



ACTION LEARNING

ALNAP



Spotlight on learning series

Learning Where it Matters

Piloting action learning with frontline humanitarian staff

Jennifer Doherty

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

www.alnap.org

About the authors

This study was written by Jennifer Doherty, Senior Research Officer at ALNAP.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Ruth Cook and Nick Wright at Action Learning Associates (ALA), and Francesca d'Emidio, Joanna Knight and Alice Robinson at The Research People (TRP) for their committed and passionate collaboration on this project. Action learning training in the pilots was facilitated by ALA and the monitoring and evaluation for the pilots was designed and conducted by TRP. Grace Evans provided research assistance.

Insights and engagement from the project's steering group were invaluable; thank you very much to Sheree Kullenberg (IRC), Gwendoline Beurel (Solidarités International), Tarana Duhuat (Solidarités International), Sean Healy (MSF), Shehu Markus (CRUDAN), Emmanuelle Maisonnave (Solidarités International), Louise Mooney (Oxfam), Solomon Tarfa (CRUDAN), and Suliane Tillon (Solidarités International), as well as to those individuals who volunteered their time to test and review the initial tools.

The individuals and organisations that piloted the action learning training and resource pack were essential for revising the resources to make them suitable for frontline humanitarian staff. We would like to thank Abdikani Abdilahi (SOSTA), Mohamed Bulle Abdille (WASDA), Nura Abubakar (MSF Nigeria), Sundus Ahmad Alsmadi (Solidarités International), Ali Regah Ahmed (Oxfam Somalia), Nasiru Muhammad Altine (MSF Nigeria), Aminu Mohammed Anka (MSF Nigeria), John Asema (MSF Nigeria), James Bamwesa (AVRD), Maryam Babangida (MSF Nigeria), Mairamou Bouba Yasmine (Solidarités International), Yoann Duprat (Solidarités International), Shilan Faisal Hussien (Better World Organisation), Mohamed Haibe (Oxfam Somalia), Muktar Hassen (Oxfam Somalia), Omer Jama Farah (TASCO), Mawlid Kalinle (Oxfam Somalia), Shehu Markus (CRUDAN), Maryam Muhammad (MSF Nigeria), Normaliza Mohd Nasir (Mercy Malaysia), Zar Ni (Raft Myanmar), Haby Sy Savané (Solidarités International), Pavithira Selvaras (Mercy Malaysia), Stephen Tamba (SHALOM, Inc.), Aneirin Wenner (Solidarités International), and Abdirashid Yousuf (Oxfam Somalia). Quotes and examples provided by the piloting individuals are presented anonymously or with alternative names throughout this resource. Thanks also go to the reviewers of this study including Jessica Anderson, Sean Healy, Jo-Hannah Lavey, Louise Mooney and Suliane Tillon.

Within the ALNAP Secretariat, thank you to Maria Gili and Danny Liu for their extensive communications work and to Alice Obrecht for her insights. Finally, Justine Kavanagh and Emmeline Kerkvliet provided research assistance throughout the project.

The views contained in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the ALNAP members.

Suggested citation

Doherty, J. (2022) Learning where it matters: Piloting action learning with frontline humanitarian staff. London: ODI/ALNAP.

ISBN: 978-1-913526-28-3

© ALNAP/ODI 2022. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-non Commercial Licence (CC BY-NC 4.0).

Cover photo: EU/ECHO/Edward Echwalu
Communications management by Maria Gili
Design by Soapbox, www.soapbox.co.uk
Copyediting and typesetting by Inkwell Communications and Design Studio

Contents

Executive summary	2
<hr/>	
1 Introduction	4
<hr/>	
2 Objective	8
<hr/>	
3 Findings	10
<hr/>	
4 Limitations	28
<hr/>	
5 Conclusion	30
Bibliography	32
Annex 1: Using questions in action learning	34
Annex 2: Detailed methodology	36

Executive summary

The knowledge of frontline staff – those directly involved in programme implementation and monitoring – is fundamental to good humanitarian action. These individuals make decisions and solve problems every day in their work with crisis-affected populations. The interactions they have with communities produce important information on how to implement projects most effectively to meet local needs. Despite the central importance of this knowledge to effective programming, frontline learning has consistently lacked support (ALNAP, 2003; Tanner, 2016). Recognising both the challenge and the importance of supporting effective learning among frontline humanitarian staff, ALNAP tested action learning as a straightforward approach to sharing knowledge and solving problems in fast-paced environments. In 2021, ALNAP piloted an action learning resource pack and training package with 26 frontline staff from 12 different local, national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and tracked how they used action learning in practice over the subsequent six months.

Action learning produced several benefits, including the stimulation of learning, reflection and active problem-solving in teams; sharing best practice and innovative approaches among peers; co-creating solutions to collective problems with people both within and outside their organisations; and creating learning opportunities between disparate formal monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) exercises. Through these pilots, some participants also identified and implemented practical changes to improve programming. Several aspects of action learning made this approach appropriate to support frontline learning, including: the space it created for staff to discuss project challenges or previous successes; the emphasis on individual staff identifying important topics that managers and senior staff leading typical meetings in hierarchical organisations may not have considered important; the respectful nature of action learning that treats everyone's questions and ideas as potentially useful to consider; and the immediate nature of action learning that enabled participants to implement it with low preparation when issues arose.

There were, however, challenges to frontline staff implementing action learning as originally intended. Due to the fast-moving environments in which frontline staff implement, it was challenging for staff to create the time to hold dedicated action learning sessions with multiple peers as a period of reflection and learning. Instead, piloting staff mainly used action learning approaches in more ad hoc and light-touch ways by integrating it into conversations with team members and in existing meetings. Training a select group of frontline staff on action learning did create practical changes at the individual or even team level; however, strong organisational buy-in and less stringent organisational hierarchies are required to strengthen frontline learning. Without those changes it is challenging for frontline staff to prioritise dedicated time for learning or for suggestions arising out of frontline learning discussions to be valued and implemented by the organisation.

1 Introduction

Frontline staff in humanitarian organisations often have limited time and tools to engage in effective learning and knowledge exchange. This is detrimental to project outcomes in both the short- and the longer-term. In the short-term, staff may find it hard to solve implementation problems quickly and effectively when there are no opportunities for personal reflection or for sharing experiences among peers. When the learning of frontline staff remains unrecognised and untapped, managers with less in-depth knowledge of project implementation and communities take decisions that may not be optimal or appropriate. In the longer-term, the detailed implementation knowledge of frontline staff does not get incorporated in future projects, with a potential loss of both efficiency and effectiveness. This is only exacerbated by the typically high turnover in humanitarian organisations that means frontline staff leave and take their experiential knowledge with them.

As such, valuing, strengthening, and sharing knowledge held by frontline humanitarian staff is essential to implementing an effective crisis response. Frontline staff regularly interact with communities and have vital experience of implementing projects in complex and specific operating environments (Tanner, 2018). They must make decisions on a daily basis as problems arise during implementation and require quick solutions that are not detailed in project documents and standard operating procedures. This 'tacit' knowledge gained through everyday experience has the potential to contribute to well-informed project design and improve daily implementation decisions if gathered and shared effectively (Campbell and Knox-Clarke, 2019). However, resources that seek to develop and share learning in the humanitarian sector have typically been directed towards headquarter-based or senior staff in international organisations, rather than to the people directly implementing or monitoring projects in international, national, or local NGOs. Despite its centrality to project success, supporting the generation and sharing of knowledge by and between frontline staff has been less of a priority (Abbott et al., 2019).

Some of the challenges to maximising the potential of frontline learning identified in previous work include:

- a lack of learning approaches that are appropriate to frontline staff preferences and available resources
- limited time and space for individual frontline staff to reflect on their challenges and identify their own solutions

- lack of sharing of individual frontline staff knowledge with peers or senior colleagues, which magnifies the problem of high staff turnover;
- inconsistencies in the value placed by senior staff on the knowledge of frontline staff – particularly national staff – that limits the time available for generating frontline learning and using it in decision-making (ALNAP, 2003).

To help address some of these challenges, ALNAP adapted an action learning approach for use in frontline humanitarian contexts. Action learning is a practical approach to learning-by-doing that only requires a limited time and resource investment. It focuses on both reflection and practical solutions, by encouraging actions that can have an immediate impact on projects as they are implemented and by supporting ongoing sharing of knowledge with peers. Action learning has been used successfully in several contexts, including the private sector, social services, health organisations, domestic charities, and international development (Abott and Taylor, 2013; INTRAC, 2012; Paludan and Popplewell, 2013; Pedler and Abott, 2008; Moldosheva, Bagyshbaeva and Abraliev, 2011). Please see [Box 1](#) for a more detailed description of the action learning technique and its potential use in humanitarian settings.

