Section 3: Systems for greater flexibility

Shifting Mindsets:

Creating a more flexible

humanitarian response

In this section:

The bibliography is available at alnap.org/help-library/shifting-mindsets-biblio.

Shifting Mindsets is formed of parts and sections which can be read independently.

Part I outlines a framework for thinking about flexibility for humanitarian organisations at the level of crisis response.

Part II is for readers who want to start making their own humanitarian responses more flexible. It outlines different 'starting points' based on the three distinct pillars that flexibility relies upon according to this study. Each section can be read independently, and in any order.
Turn to:
Section 3 on organisational systems to support flexibility
Section 4 on culture and people to support flexibility
Section 5 on funding to support flexibility

Key to design features

▷ | **Audio companions** |

Section 3: Systems for greater flexibility

3.1 Flexible logistics, supply chain and procurement systems

Providing humanitarian aid generally depends upon the movement of material resources, be these cash or in-kind items, materials provided directly to aid recipients or used to support programme activities. Building flexibility into how these materials are sourced and moved is essential for humanitarian action to respond to new learning or changes in its environment. And so humanitarian logistics and procurement are just as vital to organisational flexibility as programming or monitoring.

Humanitarian logistics is:

> The process of planning, implementing and controlling the efficient, cost-effective flow and storage of goods and materials as well as related information, from the point of origin to the point of consumption for the purpose of meeting the end beneficiary's requirements.
>
> **(Thomas and Mizushima, 2005: 60)**

It encompasses supply chain management and is related closely to the financial function of procurement.

Supply chain management, logistics and procurement processes have a significant influence on the performance of humanitarian aid (Thomas, 2003; Mwanjumwa and Simba, 2015) and there is evidence both within and outside the humanitarian sector that agility and adaptiveness in supply chain and procurement systems are linked to better performance. For example, some suggest that agility and adaptiveness may be more important than efficiency when it comes to influencing firm competitiveness in the private sector (Lee, 2004) and response time and quality of materials in the humanitarian sector (Dubey and Gunasekeren, 2016).

Yet humanitarian programme staff commonly consider supply chain systems and procurement processes to be more of a hindrance to greater responsiveness and effectiveness rather than an enabler of flexibility (Mwanjumwa and Simba, 2015). This was borne out in ALNAP's field

research, during which many of the examples of barriers to flexibility and adaptation described by programme staff centred around their organisation's procurement and logistics processes.

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3.1.1 How logistics, supply chain and procurement can inhibit flexibility

Generally, supply chain, logistics and procurement functions can support changes in a response reasonably well if anticipatory strategies are used. This means identifying potential changes up front and preparing for them with open contract agreements or the use of modular components that can be pre-positioned. However, when it comes to changes that necessitate adaptive strategies – namely unexpected changes or new learning about a programme's effectiveness – supply chain, logistics and procurement functions were found to inhibit flexible operations and programmes in the following areas.

Delivery times. If a programme is changed in a way that necessitates different quantities or types of materials, this needs to be procured either locally or globally. Stock availability is a significant problem, as well as cost and time, due to the difficulty of transporting goods to regions amid a crisis. Procuring materials locally may be faster but can be limited if supply chains have been significantly impacted by a disaster or crisis, and key informants also noted that the quality of materials can be more variable.

Standardisation. Humanitarian response supply chains are built around what is considered typical or standard for addressing a set of pre-defined humanitarian needs, rather than the preferences of individual aid recipients. They operate in a way that is similar to 'make-to-stock' in a manufacturing supply chain (see Box 3), meaning that aid recipients have little ability to shape the product or service they are receiving. Humanitarian organisations can therefore fall into delivering solutions in silo rather than addressing needs more holistically and are often limited in their ability to tailor responses to specific demands.

Standardising the basic items provided as emergency relief offers many benefits: it makes it easier to assure quality and for agencies to share stock with one another. Standardisation supports pre-positioning of relief items, which is linked to faster response times (Stumpf et al., 2017). However, the reliance on standardised stock to speed up response times means that when more bespoke or customised items are requested, it can take considerably longer to source these. Attempts to apply more of user-centred design approach to humanitarian aid – that is, one that is more customisable

and tailored to the aid recipient – have faced limitations based on agency procurement policies (Bourne, 2019; see also 3.1.2.3).

