’t do it, nobody’s going to do it. But that’s not a useful way to use our scarce resources, when we are there to save lives. So, we need to stay focused on saving lives, because even for that very clear, clear mandate, we don’t have enough funds.’ (Humanitarian agency)

‘To me one of the big challenges is around the funding issue. The humanitarian community feels that if we move forward with resilience and the nexus it will mean less money for the humanitarian community. So, they are very keen to preserve the space for the resources on the humanitarian side.’ (Development actor)

Barrier 8: The mandate-driven, top-down nature of humanitarian agencies

Finally, rigidity is also reinforced through internal bureaucracies within INGOs and UN agencies, a point that few key informants were willing to discuss in detail, though they acknowledged it was an issue. Agencies described having to turn down funding due to internal difficulties with sign-off or to financial procedures at HQ level.

‘It’s important that flexibility is not only about our capacity to react, but in our minds. Because if I have flexibility with regard to the procedures, if I have my car, if I have a team and I can react quickly, but I’m not flexible in my head, because I’m thinking, “No, but this is a [Name of Agency] thing, so you don’t act, you don’t do this,” or, “No, we are in a cluster, so I don’t want –,” then you are not flexible in your mind, and this has kind of an impact on the response we are providing.’ UN agency

Similarly, centralised and top-down decision-making structures can disempower field staff and inhibit fast changes on the ground. INGOs that seemed to be more flexible were those that featured higher degrees of decentralisation, where staff felt they could pick and choose from their organisation’s global policies and frameworks, rather than being forced to implement an approach that did not fit the DRC context.

6. Conclusion and next steps

As the setting of a humanitarian crisis that has spanned more than 20 years, the DRC epitomises both the reasons why flexibility and adaptiveness are so important to the future of humanitarian action, and why it is so difficult to achieve. Years of cyclical conflict, an under-performing state and unhealthy incentives among the international aid community have created a gridlock. Humanitarians continue to cycle dynamically in and out of basic service provision while overall progress on reducing the drivers for crisis has stalled.

Humanitarian assistance is continually used for the same populations repeatedly over time, while humanitarian actors spend significant sums in closing-down and then re-starting their operations to match the established narrative of what humanitarian assistance is meant to be: short-term and temporary. Donors continue to offer primarily short-term or annual funding for humanitarian action in DRC, are reluctant to approve changes to programmes once they have begun, and have provided divergent messages on how humanitarian and development actors should work together in the country.

At the same time, humanitarian agencies have become less equipped to respond rapidly to peaks of crisis as they emerge in the DRC. At the time of writing, the Kasai provinces, which have erupted into a massive conflict and displacement crisis with over 1.1 million displaced, have yet to see a significant humanitarian response after 8 months. UN agencies and humanitarian INGOs have, through the adoption of various bureaucratic processes, slowed down their ability to respond quickly to new emergencies. Instead of adapting to their surrounding context, implementing agencies have been driven to adapt their behaviour to the structures and constraints of the humanitarian architecture.

In short, the inhibiting factors for adaptive approaches to humanitarian action are significant. But there are examples of what adaptive approaches to humanitarian programming and management could look like in the DRC—isolated experiments which, if expanded and built upon, could lead to a very different approach to humanitarian response in the DRC.

Next steps for this research

This is the first of two exploratory country studies on the experiences of and barriers to adaptive humanitarian action. ALNAP has also produced an internal literature review of frameworks and models of adaptive management from outside the humanitarian sector. Findings from the literature review and the country study will be combined to produce a final report in 2018 on the problem statement for flexible, adaptive humanitarian action and recommendations for how to support management and programming approaches that are more responsive to changes in humanitarian contexts over time.

Endnotes

1. The numbers on humanitarian assistance to DRC vary greatly between FTS and DAC.

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