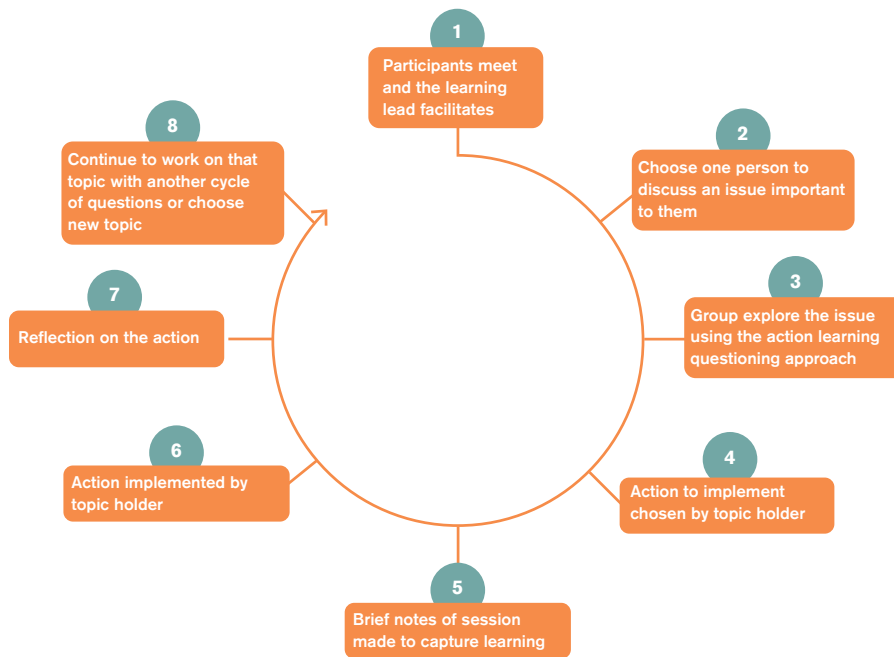
ALNAP created an action learning resource pack and supported training on action learning with 26 frontline staff from local, national and international humanitarian NGOs between December 2020 and October 2021. This study explores the learning and reflections from that pilot on using action learning with frontline staff in humanitarian contexts.

Box 1: What is action learning?

Action learning is a structured process that uses repeated cycles of action and reflection to support ‘learning by doing’ and ‘doing while learning’.

A small group of people (five is a good number) come together regularly to discuss issues they are experiencing in their work. This group is called an **action learning set**. One of the group acts as a facilitator (called a **learning lead**) and guides the rest of the group through a structured process to talk about those issues and to agree actions that may help progress the issue or solve a problem. The group meets several times to reflect on the actions that were taken, whether they worked, or whether new actions should be planned.

Action learning sets typically involve a group of peers meeting outside their regular work interactions. The group focuses on one person’s issue at a time and will continue to meet regularly to support each other in improving their work and tackle new challenges as they arise. The following image depicts that cycle.



Four important elements of action learning are:

- 1) individuals bringing their own issues for discussion
- 2) the questioning process used in the meeting
- 3) the actions that are taken between meetings to promote change
- 4) the ongoing cycle of meetings.

First, individuals bring their own topics to the group rather than being set issues to tackle by their managers – this means it is an issue that is directly related and important to that individual and their work. Second, participants choose one person to focus on in the session. The rest of the participants are guided by the facilitator to mainly ask questions (rather than provide solutions) so that the individual can reflect and become more empowered to respond to their own challenges. Please see [Annex 1](#) for examples of action learning questions. Third, at the end of the session, individuals will pick an action (whether big or small) that they hope will create a positive change. They are held accountable to that action because they must report back to the group at the next session on what they did and the effect it had. Fourth, the group meets regularly, which means that a complex problem can be discussed and worked on over several sessions and people are exposed to a range of different issues and learnings over time.

Why would this work for frontline staff?

First, this approach may be useful among frontline humanitarian staff because it provides a space for frontline workers to identify what is important to them based on what they see on a day-to-day basis. These may be things that staff who are more removed from the implementation of projects do not even realise are important, when in fact they are essential to project effectiveness. An example of this is community relations. Second, the approach also encourages frontline staff to take control of their own learning and problem solving by reflecting on their situation and working together with peers. This can strengthen the generation and sharing of essential project information among those who are implementing the programmes. Third, actions taken can have an immediate impact upon humanitarian projects, which does not occur when we take stock only *after* implementation, during a formal evaluation process. Fourth, the process provides consistent opportunities for generating and sharing learning rather than doing so only at key milestones in a project. This can help embed frontline learning as a regular and sustained practice.

2 Objective

This study has two main objectives. The first is to explore whether action learning is an appropriate method for supporting learning processes among frontline humanitarian staff. The second objective is to understand how to maximise the benefits of action learning for frontline staff to support learning processes and improve project outcomes. While predominantly focused on the action learning technique and ALNAP's resources, findings on this approach may be applicable to other techniques designed to support frontline humanitarian learning. The primary audience for the study is actors interested in strengthening learning processes for frontline humanitarian staff – whether project implementers, MEAL staff or senior leadership – within local, national, or international organisations.

To meet those objectives, the study asks two questions:

1. Is action learning a useful approach to generating and sharing learning among frontline staff in humanitarian contexts?
2. What action learning approaches are most useful for frontline staff in humanitarian contexts?

To pilot action learning in humanitarian settings, ALNAP ran online workshops facilitated by Action Learning Associates to share the action learning approach and PDF resources with participants working on the frontline of humanitarian organisations in multiple countries. Twenty-six participants from 12 organisations (three international NGOs and nine local or national NGOs) were trained in five different workshops, each containing five two-hour sessions. The workshops trained participants on three action learning exercises they could use for different purposes. Please see [Box 2](#) for more details.

Box 2: Three action learning exercises

Classic: Standard action learning approach that focuses on participants questioning the topic holder only; they are not allowed to offer solutions. The aim is to provoke the topic holder's ability to reflect and find their own solutions to challenges.

Collaborative: Adapted action learning approach that focuses on participants asking questions but also offering solutions to the topic holder to choose. The aim is to help find a solution if the topic holder is stuck or to problem solve in a collaborative way.

Positive: Adapted action learning approach that focuses on sharing a success story. Participants can ask questions to find out what created the success of the topic holder. The aim is to share positive learning that may be transferable to other projects. This exercise can be useful as a handover technique.

Following the workshops, the facilitators encouraged participants to create their own action learning sets¹ with colleagues after the training. ALNAP engaged The Research People as consultants to collect monitoring and evaluation data throughout the training and during the six months after the training sessions ended. Please see [Annex 2](#) for a full description of the piloting process and analysis approach for the study.

¹ An action learning set would contain between five and six people, who would meet regularly to use the action learning approach in a cycle of learning over several months. As such, if ALNAP trained five people in an NGO on how to do action learning, the expectation was that they would each set up action learning sets with another five colleagues, leading to 30 people in that organisation using action learning approaches together in small groups of six.

3 Findings

This section presents the key findings from the action learning pilot, looking at the two research questions in turn.

3.1 Is action learning a useful approach to generating and sharing learning among frontline staff in humanitarian contexts?

ALNAP introduced the action learning approach to frontline staff in humanitarian organisations to support the generation and sharing of their knowledge with colleagues. As noted in Section 1, there are several challenges to maximising the potential of frontline learning. This section explores whether action learning can overcome these learning challenges. It also assesses whether action learning produces practical learning with the potential to improve humanitarian action.

3.1.1. The utility of action learning as an approach to frontline learning

- *Is action learning an appropriate approach that meets the learning needs of frontline staff?*

Previous research highlighted the need for frontline learning approaches to be quick to implement, solutions-focused, and accessible to people with limited previous exposure to structured learning techniques (ALNAP, 2003). Based on the feedback from participants, action learning meets several of those requirements.

Frontline staff found action learning to be an accessible technique.

Even after two sessions, almost all respondents to the training survey were able to explain action learning effectively² and many were able to demonstrate the approach well during the sessions.³ Some were also able to articulate how action learning was different to the approaches they were used to within their organisations: 'At first I thought it will be the same like other trainings or meetings but in action learning, I discover how important is to ask the right questions to help the problem holder understand more about the issues or challenges that she or he is facing. I've learnt that it is not necessary to provide suggestions or answers, which is what we used to do almost all of the time.'⁴ Participants also found the approach to be relevant to their work and thought the approach would help them to improve it.⁵

² Mid-term survey.

³ Trainer and ALNAP researcher observations.

⁴ Mid-term survey, respondent 15.

⁵ 78% of respondents in the final survey agreed that action learning was relevant to their work (n=14) and 61% agreed it would improve their future work (n=11).