Compliance procedures and processing times. Requests to change the quantity of stock or the type of items in an intervention can take weeks to process within an organisation's systems. If logistics, supply chain and procurement staff do not know the best way to speed up this process, or are not motivated to do so (see also the following two points), then this can contribute to programme staff avoiding improvements or necessary changes to their intervention, out of concern for the time and effort involved in making the change happen.

Box 3: Decoupling points in supply chains

The concept of decoupling points, and push-pull systems, plays an important role in understanding the linkages between supply chain systems and the ability of humanitarian agencies to customise and tailor support based on feedback from crisis-affected people. All supply chain systems use a combination of 'push' and 'pull' systems: 'The demand process is driven by customer orders, and this "pulls" the product through the supply chain. The supply process is driven by forecasts, with the intention of "pushing" product to a stock point in anticipation of future demand' (Mizushima 2019).

The decoupling point refers to where the push and pull sides of the chain meet, as it 'decouples the order-driven and forecast-driven activity.' (ibid.) The location of the decoupling point is an indication of the degree to which a business exposes its supply chain to variation from the customer.

Many humanitarian organisations operate a system that is initially highly 'push' – like made-to-stock (MTS) – with the decoupling point all the way down at the aid recipient level. In the aftermath of a crisis, or as a project continues, humanitarian supply chains introduce more 'pull', using a make-to-order (MTO) approach in which special items can be procured, although these still need to be pre-approved in an organisation's catalogue. In humanitarian programmes it is rare to see the decoupling point high up the supply chain, where aid recipients can shape the design of the solution provided.

While agencies have developed their procurement systems in line with donor requirements, these systems may err on the side of greater rigidity and diligence than what is required in reality. For example, attempts made by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) to streamline procurement processes using pre-approved Humanitarian Procurement Centers (HPCs) were hampered by 'unnecessarily complex procurement procedures' that continued to be used by DG ECHO partners even when these procedures were not

required as part of the funding agreement (European Union, 2019: 32). And if procurement staff are not familiar or confident in a donor relationship, they may apply due diligence procedures that are not actually required to implement changes.

Capacities of logistics, supply chain and procurement staff. Professionalisation of logistics and supply chain functions has been a longstanding gap in the humanitarian sector (Fritz Institute, 2019; European Union, 2019). This is being exacerbated by the rise in cash-based programming, a modality that requires a different set of skills than those required for managing vehicle fleets or arranging food shipments. The result is that these staff may not have the skills, knowledge or experience they need to make significant changes across modalities, and to make them swiftly and confidently.

Mindsets of logistics, supply chain and procurement staff. The mindsets of logistics, supply chain and procurement staff may be oriented towards efficiently executing an agreed plan, rather than being the sort of mindset that supports change and improvement within programmes. Some of this has to do with accountability – plans create clear expectations against which staff can be held accountable and changes can be disruptive and imply that mistakes have been made. But it also has to do with timing: programme staff can communicate changes poorly, at late stages, and can tend to regard logistics, supply chain and procurement staff as 'support' or 'back office' roles that are secondary to programming. This can further entrench these operating mindsets and contributes to a lack of shared ownership for achieving country or programme objectives.

3.1.2 Creating more flexible supply chain, logistics and procurement systems

When thinking about the flexibility of their supply chain, humanitarian organisations need to consider their capacity to:

- change location and mode of delivery (Flex area 1: delivery)
- offer a wider range of products (Flex area 3: product)
- change or adjust what is delivered within a modality or sector depending on context (Flex areas 3 and 4: product and services)
- change programme modality or sector (Flex area 4: services)
- change or manage multiple supply chains simultaneously in order to deliver different services or adopt a different role within a context (Flex areas 4 and 5: services and role/strategy).

In the business sector, supply chain flexibility has received significant attention over the past decade as markets have become more complex and competitive, with more 'dynamic demand': customers demanding greater variety, in faster delivery times, while maintaining lower loyalty to individual brands or service providers (Christopher et al., 2006; Verdu, 2009; Daaboul and Da Cunha, 2015).

Because humanitarian logistics and supply chain systems have been designed to deal with dynamic demand in terms of the location and mode of delivery (and to some degree in terms of product mix, or variety), there have been attempts to transfer lessons from the humanitarian sector to the private sector when it comes to these types of flexibility (Charles et al., 2010).

