

# Shifting Mindsets: Creating a more flexible humanitarian response

September 2019

**Around the world there are people affected by conflict and disaster who do not receive the aid they need – and many more receive no aid at all. Evaluations of humanitarian action show that this is not simply a problem of funding but a problem of flexibility.**

When populations move, or when crises take hold in new locations, it can take weeks or even months to initiate a humanitarian response or to shift aid to where it is needed most. As contexts change, or when faced with a new type of crisis altogether, humanitarians can apply the wrong approaches and be slow to adapt them. On the brink of a crisis, or as a population emerges from one, humanitarian actors are less and less visible. And when asked to deliver solutions that are context appropriate or to engage with the factors that sustain crises long-term, humanitarian programme designs often resort to ‘copy and paste’.

Once considered highly flexible, many humanitarian organisations are perceived to have grown increasingly bureaucratic and rigid. As a result, they are less suited to the highly dynamic nature of conflicts and disasters, and the complexity of protracted crises. Individual aid workers who try to do things differently must often work outside their organisation’s own systems. No longer engineered into the DNA of humanitarian agencies, flexibility happens only by breaking the rules.

The question is: what can those in humanitarian organisations do about this? It is a challenge that is particularly pressing for larger organisations, who must ask themselves how they can regain and grow their response-level flexibility. But it is also vital for smaller and possibly nimbler organisations to think about how they can protect the flexibility they have – and use it to greater effect.

## **A framework for thinking about flexibility in humanitarian response**

This is the final report of a two-year workstream on improving flexibility in humanitarian response. It offers a framework for thinking about flexibility in humanitarian response and sets out the evidence for three core pillars that support this flexibility, and which agencies need to address.

Flexibility is a journey. This report is intended, not as a guide, but as a companion for thinking on how to shift the flexibility capacities of humanitarian agencies to better deal with the challenges of modern crises.

### **Flexibility is multifaceted**

At their heart, flexible approaches are about humanitarian actors doing things differently when situations and contexts change, or when they learn more about what a situation requires. This makes it seem easy to be flexible and most readers will feel that flexibility is just common sense – which, in essence, it is.





Flexibility can refer to internal and external processes, can cut across multiple organisational functions, and can be directed for very different purposes. Photo credit: EU ECHO/Save the Children

But putting these simple ideas into practice is extraordinarily challenging. This is because flexibility is a multi-faceted capacity that can look very different across organisations and environments. Flexibility can refer to internal and external processes, can cut across multiple organisational functions, and can be directed for very different purposes. It is important therefore to take an intentional, strategic approach to building response-level flexibility.

### **Organisations need to deal with the flexibility paradox**

Evidence shows that highly flexible organisations rely on some degree of structure and formality. Humanitarian agencies need to tackle this apparent paradox and recognise the balancing and trade-offs that being highly flexible requires. For example, organisations that have a high degree of geographical flexibility may need to limit what services they offer; meanwhile, organisations that offer high levels of service flexibility will need to put in place

certain processes and routines that allow them to assure quality across a diverse offering. Flexibility requires prioritisation. Choosing the focus for an organisation's flexibility should be a strategic decision that considers many factors.

### **Understand different triggers for flexibility**

Broadly, there are two types of change that organisations face in a crisis: known or reasonably expected change, and unknown or uncertain changes (which may also include new learning about programme performance or feedback from crisis-affected populations). These different types of change each require a different strategy for building flexibility: anticipatory (for better-known changes) and adaptive (for unknown and uncertain changes). At the country level, organisations should be able to apply a combination of anticipatory and adaptive approaches, to be flexible to their particular operating context.

### **Be clear about the area of focus for response-level flexibility**

It is important that humanitarian organisations clarify what aspect of the humanitarian response will change in response to contextual change or new learning. There are five main areas on which a humanitarian organisation may focus: where and how aid is being delivered (delivery); to whom (targeting); what materials are provided (output); what overarching sectors or solutions are being offered (service) and what broader response objectives and roles are being achieved (strategy).

### **Decide how flexible to be**

Flexibility consists of range and speed: how many potential options an organisation can execute and in what time. Different time scales will be appropriate for different aspects of a response and, similarly, organisations may choose to reduce their range in one aspect in order to expand it in another.



## How to create more flexible humanitarian responses

Three main pillars support flexible humanitarian responses: organisational systems, organisational culture and people, and funding.

### Creating more flexible organisational systems for programming, supply chain and monitoring

Organisational systems within humanitarian agencies are increasingly designed for top-down control rather than for enhancing response-level flexibility. But this research identifies a number of steps that senior managers in international organisations can take to change their systems for more flexible responses. It finds that there are three systems that are particularly salient to flexible humanitarian response – programming, supply chain and procurement, and monitoring – and that flexible humanitarian country teams demonstrate greater integration and communication across these three systems.

### Supporting an organisational culture and teams for flexible response

Organisational culture and the skills of field-level staff need to be conducive to making changes in a timely manner, by using critical thinking and being prepared to question and revise assumptions about what's working. Cultivating the right culture and mindset for flexible action is difficult: often these do not rely on a system or a process, but rather on interpersonal relationships and a set of often unspoken rules and ways of working. Organisations can address this by recruiting people with different skillsets and facilitating cross-team conversations at country level that shift the working culture to one that seeks out and supports timely changes to programmes, rather than inhibits it.

### Using flexible funding wisely

Recent reforms to humanitarian funding offer an opportunity to rethink how humanitarian action is planned, monitored and implemented. However, doing this requires both donors and implementing

agencies to do much more. Donors need to continue trialling different forms of flexible funding, as well as supporting the exploration of accountability and monitoring and evaluation systems that complement rather than inhibit useful changes to programming based on learning or context.

Humanitarian agencies need to engage seriously in rethinking their systems and practices to give greater decision-making power to their field teams, local partners and crisis-affected communities. They also need to better demonstrate the difference that unearmarked and flexible funds make to their operational flexibility – and how this in turn leads to tangible improvements for people in crisis.

## Shifting mindsets and stepping into the future

Ultimately, humanitarian agencies must shift their mindsets and become more flexible or face growing challenges in meeting humanitarian needs amid crises that are more dynamic, more diverse and more drawn out. This report aims to stimulate discussion within those humanitarian organisations that recognise the need to support field staff and partners to anticipate change and adapt their operations and programming based on new learning.

Greater response-level flexibility begins with conversations at the top of humanitarian organisations. These conversations must focus on the realities that frontline staff are facing and the kind of humanitarian organisations they want to be. This is the future that agencies know they must step into. ALNAP's work on flexibility and adaptiveness offers a supportive framework for thinking about how they will do this – and what it will take.

ALNAP's new study *Shifting Mindsets: Creating a more flexible humanitarian response* and its audio companions are available at [alnap.org/shifting-mindsets](https://alnap.org/shifting-mindsets).

## CONTACT

ALNAP Senior Research Fellow Alice Obrecht  
E-mail: [a.obrecht@alnap.org](mailto:a.obrecht@alnap.org)