Ease of understanding, however, did vary among staff. It took longer for some of the participants who did not have a MEAL background to grasp the approach.⁶ There were also particular challenges to understanding action learning through remote training. Despite some enthusiastic participants, most members of the mixed workshop for Africa-based participants found it very hard to stay connected to the internet, which meant it was difficult for them to understand the trainer or to engage effectively with other participants. In contrast, the participants in the workshop focused on Asia and the Middle East were able to create a bond and work together to build their competence in the approach. Their understanding and appreciation of the approach seemed stronger than in the other mixed group. One participant from the Asia and Middle East group reported that: 'The action learning product is quite simple to use for everyone. You don't need jargon. You don't need to be aware of complex processes and methodology. So for everyone, I think it will be a fundamental exercise to use.'⁷ There were, however, some participants who were concerned about their ability to introduce the action learning approach – particularly the questioning aspect of the technique – to their colleagues who did not attend the ALNAP training sessions.⁸

Frontline staff valued the light-touch learning approach, which meant sessions required a short amount of time and could be implemented immediately to deal with challenges with almost no preparation. Several participants found action learning valuable because it had the potential to change projects as they were being implemented, rather than happening at the end of a project when it was too late to make changes. One explained they had: 'moved from a traditional way of conducting learning in our humanitarian programmes where we organise a session once or twice a year. Now, given the clear guidelines contained in action learning, I am able to organise a quick session for any learning issue while in the field. This helps promote getting a quick remedy for the issues.'⁹ Participants particularly liked the fact that the process was short, easy to understand, systematic and light touch in terms of effort – in contrast to many existing processes within their organisations. One participant from an INGO noted that action learning is not: 'a heavy international thing, where we have to communicate with different layers of organisations. It's light, operational, fast and something that all the stakeholders in the base will use to improve the quality of the activity . . . it's not about reporting and about having a 20-page document as was the case before.'¹⁰

Holding short, regular action learning exercises also has the potential to save time within the existing heavily structured MEAL processes. One participant explained that their organisation typically held learning events at

6 Trainer observation.

7 End of training interview with interviewee number 2 from the Asia and Middle East group.

8 End of training interview with interviewee number 2 from the second INGO group; end of training interview with interviewee number 2 from the third INGO group.

9 Endline survey, respondent 20.

10 End of training interview with interviewee number 2 from the third INGO group.

set intervals with long gaps in-between, but the action learning meetings could make that more efficient. He explained: 'Several problematic learning issues have been discussed using the action learning exercises. When we hold our learning event we can simply discuss and track the progress on pre-identified issues that are already documented.'¹¹ Indeed, several participants saw the value in documenting the learning from the sessions in a short summary that would enable future sharing of learning within the organisation and beyond. They hoped it could thereby provide efficiency gains: documentation would be ready to synthesise into a donor report without lots of last-minute gathering and writing.¹²

- ***Does action learning create a space for frontline staff to learn during humanitarian delivery?***

Frontline staff often have limited time and space to engage in learning and reflecting because they are so busy implementing projects. This reduces the opportunity to identify challenges and potential solutions independently and can lead to managers with less in-depth knowledge of project implementation and communities taking decisions for frontline staff.

Frontline staff valued the space provided by action learning to focus on their own learning. Both the staff members nominated by piloting agencies and the individual applicants to the open training sessions were enthusiastic about their participation in action learning sessions, and motivated by the opportunity to gain new learning skills and improve project implementation.¹³ Prior to the training, the participants had found it hard to dedicate time to learning between implementing projects and meeting donor deadlines. The action learning training sessions gave space for the participants to stop and think about the challenges they had encountered, through the process of bringing a topic to discuss with others.¹⁴ One noted: 'Whilst we were delivering different activities on the ground we needed to give more attention to . . . more focus to the learning side. This [action learning training] gave us the opportunity to pay more attention to and have more awareness of the need to focus on learning areas.'¹⁵

In addition to the time spent in action learning sessions, participants reported positive changes to the way they thought about and practised learning in their work.¹⁶ Several people noted that they were asking more questions and thinking through their own and other people's problems at work in a way that used the action learning questioning structure. Taking the time to ask questions and understand an issue in more depth was seen

11 End of training interview with interviewee number 2 from the first INGO group.

12 Mid-term survey, respondent 11 and 18; end of training interview with interviewee number 2 from the third INGO group.

13 Pre-training survey.

14 End of training interview with interviewee number 1 from the third INGO group.

15 End of training interview with interviewee number 1 from the first INGO group.

16 16 people reported this at the mid-term survey point. In the final survey it appears that learning was stimulated more than self-reflection: 78% of respondents said they had learned from their fellow action learning participants (n=14). However only half of the respondents to the final survey said that action learning had helped them to reflect on their own work, with 22% saying it did not.

as a valuable outcome that allowed them to analyse different factors and to understand why they may be important to different people.¹⁷ Even without necessarily setting up formal and regular action learning sets, participants found themselves thinking and interacting with colleagues and challenges in a different way due to their exposure to the technique. This went beyond individual shifts in thinking among piloting participants: by using the exercises and asking questions to their colleagues in their pre-existing meetings, participants were able to ‘trigger thinking’ among other staff to better analyse their own situations¹⁸ or to find solutions to their colleagues’ challenges by helping them learn from others.¹⁹ One participant explained: ‘I now go to work every day with a very open mind, to solve problems and also support other team members to do the same too.’²⁰

While some participants valued the empowering opportunity to think through their own challenges in a reflexive way, most participants appreciated the ability to find collective solutions to pressing problems more. Traditional action learning techniques focus on participants only posing questions to the person who holds the challenge, rather than offering any tips and solutions of their own. The purpose of the questioning approach is to stimulate the individual to think in a deeper, more reflective way and to come to their own solutions over time. Some participants valued that aspect of the approach and the way action learning challenged individuals to think through their own ideas without relying on other people: ‘. . . you can use it [action learning] to achieve other people’s potential. That person is the one to come up with ideas. You can see what is hidden in them. It is like an “eye opener” for the person to be understood and to see what they can achieve . . . in action learning the facilitator is just there to “give you a push” to express yourself, to develop, to bring out the good things within yourself.’²¹

Humanitarian settings, however, often involve problems that require more immediate solutions. As such, ALNAP included both a classic ‘question only’ action learning exercise²² and an alternative collaborative form that started with only questions and then opened to suggestions from the broader group for solutions.²³ Most participants found the collaborative method of finding solutions collectively more appealing than the self-reflective method,²⁴ which some participants found frustrating. One participant explained: ‘it is also hard not to try to help your group-mate with suggestions of what they could do, based on your own experiences, and only limit yourself to asking questions.’²⁵ Participants may have a richer

17 Mid-term survey, respondents 1, 16, and 18; end-line survey, respondent 18.

18 Mid-term survey, respondent 16.

19 Mid-term survey, respondent 22.

20 Mid-term survey, respondent 25.

21 End of training interview with interviewee number 1 from the second INGO group.

22 Called the ‘classic’ exercise.

23 Called the ‘collaborative’ exercise.

24 65% of the respondents to the final survey found the collaborative approach most useful, 24% chose the classic approach and 12% chose the positive method.

25 Mid-term survey, respondent 4.

learning experience as they discover solutions themselves through critical reflection prompted by others, rather than being provided with answers by their peers in the group. However, when someone is stuck on a thorny issue, it may be operationally more expedient to solicit the opinions of others. One participant explained the use of that problem-solving approach in frontline humanitarian situations: 'It's maybe because we're facing many issues. It's [the collaborative approach] more convenient with our situation, because it takes you to the solution straight away, it does work.'²⁶

Frontline learning can create intellectual space, but it does not on its own create the additional free time required for learning. Although pilot participants found action learning to be a useful approach to stimulate their own learning and that of their peers, many struggled to set time aside exclusively for practising action learning. As such, introducing a new learning technique is not a magic bullet; time remains at a premium for frontline humanitarian workers and they often have limited power to advocate for more learning time from their managers. However, participants managed to use time in existing meetings and project processes to integrate the action learning exercises. In some cases, this led to more effective meetings than they had held previously – action learning provided a useful structure for efficient learning and problem solving. For example, one participant usefully summarised both the challenge of fitting action learning into a busy schedule and the potential benefits of doing so:

It's very difficult to always improve something or to do something new without adding any additional workload. So, every time we add something, we have to delay something else . . . Adding something, like this, from scratch and adding more time for all the team, it will probably not work, because everyone is already struggling with the new workload. But, you should say: 'OK, we can do this, you already have to do it anyway, but I can propose a different way to do it. A way which is more fun and less time consuming'.²⁷

²⁶ End of training interview with interviewee number 1 from the third INGO group.

²⁷ End of training interview with interviewee number 2 from the third INGO group.