Equally, the private sector's work on tackling the management of multiple supply chains to achieve more complex forms of service and strategy level flexibility may offer lessons for humanitarian organisations – particularly as they move towards combined cash-based and in-kind services (Tomasini and Van Wassenhove, 2009; Beamon and Balcik, 2014; Fritz Institute, 2019).

Designing supply chains and procurement processes for greater flexibility is a significant undertaking and will need to be tailored to individual agencies. Supply chain flexibility can be built through anticipatory or adaptive strategies (see more on each in subsections Think strategically about logistics, supply chain and procurement and Invest in staff capacity and skills respectively). Anticipatory strategies, typically in the form of preparedness planning, are much more common in current practice (though collective approaches need to be strengthened to maximise efficiency and system-wide flexibility). Adaptive strategies are rare but will be necessary to support the approaches described in 3.2 Programme design and programme cycle management.

ALNAP's workshop and subsequent interviews with supply chain and procurement professionals identified six key things that agencies will need to do if they are to create greater flexibility in these systems, whether anticipatory or adaptive strategies are chosen. It then provides examples of specific anticipatory and adaptive approaches to logistics, supply chain and procurement.

Think strategically about logistics, supply chain and procurement.

Strategy is critical to achieving supply chain agility and adaptiveness. In some cases, the presence of strategy and senior management commitment to supply chain capacity have been the primary determinant of agility and adaptiveness and can amplify or block the effectiveness of other supporting factors (Dubey et al., 2017). In the business sector, taking an intentional and strategic approach to logistics and supply chain management is a common characteristic across firms considered to be highly flexible and adaptive to consumer demand (Christopher and Holweg, 2011).

In humanitarian agencies, a high proportion of funding is spent on supply chain: a study of multiple organisations found 60% to 80% (Van Wassenhove, 2006), while an internal study for ACF found an organisational average of 69% (Stumpf et al., 2017). Yet, despite this supply chain and

logistics systems receive surprisingly little strategic attention in most humanitarian organisations (Thomas and Mizushima, 2005; Schulz and Heigh, 2009; Tomasini and Van Wassenhove, 2009; Blecken, 2010). If humanitarian actors are serious about developing greater capacities for anticipatory and adaptive programming, this will need to change.

As agencies engage more and more in cash-based programming – and discover that they need to maintain both cash and non-cash based modalities to respond to market changes – the implications of the strategic thinking gap are increasingly being felt (Dubey et al., 2017; Christopher and Holweg, 2011). To help humanitarian actors think more strategically about supply chain functions and the necessary staff capacities for multiple modalities, Fritz Institute developed[1] an operational design training for humanitarian actors. Organisational design processes are generally an overlooked area in humanitarian agencies and humanitarian studies but absolutely critical to achieving greater flexibility within a response.

Invest in staff capacity and skills. Organisations need to invest in their logistics, supply chain and procurement personnel through capacity building and training opportunities (ibid.). This should be informed by consideration of what skills will be required to deliver a more flexible logistics, supply chain and procurement function. For example, the skills needed to manage warehouses and vehicle fleets are generally considered to be different from the skills needed to monitor markets and use analytics software to manage complex and multiple supply chains. The shift in some organisations of responsibility for cash-based programming from programme teams to logistics, supply chain and procurement teams has prompted a review of recruitment profiles and raised the question of whether it is possible to construct a 'hybrid' logistics profile for both cash- and in-kind modalities (ibid.). It is yet unclear if these skillsets can be adequately trained or whether they require a more specialised background.

Connect the feedback loop between crisis-affected people and logistics and procurement staff. In the humanitarian sector, supply chain and logistics functions can sometimes feel removed from aid recipients, as the primary point of contact for aid recipients tend to be programming staff. Logistics and supply chain staff often encounter requests for changes from programme staff in an ad hoc way, with urgent deadlines. Logistics, supply chain and procurement key informants described several examples of making changes to kits on request from programme staff – typically based on needs assessment data or feedback from crisis-affected people – but never hearing back on what difference these changes had on the quality of aid. From their perspective, such changes introduce inefficiencies without clear gains, because the feedback on how this has improved performance is never channelled back to them.

1   In partnership with the Cash Assistance Learning Platform.

This speaks to an important but often missed 'loop' in collecting and acting on feedback from aid recipients: it is not only important to 'close the loop' with aid recipients, by showing how feedback has been actioned, it is equally important to close the loop *internally* to show the difference that responding to aid recipient feedback can make. If feedback doesn't reach logistics, supply chain and procurement staff, they can perceive the experience of making changes as a costly enterprise that uses time and resources without adding tangible value to a response.