- ***Does action learning stimulate increased knowledge sharing among frontline staff?***

High staff turnover is one of the key problems for knowledge retention in humanitarian organisations. Busy daily schedules mean staff have limited opportunity to pass on their insights to other colleagues. If they leave the organisation, their knowledge leaves with them. Action learning tries to support frontline staff to share their own learning from projects with each other on an ongoing basis in several ways. First, in all action learning exercises, participants bring to the discussion a topic that concerns their work, thereby helping peers to understand the issues being faced by different colleagues. Second, when participants propose solutions in the 'collaborative' exercise, they often share their own experiences to suggest ways forwards. Third, by choosing a success story to share in the 'positive' exercise, participants learn about the individual and external factors that helped someone succeed in a previous project. Each of these methods is intended to increase the sharing of knowledge among peers that can be applied to other projects and reduces the likelihood that skills and experiences will be entirely lost if an individual were to leave the organisation.

Action learning supported frontline staff to share learning with their peers in the immediate group but turnover remained a challenge because it was hard to share knowledge beyond the direct participants. Having that space to share learning and skills with their peers was novel for many participants. They appreciated the opportunity to learn about colleagues' challenges so they could address similar issues in their own work,²⁸ and to hear the varied perspectives of different colleagues with whom they didn't typically make time to discuss ideas.²⁹ For example, MEAL staff from one INGO had only briefly interacted with each other before the action learning training began. They discovered new efficient ways to analyse and display their project data because one person shared a new approach they had been using.³⁰ Despite working together in similar roles in the same organisation, these opportunities for sharing learning had not previously been found and the practical solution to a common problem had not been shared.

Some participants, however, were concerned about how the learning generated within their action learning sessions could be shared more widely. While the knowledge of the five people in the action learning group might increase based on their interactions, they were still concerned that the knowledge gained would be lost if they left the organisation. Some steps to reduce those concerns included making notes in action learning sessions and sharing (non-confidential) learning in MEAL milestone meetings or other cross-team events.

28 End of training interview with interviewee number 1 from the third INGO group.

29 End of training interview with interviewee number 1 from the African group.

30 End of training interviews with interviewee numbers 1 and 2 from the third INGO group.

Action learning also provided opportunities for sharing learning between staff in different organisations. Due to COVID-19, the action learning training sessions were all held remotely using Zoom. Two out of the five groups were made up of participants from different organisations and even different countries. As noted above, the participation in one of the groups was more limited due to very challenging internet connectivity but the other was a highly interactive group in which participants were able to share experiences from different contexts and to see the value in that learning. The action learning approach's focus on interactive discussion and creating an atmosphere of trust enabled participants to share openly with each other despite being in different organisations and being geographically remote.³¹

- ***Does action learning shift power dynamics and organisational hierarchy in ways that value the knowledge and learning opportunities for frontline staff?***

Entrenched organisational hierarchies can limit the enabling learning environment for frontline staff and makes it hard for them to have the space to generate new knowledge, share their learning and have it used to inform organisational decision-making.

Some shifts in power dynamics were achieved through the use of action learning, but mainly at the level of individual teams rather than across the broader organisation. For several managers in the training, using action learning with their teams represented the first time they had really given their staff the opportunity to offer their own ideas³² rather than telling them what to do.³³ Previously, some managers considered it their sole responsibility to come up with solutions for their teams and some did not originally think frontline staff had strong ideas to offer – some of those preconceptions were changed by using action learning with their teams. Please see Box 3 for a description of that experience. One manager summarised the change created by action learning: 'I have changed the way of finding solutions, in the past, it was only me, but now, the team as whole.'³⁴

The simple and collaborative process of action learning provided opportunities for people who would not normally offer opinions to speak up and share their learning, and colleagues benefited from hearing it.³⁵ In addition to changing the dynamics within teams, action learning also provided an opportunity to change relations between humanitarian actors and crisis-affected communities. Although action learning was designed to be used among humanitarian colleagues, some participants successfully used the approach in discussions with affected communities (please see

31 End of training interview with interviewee number 1 from the first INGO group.

32 Endline survey, respondent 13; end of training interview with interviewee number 1 from the third INGO group.

33 End of training interview with interviewee number 2 from the second INGO group.

34 Endline survey, respondent 1.

35 Mid-term survey, respondent 22.

Section 3.1.2 for details). For one participant, using the approach strongly altered their perceptions on how communities can input into programmes and the value of their ideas and solutions:

Oh, the difference is that I allowed them to freely explore, to freely express themselves and I freely allowed them to make decisions for themselves.

Sometimes we make assumptions because sometimes when you look at somebody, you assume that person wouldn't have anything good to bring, especially when there's nothing good about their situations. From our own mentality we may assume that. [But I tell you]: when you apply this methodology of action learning, especially the collaborative exercise it is really helpful.

I must emphasise that I believe that everybody on this earth has his or her own potential but sometimes we don't use the right methods, the appropriate methodology to get to it.³⁶

Box 3: A manager using action learning with her team

Although many of the participants found the action learning workshops useful, some were sceptical about applying the technique with colleagues who may not understand the approach or derive value from it. One participant from an INGO demonstrated the ability to bring other colleagues on board and, with their buy-in, made plans to implement the approach regularly.³⁷

Nadia decided to run a collaborative learning exercise with her team, asking each of them to present an issue, problem or challenge they wanted to discuss.³⁸ In action learning the problems addressed can range from larger, more complex problems requiring innovative solutions to narrower, more commonly faced challenges. After hearing everyone's individual topics, the group chose to focus on the issue of a complaints and feedback mechanism that Michael said wasn't working effectively.

Michael explained that some of the community members in the camp were putting feedback into the organisation's complaints box but the team were unable to follow up on the suggestions. For example, people wrote 'I need more water' or 'I need a hygiene kit' but there were no details for the officer to follow up with the individual to respond.

³⁶ End of training interview with interviewee number 1 from the second INGO group.

³⁷ This feedback was gathered at the end of the data collection period. As such, it is not clear whether the practice has been sustained but this example underscores the practical potential of the approach.

³⁸ End of pilot interview with interviewee number 1 from the third INGO group..

The group provided a range of solutions to his challenge and Michael chose one to try out immediately. Following the meeting, Nadia and Michael worked together to design a form for the complaints box with a template for community members to fill in their information and their detailed complaints so the organisation could better follow up. Michael then went to the community to train them in using the form during the next hygiene kit distribution.

Nadia reflected on the session from the perspective of a team manager: 'When they started sharing their issues, problems and challenges, I really discovered that there were some things that I wasn't aware of, you know, when we started, when we chose the problem, when we began to explore the challenges and they started talking about their solutions I was really surprised that they really had great ideas. Before they didn't have the "floor", they didn't have the chance to talk. When they did they came up with ideas I have never heard about. So it was a really great exercise!' She explained that without the action learning training, she would not have held a session to ask about her team's challenges outside of formal appraisal processes.

Nadia and her colleagues considered action learning to be a successful approach for their organisation. The team has asked for a similar session to be run on at least a monthly basis so they can address all the issues raised in the first session.

One reason for this enthusiasm was the efficiency of the process. Nadia explained: 'It took I think, 40 minutes for us. And I think it was really good, because, you know, we had 10 people in the first session, and to have that many, to run it, and to close the exercise with a proper solution within 40 minutes that's a good, good exercise!'³⁹

Another of her colleagues encountering action learning for the first time agreed: 'For me and for most of the members of the team, we welcomed this idea [action learning]. We felt we really participated for the first time and it was good to share our challenges and our problems without any hesitation.'⁴⁰

Organisational hierarchies still inhibit the time available for generating frontline learning and using it in decision-making.

The original expectation of the project was for all the participants to go away from the training and set up their own groups, with whom they would practise action learning as a stand-alone activity on a regular basis. This did not happen – instead, individuals incorporated the approach into existing meetings, MEAL processes or just in ad hoc discussions with their colleagues. Fast-moving emergency environments limited the time available to conduct action learning and it was difficult for individual frontline staff to carve out time for learning processes that were additional to existing workloads

³⁹ End of pilot interview with interviewee number 1 from the third INGO group.

⁴⁰ End of pilot interview with interviewee number 3 from the third INGO group.

or to convince their managers and the broader organisation to protect their learning time. Participants underscored the need to have a stronger enabling learning environment for new learning processes to take hold, especially when workloads were already full and staff turnover was high.⁴¹

Some participants found it hard to implement the exercises in practice due to entrenched organisational ways of working. For example, one participant from a large INGO was enthusiastic about trying one of the exercises that focuses on success stories during an end-of-project meeting and planned the session with support from one of the ALA trainers. However, she found that her colleagues were used to holding project meetings in a particular way and there was limited space and interest in trying the new approach. She found it hard to get buy-in and felt the pressure of being responsible for trying to introduce a new approach following her training.⁴² This example underscores the challenge of frontline staff trying to introduce new approaches into their organisations when processes are hierarchical and institutionalised.

When participants did have success sharing the action learning ideas with colleagues and generating enthusiasm for adopting the approach more widely, it was generally from colleagues less senior than they were. One participant from an INGO told us: 'When I talked to my deputy about this idea he told me we need to have it not only once but we need to have it multiple times, we need to raise multiple issues. He was really motivated for this and he told me "let's have a pilot . . . let's have it directly before even coming to the field."⁴³ In this case, however, the reaction of the less senior staff member did help motivate the manager, which does indicate a respect for the opinion of their team.

Challenging power dynamics due to cultural practices and hierarchy were also at the forefront of participants' minds when it came to applying the action learning technique with a mixed group of colleagues. During the training, frontline staff raised concerns about having the ability to implement the technique with other colleagues of differing levels of seniority. For example, they were concerned that junior staff may not have the experience to think through relevant challenges,⁴⁴ while more senior staff may be unwilling to adapt to new learning techniques.⁴⁵ Participants were also very aware of the power dynamics in their setting that might make some people unwilling to offer up solutions or may force them into accepting the opinions of some colleagues over others.⁴⁶ Cultural factors relating to gender, or norms such as not celebrating success or trying to hide failures were also raised by participants as potential barriers. These comments are representative of the key concerns raised in the final sessions in the workshops as participants thought through how to apply

41 End of training interview with interviewee number 2 from the third INGO group.

42 End of pilot interview with interviewee number 2 from the third INGO group.

43 End of training interview with interviewee number 1 from the third INGO group.

44 End of training interview with interviewee number 2 from the second INGO group.

45 Endline survey, respondent 15.

46 End of training interview with interviewee number 2 from the third INGO group.

action learning with their peers. Indeed, while a substantial majority of participants thought action learning was relevant to their work, just over half of the respondents in the final survey thought they would be able to use it frequently in their organisations.⁴⁷

One participant, however, saw action learning as a potential solution to working in a multi-cultural and hierarchical institution: 'if a diverse group of people with different viewpoints in the organisation are required to implement the solution, it can be useful to have them involved in defining that solution at the start to elicit buy-in'. Another participant elaborated:

Sometimes you have to convince people in this collaborative approach, which means we work together on the issue but it is not your responsibility and it is not mine. It is a shared responsibility . . . especially for some context that, I'm sure you know, is slightly multicultural . . . we have women, we have men, we have Arabs, we have Kurdish, we have different people.

Also, as managers, we are very different from our staff. So this kind of approach, I think it was the best one from my point of view, because it's also a way for us to work closely together . . . otherwise, people will just say 'okay, yes, yes of course', but if you haven't taken their opinion, maybe they will not really follow what you said.⁴⁸

3.1.2. The practical application of action learning to project implementation

One of the key reasons action learning was chosen as an approach to support frontline learning was its practical nature. In addition to stimulating learning and reflection, it should also generate actions that can be implemented by the frontline individuals to address an identified practical challenge. More evidence would be needed to determine the effectiveness of the project changes made as a result of using the action learning approach. Although there are several examples of the solutions that workshop participants found through using action learning approaches, the data we have is limited and based on self-reported and anecdotal evidence from the participants. There has not been follow up to determine whether the changes made to projects resulted in positive outcomes. Instead, the findings in this short section point to the potential of action learning to help frontline staff think of ways to improve projects by providing the space and a method to analyse situations and reflect on different options as project implementation occurs. It does not assess the effectiveness of the potential solutions identified.

⁴⁷ Final survey.

⁴⁸ End of training interview with interviewee number 2 from the third INGO group.

The action learning sessions gave participants the opportunity to discuss and make immediate changes to project activities.

One of the key aims of implementing action learning in humanitarian settings was to allow frontline staff to use their knowledge to address challenges in projects as they arise, rather than at the end of a project. The practical issues tackled ranged from project implementation, to monitoring and evaluation, to human resources and management challenges. Examples of topics raised by frontline staff are provided in [Box 4](#).

Box 4: The range of practical issues discussed by frontline staff in action learning sessions

A wide range of issues were discussed during the action learning training sessions and in the subsequent implementation period. Some of these were challenges to be addressed, while others were presented as success stories. A sample of these are presented below.

Programme implementation:

- the challenge of operating in a situation of armed conflict and remaining neutral
- women's economic empowerment
- food security and child nutrition
- choosing project locations for WASH infrastructure
- protection challenges in refugee camps, including lack of lighting
- engaging men in health projects

Monitoring, evaluation and learning:

- how to share learning from the MEAL team with programme teams
- how to analyse and display MEAL data efficiently
- ensuring women are represented in data collection and feedback mechanisms

HR and staffing issues:

- how to manage difficult team members
- the challenge of starting in a new role in an established team
- how to diffuse conflict in a team

Several of the participants reported finding solutions to their problems or learning from the success of others that led them to make practical changes. This occurred across a range of sectors. For example, one participant reported that action learning helped them resolve the challenge of where to site a solar-powered borehole;⁴⁹ another was using the action learning technique with their team to decide how to distribute masks effectively to communities and encourage their use, while another created an advocacy plan after the action learning sessions to share the benefits of their protection programme with other organisations.⁵⁰ A further participant explained the process of working with peers to find and implement a successful solution to health challenges:

⁴⁹ Endline survey, respondent 13.

⁵⁰ Endline survey, respondent 25.

Before the training I was having this challenge of trying to improve or increase the number of males in attendance during health education sessions . . . during this training I was able to receive brilliant ideas from other participants, for example making the men feel special by creating special time for them, also by reducing the number of sessions for them . . . which I applied and it worked.⁵¹

One of the most interesting applications of action learning emerging from the pilot occurred in discussions with communities instigated by community health coordinators. This led the frontline staff to find new solutions to nutrition challenges that were co-produced with the community members. See [Box 5](#) for more details of that approach and its outcomes.

Box 5: Using action learning with crisis-affected communities

Participants from a health-focused INGO decided to adapt the traditional action learning process to discuss project implementation challenges and solutions with communities.

Problem: The frontline staff had noticed a reduction in weight among children in the community. Their programme had been providing supplements to caregivers to administer to children who were malnourished, but their weight was still falling.

Process: One workshop participant trained their team in action learning and went to the community, where they brought together frontline staff with caregivers. They used the collaborative method to stimulate discussion and ask the caregivers to give their own thoughts on what the problem was and to offer up some possible solutions.

Solution: Through the discussion, staff learned that the children had been vomiting after eating because the food provided was too sweet. They also found it lumpy and unappetising. The caregivers came up with the idea of making a pap (food supplement) using the produce they had available from farms and mixing it with peanut while it was hot, with the aim of making it more appetising and smoother for the children to eat. The staff went back to check on the situation a week later and claimed there was a marked difference in outcomes with the children already looking healthier.⁵²

⁵¹ Endline survey, respondent 25.

⁵² End of training interview with interviewee number 1 from the second INGO group.

3.1.3 Is action learning a useful approach for frontline staff?

This section identified four key challenges to effective frontline learning that the action learning approach attempted to mitigate. Results suggest that action learning is an accessible and appropriate approach to frontline learning; it can stimulate reflection among frontline staff to solve problems as they arise and promote the sharing of information between peers, thus supporting knowledge retention in an organisation. This section also detailed the range of practical issues to which participants applied the action learning approach, demonstrating its versatility and applicability to multiple frontline actors.

Action learning does not, however, make a strong contribution to overcoming hierarchical power dynamics and a lack of learning culture at an organisational level. Nevertheless, there are some positive indications that by using action learning techniques, individual managers take a more inclusive approach to problem solving and are more appreciative of the knowledge held by the frontline staff that they manage. Although individuals can use action learning approaches in their daily work by integrating a more questioning approach to their interactions or incorporating exercises into their own meetings, action learning practices are unlikely to take root across an organisation through the actions of frontline staff alone. More senior organisational buy-in is required to support the adoption of new approaches, protect the space for learning for frontline staff and promote the value of knowledge held by staff who work directly with communities. Those changes will not emerge from the introduction of a new learning technique but would require concerted effort at multiple levels within an organisation.

3.2. How can action learning best support frontline staff in humanitarian contexts?

The previous section demonstrated that action learning can be a useful approach for frontline staff but it is still hard to create time for learning in humanitarian contexts. To encourage the adoption of a new learning technique in the broader organisation and to shift the way senior colleagues value and use frontline knowledge for decision-making are beyond the power of individual frontline staff. There are, however, useful ways to maximise the potential of action learning in the absence of those broader enabling structures.

Following the full action learning model – creating specific learning groups to meet regularly together over longer a time period that are separate to other work processes to reflect on issues and work on them in an iterative way – was not possible for any of the pilot participants. However, participants still found ways to use and benefit from elements of action learning in their work, sometimes in the absence of broader organisational support or dedicated learning time. Instead, they integrated elements of the approach into their ongoing work in innovative ways that were 'lighter touch' than the original approach but still generated useful learning. Their adaptations suggest eight ways that organisations and frontline staff can use action learning in their work to increase reflection, knowledge sharing and problem solving.