Consider customisation. Supply chains are built around what is considered to be typical or standard for addressing a set of pre-defined humanitarian needs, rather than the preferences of individual aid recipients, which means they can fall into delivering solutions in silo rather than being configured to address needs more holistically, or tailor response to specific needs or requests.

How customised humanitarian aid should be expected to become is still a matter of debate (ALNAP, 2019). There have been attempts to apply make humanitarian action more customisable and responsive, notably by using user-centred design in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programming, but these have faced limitations due to agency procurement policies (Bourne, 2019). Cash-based assistance can go some way to addressing this, but its ability to offer aid recipients more customisation and control is constrained by the diversity of options on the local market and what form of cash-based assistance is provided (e.g. vouchers offer less customisation).

There are two ways in which humanitarian agencies can think about designing supply chain flexibility to better respond to the diversity and

Photo credit: European Union 2019/Christian Jepsen.

complexity of crisis-affected people's needs. The first is to consider mass customisation (see the following section) and other similar approaches that introduce more 'pull' across the supply chain. A second approach is to 'design from the customer backwards' and apply customer segmentation techniques to understand different aid recipient profiles and the kind of aid that will be most relevant (Gattorna, 2015). Existing data on aid recipient preferences and context specific adaptations from previous responses can be used for this.

Use more integrated planning approaches between logistics and programme staff. Project and programme plans create clear, shared expectations across programme and logistics, supply chain and procurement staff. These plans can be important for this latter group particularly, as it creates clarity and a certain level of stability in terms of roles as well as what and when things will happen. Making adjustments within a humanitarian response can disrupt these expectations and, if not communicated and communicated well, can lead to staff becoming resistant to certain change.

This is linked to the importance of good human resource management and team building, which we explore in the section on people and culture, but it can also be addressed through better planning processes that:

1. bring together logistics, supply chain and procurement staff and programmes and monitoring staff together at the outset of projects
2. create clear expectations that changes to project delivery should be encouraged when needed, and why this is the case
3. set clear rules for communicating changes between teams to minimise stress-based reactions.

Use data and analysis more and with purpose. Agencies should improve their use of data and analysis to build supply chain capacity for multiple programme modalities and to maintain full visibility of the supply chain across the organisation. Supply chain visibility refers to the ability to see where all materials and products are along a supply chain at any given moment and to monitor this in real time (Lee, 2004). It helps to improve response flexibility by helping organisations source, locate and move resources more quickly and efficiently up and down the supply chain.

Visibility relies on connectivity – all suppliers and partners being well connected throughout the chain – and transparency provided through high quality information-sharing systems. Measures to assess supply chain visibility include the 'tracking of location and inventory, temperature monitoring, tracing of product information, information sharing, and decision-making support' (Privett, 2016) and the visibility of demand levels throughout the supply chain (Dubey et al., 2015).

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Humanitarian agencies have increasingly turned to software solutions to help track orders and products across their supply chain around the world. There has also been a greater move towards the use of radio-frequency identification (RFID) and barcodes for tracking warehouse stocks. But given the types of contexts in which humanitarians operate, it can be risky to over rely on technological solutions to supply chain visibility given the infrastructure needed to support them (Privett, 2016).

But visibility alone is not enough to support flexible operational capacity (Wei and Wang, 2010). An organisation may have good supply chain visibility, but they cannot use this for the flexibility of their responses if they do not have leadership-level commitment to managing supply chains strategically (Dubey et al., 2017; see also 3.1.2.1 'Think strategically'). Moreover, supply chain visibility should be used for specific purposes – namely supporting coordination, integration and learning about stocks and flows. When it is only used to respond quickly to environmental changes ('reactive strategies') it will not contribute to better humanitarian performance (Wei and Wang, 2010).

Photo credit: European Union 2019/Christian Jepsen.

Anticipatory strategies for humanitarian logistics and supply chain flexibility

Preparedness measures. Mass stocking and pre-positioning of goods are common examples of creating greater preparedness capacity in humanitarian logistics and supply chains. Pre-positioned items have historically been difficult to fund, although this method is considered to offer potential cost savings for humanitarian response (Stumpf et al., 2017). The past decade has seen some movement towards collaborative or collective approaches to pre-positioning, such as sharing of regional or global warehouses and sharing stock.