1. Use action learning as an individual frontline worker

Individual frontline staff or their managers may struggle to convince other colleagues to use the action learning exercises. However, participants demonstrated how an exposure to action learning enabled them to take a more reflective approach to their work and to their conversations with their peers or the people they manage. Even if other people within the organisation do not adopt and support the technique, individuals can alter the way they approach challenges and the way they problem solve with other people by making sure they ask questions first to help explore issues without jumping straight to suggesting solutions. Individuals can use some of the action learning questions (please see [Annex 1](#) for examples) to structure their own thinking, they can ask peers more questions in conversations, and managers can ask their team members for their ideas instead of always providing the solutions for their team.

2. Integrate action learning into existing team meetings

Given how busy frontline staff are and their limited power to shift organisational practice, integrating action learning into systems that are already in place may be one of the most effective ways of making learning part of daily practice and give it the opportunity to influence project outcomes throughout implementation. Instead of creating stand-alone action learning meetings, frontline staff and their managers can capitalise on existing regular team meetings to integrate a short action learning exercise. This can allow team members who normally do not have the opportunity to identify and solve challenges a chance to put their ideas forward. It can also contribute to stronger teamwork through collaborative problem solving.

3. Integrate action learning into MEAL milestones

In designing the resources, we wanted action learning to be something frontline staff could do between formal monitoring and evaluation milestones to ensure that their knowledge could influence project outcomes in real time. We also wanted to avoid a focus on learning predominantly for donor reporting, which can happen in some bureaucratic MEAL systems

(Sundberg, 2019). However, based on discussions with participants it became clear that the action learning exercises can be useful at core project milestones, too. For example, people can share success stories with a broader set of colleagues and discuss what individual and environmental factors were important for a positive impact. They can also be used to start solving some of the challenges that have been found during mid-term evaluation and monitoring points. Using participatory action learning approaches in MEAL milestone meetings (such as mid-term, end of project reviews or cross-organisation learning events) could help bring more frontline voices into these fora, which are currently often focused on presentations by more senior staff.

4. Use the knowledge from action learning exercises to inform other processes

Action learning is predominantly a non-written form of learning that does not require a lot of documentation, although it can be useful for participants to make short notes so they can remember what was discussed and the actions they committed to take. However, participants in the pilots were keen for the learning in their small groups to be leveraged as effectively as possible within their organisations and shared more widely. One way to facilitate this is to periodically draw together a summary of the notes from the meetings and share the salient (and non-confidential) points in organisational meetings or project reviews. When it comes time for donor reporting, these could also be a source to ensure that some of the important tacit learning of frontline staff is reflected to those funding the project.

5. Work with managers of frontline staff to share the approach with their teams

Individual frontline staff can benefit from using the approach on their own (please see [Point 1](#)) or with their peers in group settings. However, it may be difficult for them to instigate the use of a new technique into their teams and to sustain it in their organisation without buy-in from more senior colleagues. The pilots showed that managers within implementing and monitoring teams, who themselves have close contact with projects and communities, have more power to choose the approaches they use in their regular team or project cycle meetings. If an organisation is interested in adopting the action learning approach to support frontline learning, it would be useful to also introduce the approach to some key frontline managing staff who can help maintain some space for action learning within their teams.

6. Sustain action learning within an organisation through training multiple people

Although individual frontline staff and managers can be important for introducing the action learning approach, the pilots underscored the high level of turnover among frontline staff in humanitarian organisations (please see [the discussion of limitations](#)). The action learning approach is unlikely to be sustained in an organisation if the people who are familiar with

facilitating the technique move on to another organisation. If an organisation is committed to supporting frontline learning through the use of action learning, it should consider familiarising multiple frontline staff and their managers with the approach at regular periods to avoid the loss of action learning skills through high turnover.

7. Pay attention to culture and power dynamics within action learning exercises

For action learning to work well and encourage frontline staff to share their ideas, facilitators need to understand the potential power dynamics in the group. For example, participants were concerned that women may not always be able to speak authoritatively in front of men or junior staff may feel pressured to only accept the ideas of the more senior people in the room. Facilitators of action learning should consider which of those – or other – challenges might be relevant in their specific context, and adapt the approach in ways to level the playing field. For example, facilitators could split participants into different gender groups or agree respectful ground rules at the start.

8. Experiment and adapt the approach further

Several of the above suggestions are based on adaptations made by the participating frontline staff to make action learning work effectively for them or their teams within their own organisational learning and operating environments. They highlight the surprising versatility of a learning approach that at first appears relatively structured. One of the most interesting applications of action learning by the piloting individuals was a session conducted with crisis-affected communities. The ideas shared by the community underscore that useful knowledge and ideas are held by individuals regardless of their level of seniority or power. Indeed, crisis-affected individuals may see challenges that frontline staff have not noticed, or they may have solutions that humanitarian organisations have not considered. This community-based action learning session demonstrated that the questioning technique used in action learning was adaptable to different situations with different groups of people within and outside their organisations with different levels of exposure to formal learning techniques.

If individuals or organisations decide to adopt action learning as an approach in humanitarian contexts, frontline staff and managers should pick and choose what is most useful for them from the action learning method, rather than always insisting on a structured set of meetings with a specific format. Trying to fit a rigid method to a complex and fast-moving environment may prove more frustrating than beneficial.⁵³ But allowing experimentation and adaption may facilitate some more innovative and contextually useful action learning approaches to evolve.

⁵³ End of pilot interview with interviewee number 2 from the third INGO group.

While some of the above suggestions are a departure from ‘best practice’ action learning approaches, they represent a compromise between the gold standard technique and the practical constraints faced by busy frontline staff who work in pressured and fast-moving environments with limited power to dictate their own working schedules. Based on the experiences of piloting staff, the lighter touch practical approaches better meet their current learning environments, are more likely to be sustained than complex processes, and can still lead to gains in knowledge and solutions to project challenges.

It is not possible to conclude from the small sample of organisations in the pilot study what the optimal conditions are for introducing and sustaining action learning in an organisation. The experiences of the participants and their organisations suggest, however, that it is difficult to integrate a new learning approach during an immediate emergency period.⁵⁴ The prerequisites would also depend upon the expectations placed upon the approach. For example, the findings show that few preconditions are required – aside from personal will and interest – for an individual to use elements of the approach to alter their own questioning behaviour and thereby improve daily learning, or for a manager to change the structure of their team meetings to problem solve productively. In contrast, sustaining a systematic action learning practice for frontline staff across a whole organisation in a way that feeds into broader learning and decision-making structures would likely require organisational buy-in at multiple levels. A scaled approach could necessitate a significant shift in both practice and learning culture, especially when an enabling learning environment that values the inputs of frontline staff is not already part of the fabric of an organisation.

⁵⁴ For example, it was difficult for participants from Somalia to engage in the action learning sessions when they were called to respond to the emergency developing in Ethiopia.

4 Limitations

The study findings and recommendations should be considered in light of two main limitations to the research. First, the training and monitoring of the pilots were all conducted remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions, making it difficult to connect with some of the participants after the training. As such, we do not know whether and how several of the participants have sustained these practices following the training. While the post-training surveys indicated that action learning had helped participants to reflect on and learn from their work and act differently as a result,⁵⁵ follow up with many participants was challenging. Only nine of the 26 participants engaged in interviews in the initial weeks following the action learning training and only three provided feedback several months after the training. Interviews were sought with others and several meetings were organised, but the participants were unable to attend or were unresponsive. For some participants, it was due to their busy schedules, unstable connectivity, and frequent travel to remote places. For others, however, it may also have been due to a lack of interest in the learning technique. It is possible that the people we were able to contact successfully had more positive views on action learning than those who were unresponsive.

Second, high staff turnover also caused challenges for both the implementation and monitoring of action learning. Some of the pilot participants moved on from their organisation immediately after the initial action learning training sessions finished, which meant they were unable to implement any of the exercises with their colleagues. Several others left their organisations during the monitoring period, meaning we were unable to track how well they maintained action learning activities over time. In some cases, all the pilot participants at an organisation had moved on within six months of completing the training. Some participants reported that they planned to introduce action learning at their new organisation; however, evidence of practical implementation in those new organisations is not available.

It should also be noted that four out of the 12 participating organisations volunteered to support the pilot based on the interest of more senior staff in strengthening frontline learning. This included three international organisations and one national organisation. This might mean the learning conditions under which the piloting frontline staff were operating was more optimal in these specific organisations than for most frontline staff. However, the role of these more senior staff was mainly to nominate frontline staff to take part and to protect their time to attend the ALNAP

⁵⁵ 12 out of 18 indicated that was the case in the end-line survey. One of the four who did not agree with that statement went on to explain it was because they had not yet implemented action learning with colleagues, but that may change in the future.

action learning training. They did not play a role in the training itself or in sustaining the practice of action learning among individual staff after the training finished. The nominating staff in the large INGOs were also remote from the piloting contexts with limited interaction with the individual frontline staff during the piloting period. As such, the in-country learning environment and operating context for the participating frontline staff was likely quite similar to the situation in other non-pilot organisations.

5 Conclusion

The use of action learning approaches among frontline staff in humanitarian organisations can help to overcome several barriers to frontline learning. It represents an accessible learning technique that requires limited resources and is applicable to practical challenges as they arise. It helps provide intellectual space for reflection and problem solving that facilitates the participation of frontline staff who do not typically have the opportunity to identify challenges that are important to their work and to propose their own solutions. Action learning also helps to facilitate sharing of experiences and knowledge between staff who do not typically have the time to discuss their own learning with peers, which has the potential to reduce the impact of high turnover on institutional knowledge. It can also support some limited shifts in power dynamics within humanitarian organisations. For example, by helping managers to see the value of frontline staff knowledge and ideas, or even to help humanitarian staff value the problem-solving skills of crisis-affected communities.

The introduction of action learning, however, only reduced some of these barriers to frontline learning rather than overcoming them entirely. The pilots demonstrated that even with new learning techniques, it is difficult to prioritise individual frontline staff learning and deeper reflection above more immediate problem-solving needs that require quick solutions. It is also hard for frontline staff to find the time for standalone learning sessions that happen outside of project and MEAL activities. Importantly, the action learning technique could not guard against high staff turnover that affected both the implementation and monitoring of the pilot and it could not break down entrenched organisational hierarchies and power dynamics on a larger scale that limit the extent to which frontline knowledge is valued and used in decision-making. For the knowledge generated by action learning to be maximised, a strong and supportive organisational learning environment is required.

To maximise the benefits of action learning for frontline staff, individuals and organisations should not feel wedded to creating a standalone action learning process. Instead, they should consider how to integrate action learning exercises into existing meetings and MEAL processes, how to capitalise on the knowledge shared within these exercises and how to encourage managers to use action learning approaches to provide more learning space for their frontline staff. Ultimately, the pilot demonstrated the strong innovation capabilities of frontline staff who adapted structured action learning exercises to meet their own learning needs. They were thus able to maximise the learning potential of the action learning technique in ways that were appropriate to the often limited time, resources, and institutional support available within their own organisations and contexts.

While this ALNAP pilot has focused specifically on action learning as an approach, it has produced some recommendations that are likely generalisable to the introduction of other learning approaches in humanitarian organisations. It has underscored the importance of understanding staff learning preferences and the realities of the learning environment that frontline staff inhabit. It also highlights the need to be flexible and encourage useful adaptations that best suit different individuals, organisations, and contexts. Finally, the pilot shows the need for an enabling learning environment to maximise the potential for valuable frontline knowledge to have a sustained positive impact on humanitarian programmes.

Bibliography

Abbott, C., Brook, C., Evans, G., Obrecht, A. and A. Sundberg (2019) *Action Learning: A mapping of approaches for humanitarian action*. ALNAP Mapping Paper. London: ODI/ALNAP. (www.alnap.org/help-library/action-learning-and-tacit-knowledge-a-mapping-of-approaches-for-humanitarian-action).

Abbott, C. and Taylor, P. (eds) (2013) *Action Learning in Social Work*. California: Sage. (www.alnap.org/help-library/action-learning-in-social-work).

ALNAP. (2003) *Learning by field level workers: ALNAP review of humanitarian action 2003*. London: ALNAP/ODI. (www.alnap.org/help-library/learning-by-field-level-workers-alnap-review-of-humanitarian-action-in-2003-field-level).

Campbell, L. and Knox Clarke, P. (2019) *Beyond assumptions: How humanitarians make operational decisions*. ALNAP Study. London: ODI/ALNAP. (<https://www.alnap.org/help-library/alnap-study-beyond-assumptions-how-humanitarians-make-operational-decisions>).

Doherty, J. and Sundberg, A. (2022) *Action learning for frontline humanitarians: A resource pack*. London: ODI/ALNAP. (<https://www.alnap.org/help-library/action-learning-for-frontline-humanitarians-a-resource-pack>)

Donnenberg, O. (2012). 'Network action learning in an Austrian hospital', in Pedler, M. (ed) *Action Learning in Practice*. Oxfordshire: Routledge. (www.alnap.org/help-library/network-action-learning-in-an-austrian-hospital).

INTRAC. (2012) *Action learning sets: A guide for small and diaspora NGOs*. Oxford: INTRAC. (www.alnap.org/help-library/action-learning-sets-a-guide-for-small-and-diaspora-ngos).

Moldosheva, A., Bagyshbaeva B. and Abraliev K. (2011) 'Leadership, gender and youth: Reviewing the old and experimenting with the new'. *Praxis Note*, 59. Oxford: INTRAC. (www.alnap.org/help-library/leadership-gender-and-youth-reviewing-the-old-and-experimenting-with-the-new).

Paludan, M.P. and Popplewell, R. (2013) 'Turning voice into action: A discussion of three Action Research studies conducted by Danish Children & Youth Network and their learning outcomes'. *Praxis Note*, 65. Oxford: INTRAC. (www.alnap.org/help-library/turning-voice-into-action-a-discussion-of-three-action-research-studies-conducted-by).

Pedler, M. and Abbott, C. (2008) 'Lean and learning: Action learning for service improvement'. *Leadership in Health Services*, 21(2): 87-98. (www.alnap.org/help-library/lean-and-learning-action-learning-for-service-improvement).

Sundberg, A. (2019) *Beyond the numbers: How qualitative approaches can improve monitoring of humanitarian action*. London: ALNAP/ODI. (www.alnap.org/help-library/beyond-the-numbers-how-qualitative-approaches-can-improve-monitoring-of-humanitarian).

Tanner, L. (2016) *Knowledge landscape report*. London: Humanitarian Leadership Academy. (www.alnap.org/help-library/draft-landscape-report)

Annex 1: Using questions in action learning

The context of this annex is reproduced from Doherty, and Sundberg (2022).

The most important role of action learning participants is to ask questions to help the topic holder think through their issue effectively. Instead of rushing to offer solutions, participants' questions can prompt the topic holder to think about the issue in greater depth – or to find a new perspective that can help them to reach a solution they wouldn't have found on their own.

What kinds of questions?

Three main types of questions are used in action learning to help people to think about their problem in a different or new way. These are 'thinking', 'feeling' or 'willing' questions.

Below is a list of example questions as a starting point. These lists are by no means exhaustive; you can be creative and come up with questions that suit your specific action learning session. The questions are mainly written in the present tense, which will help with ongoing issues and challenges. If you are using action learning to explore factors in success stories that happened in the past, then you can use similar questions but in the *past tense*.

'Thinking' questions

These types of questions look to explore and uncover facts, data, information, assumptions and stories. You can consider them as 'detective' questions. When coming up with your own 'thinking' questions, remember that they are seeking more detail about the *facts* of the problem situation.

- *What have you done so far to tackle this issue?*
- *What are aid recipients saying to you?*
- *Are there different communication and cultural factors involved?*
- *How much time are you spending on this problem? How much time do you have for the project?*
- *Who else is involved? Who are the stakeholders in this problem?*
- *What makes this problem important?*
- *Whose help do you need? What power and interest do they have in the problem?*
- *Who has decision-making power over this situation?*

'Feeling' questions

The questions and problems we face in our work will often have a motivational or 'feeling' component to them. 'Feeling' questions help people to reflect. They encourage empathetic approaches to the issue by asking about emotions and challenging the assumptions that a topic holder might have. When coming up with your own 'feeling' questions, remember that they are seeking more detail about the *person's feelings* about the situation.

- *Why is this challenge important to you?*
- *How do you feel about the questions you have been asked in this group?*
- *What other reasons could there be to explain why they did that?*
- *Would you be surprised if others felt the same/differently?*
- *How did you feel when you heard that?*
- *If I were in this situation, I would be angry – how about you?*
- *What is stopping you from...?*
- *How is this affecting your team?*

'Willing' questions

These types of questions are about looking ahead and planning. The idea is to reflect, take stock, find direction and set goals. You can consider them 'proactive' questions. When coming up with your own 'willing' questions, remember that they are *action-oriented*.

- *What help, or support, might you need?*
- *How will you get that support?*
- *What could we do more of or less of?*
- *How will you decide what action to take?*
- *What steps can you see? What will you do next?*
- *Can you describe how things will be in one month?*
- *What alternatives are there?*
- *What would be the best-case scenario? What would 'good' look like?*

Annex 2: Detailed methodology

To pilot the action learning approach, ALNAP ran online workshops to pilot the action learning approach and shared PDF resources with participants working on the frontline of humanitarian organisations in multiple countries. The facilitators encouraged participants to set up their own action learning sets with colleagues after the training. ALNAP engaged consultants to collect monitoring and evaluation data throughout the training and during the five months after the training sessions ended.

1. The Action Learning Resource Pack and training programme

The pilot Action Learning Pack was created as an interactive PDF with sections explaining the importance of frontline learning, the action learning approach, three different action learning exercises, guidance sheets, and fillable forms participants could use to track their learning. The pack could either be viewed online or printed.

The three different exercises included three types of action learning inspired by approaches found in the mapping (Abbott et al., 2019):

- **Classic:** Standard action learning approach that focuses on participants questioning the topic holder only – they are not allowed to offer solutions. The aim is to provoke the topic holder's ability to reflect and find solutions to challenges.
- **Collaborative:** Adapted action learning approach that focuses on participants asking questions but also offering solutions to the topic holder to choose. The aim is to help find a solution if the topic holder is stuck, or to problem solve in a collaborative way.
- **Positive:** Adapted action learning approach that focuses on sharing a success story. Participants can ask questions to find out what created the success of the topic holder. The aim is to share positive learning that may be transferable to other projects.

Training was developed by Action Learning Associates to support the use of the pack. This consisted of five interactive online sessions,⁵⁶ during which the trainers introduced the action learning approach and the three different exercises. They also gave the participants an opportunity to practise as learning leads facilitating the process, as topic holders, and as participants of an action learning set. The trainers provided feedback and spent the final session discussing how participants could best

⁵⁶ The training took place between December 2019 and April 2020. In-person workshops were the original intention, but the COVID-19 pandemic led to remote workshops and M&E of the pilots.

organise action learning sets in their own contexts and considering any concerns participants had about implementing those sets. Following the five sessions, the trainers offered additional support to the participants in groups or one-to-one sessions.

The expectation was that each participant would then create their own action learning set with colleagues, which would meet regularly to go through several iterations of the action learning cycle to generate and share learning to support project improvements. As such, if ALNAP trained five people in an NGO on how to do action learning, the expectation is that they would each set up action learning sets with another five colleagues, leading to 30 people in total in that organisation using action learning approaches together in small groups of six.

2. Participants

Twenty-six individuals⁵⁷ from 12 organisations participated in the training. They were from three international NGOs and nine local or national NGOs. Participants were in DRC, Iraq, Jordan, Liberia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia/Somaliland and Syria. The people trained were all frontline staff, with most working in their own country and a minority of international staff. They had a range of roles within their organisations, including community health coordinators, MEAL staff and senior leadership (from local organisations).

Four of the organisations were part of the steering group who had helped create the project (three international and one national) but the others all applied via an open invitation from ALNAP.⁵⁸ Three workshops were provided for individuals from the same organisation and two workshops were for a mix of individuals from different organisations divided based on time zones – one workshop for participants from Africa and another for Asia and the Middle East.

3. Monitoring and evaluating the pilots

ALNAP engaged The Research People (TRP) as consultants to conduct the monitoring and evaluation data for the pilots, which was then analysed by ALNAP for this report. Data was collected for two purposes: 1) to inform changes to the action learning resource pack and training; and 2) to inform the two research questions outlined above. In answering the second question, the data collection focused on assessing the effect of the action learning training and subsequent implementation at three levels of change: participants' learning, their behaviour, and project/organisational results.

Data collection started just prior to the first training workshop in December 2020 and continued until the end of September 2021, which was five months after the final workshop finished. Data collected focused mainly on feedback from the participants (who went on to become 'learning leads' after the workshops) collected via surveys and interviews, but it also included observational feedback from the action learning trainers and one ALNAP researcher who took part in two of the workshops.

⁵⁷ This does not include the one participant from Bangladesh who dropped out.

⁵⁸ 86 people applied to the open training advert, which required an application form expressing interest and ability to attend the sessions.

All participants were requested to complete three surveys: one before the training; one after two sessions; and one at the end of all five sessions. The majority of participants responded to all three surveys but there was some survey fatigue with the numbers responding to each diminishing and only 18 of the participants responding to the final survey. In these surveys, questions were asked to assess participants' understanding of action learning, their perception of its value, information about how they had put the training into practice and opportunities for and barriers to using the technique in their organisations.

Post-training interviews were held with a sample of participants in the immediate weeks following the completion of their training, with the aim of speaking with two from each training session. The participants were chosen based on their engagement in the training or particularly interesting responses in the surveys (including negative ones). Nine of these interviews were conducted, with only one participant being available from the mixed training focused on African organisations. TRP also aimed to follow up with participants several weeks and months after the training was completed to understand more about how they had used action learning after the training. The engagement of many participants in that element of the M&E was low. While several participants indicated their intent to implement action learning with colleagues, it proved difficult to engage them in conversations over the subsequent six months on what they had implemented and how it had been received by colleagues. Only two post-implementation interviews were held with the learning leads and one interview with a colleague who had participated in the action learning session. Based on the limited engagement of some participants after the training, some of the positive results from the pilot reported after the training ended may be based on the experience of individuals who are active and committed to learning rather than being typical of all frontline staff.

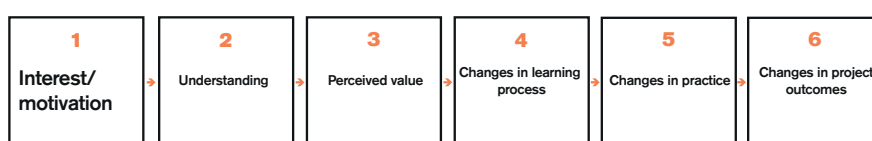
TRP and ALNAP also organised a focus group discussion with participants to discuss their experience of using the pack. Due to connectivity challenges among the majority of people who agreed to attend, this event became an interview with a single participant to discuss the resource pack and also provide feedback on their experience of using the pack to train colleagues on action learning.

In addition to the data in the surveys and interviews, the results draw on observations by one member of the ALNAP Secretariat who participated in two of the workshops (with one of the INGO groups and in one of the mixed-organisation groups) and feedback from the two action learning trainers from ALA. Additional components of monitoring and evaluation were originally planned, including interviews with members of the new 'action learning sets,' interviews with line managers of the participants and a sense-making workshop to discuss the most significant changes as a result of the action learning training. Due to challenges in accessing participants, even virtually, in the post-training period and the decision by many not to set up official 'sets', these additional M&E components were not conducted.

4. Analysis

The framework used to analyse both the survey and interview data is explained below.

This study examines several stages of the learning and implementation process to determine the usefulness of action learning to frontline humanitarian staff. It explores six components, including: interest/motivation; understanding; perceived value; changes in learning processes (individual and organisational); changes in practice; and changes in project outcomes. This is conceived as a loose causal chain of steps that is not necessarily consistently linear. For example, someone may perceive limited value in action learning after the training but may implement the approach to fulfil their commitment to the trainer, which may result in tangible project changes, thereby leading to a change in their perception of the value of the approach.



Interest/motivation

The initial level of interest and motivation to take part in the action learning training is an indication of how appropriate individuals and organisations thought action learning was to their learning needs. It is also a more general indication of how interested they are in strengthening learning process and opportunities for frontline staff irrespective of the particular method (i.e. action learning) being offered.

Understanding

For frontline humanitarian staff to implement a new learning technique, it is important that they can understand the principles of the approach and how to implement it. Ideally, the approach would also be relatively easy to understand for a range of staff who likely have limited time for learning and studying in their typically busy and sometimes unpredictable schedules.

Perceived value added of approach

If people do not perceive the value of action learning in the training, it is very unlikely they will go on to use it in their own work or to share it with colleagues.

Changes in learning processes

We expected action learning to have an effect on two levels of learning processes: the individual level as people began to think differently about their own learning and to feel empowered to make changes in their work based on that learning; and the organisational level as the participants put action learning into practice with colleagues.

Changes in practice

Following those shifts in individual or organisational processes, we expected people to take actions based on the knowledge that has been generated and shared through the action learning processes.

Changes in project outcomes

Finally, based on those actions we would hope to see positive project outcomes that are made during project implementation and during the design of new projects based on the previous learnings. These outcomes may be hard to track and attribute directly to the action learning processes. Indeed, any changes noted in the data – especially those related to positive outcomes for affected populations – will be self-reported by project participants and largely anecdotal.

Related ALNAP publications

- Action Learning & Tacit Knowledge: a mapping of approaches for humanitarian action (<https://www.alnap.org/node/67441>)
- Action Learning for Frontline Humanitarians: a resource pack (<https://www.alnap.org/node/84821>)
- Sharing Tacit Knowledge for Humanitarians: a resource pack (<https://www.alnap.org/node/84823>)



ALNAP

Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

alnap@alnap.org