Beyond pre-positioning, other ways to strengthen the preparedness of logistics functions include the creation of customs agreements with governments before a crisis or disaster. Toward this end, the Global Logistics Cluster (GLC) is currently leading a 'preparedness initiative' to 'strengthen national supply chain resilience and promote a common methodology towards logistics preparedness globally', with 15 participating pilot countries as of the beginning of 2019 (Global Logistics Cluster, 2019).

Modular approaches. Common component or modular approaches are those that seek to create commonality in the materials used across a range of goods and services (Pujawan and Santosa, 2014). Full use of component commonality would mean that, for example, a country office has a complete overview of the different varieties of NFI kits or food kits it can construct, using a common set of materials. The country office can then maximise its range while minimising cost by ordering common components in bulk and smaller volumes of more specific items that are requested by some crisis-affected people but not all – e.g. soap as a common component and menstrual hygiene pads as a more specific item.

Flexible supplier contracts. The use of more open-ended contracts with suppliers creates a flexible source of supply that saves time on procurement and bids. Standing arrangements with suppliers tend to happen only at the global level; local-level procurement can take more time because there are no pre-established contracts with local suppliers and a bid process must be used. This could be addressed through better preparedness by agencies in mapping and identifying potential suppliers in high-risk countries in advance of a crisis. More work is needed to understand the best approaches to creating long-term flexible supplier contracts given the mix of short- and long-term funding with which most agencies must work.

Adaptive strategies for humanitarian logistics and supply chain flexibility

Postponement/delayed differentiation. Postponement is a long-held strategy in the business sector for improving flexibility in supply chain. It refers to 'postponing the task of differentiating a product for a specific customer until the latest possible point in the supply network' (Feitzinger and Lee, 1997: 1). This allows for faster and more cost-effective customisation 'once actual consumer demand is known' (Oracle, n.d.: 1) In recent years, ShelterBox

has adopted a postponement approach to the assembly of its kits, moving supplies to the country level before assembling its boxes based on orders in-country. This helps reduce costs and save time from shipping supplies to a regional depot and then onto the crisis-affected country. While ShelterBox does not offer significant customisation of its boxes, in theory this strategy could also be used to customise the items in each kit at country level, based on need.

Mass customisation. Consumers used to be sorted into three categories: those who wanted a product quickly, those who wanted it cheaply, and those who wanted it customised. As these demands merged over the past 15 years, the business sector has looked to develop approaches that allow them to customise more quickly and at better cost for consumers who 'want it all.' Mass customisation is one such approach, which 'relates to the ability to provide customized products or services through flexible processes in high volumes and at reasonably low costs.' (Thoben, 2003: 71). This can be useful for humanitarian action, where a perennial challenge to using feedback from affected populations is the timing and cost of customising humanitarian action to specific individuals or groups of people (Donini and Brown, 2014).

Mass customisation has been recommended, though not yet applied, in the humanitarian sector (ICRC, 2018: 79) and could be particularly appropriate for shelter or WASH items. With mass customisation, lower costs are achieved by systematising the process of customisation or by giving the customer the ability to self-customise. Examples of mass customisation in the business sector include the development of 'smart' light fixtures, where customers can programme lightbulbs to their own specifications (brightness, colour, what flipping a switch does) using a mobile app provided along with the sale of the lightbulb.

3.2 Programme design and programme cycle management

Programming is where a humanitarian actor's flexibility is most visible externally. Each humanitarian agency has their own approach to organising their programme function. And though each will also have different views on approaches to programme cycle management, they tend to broadly follow the stages outlined in the IASC Programme Cycle Management of assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

3.2.1 How programme design and management can inhibit flexibility
There are five ways in which current approaches to programme cycle management can inhibit flexibility.

Lack of adequate attention to response design. Response design – the design of interventions and selection of programme logics – has been an overlooked area in humanitarian research and organisational policy (Maxwell et al., 2013; Campbell, 2018: 34). In practice, service design is not so much an intentional decision-making process but rather the outcome of different organisational and contextual pressures.

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In-country, many staff described response design as a mechanistic process, where a limited range of services or products are applied to the needs presented by crisis affected communities, potentially with some minor changes to individual items or the way in which services are delivered, based on consultation. When asked how they selected service designs, many organisations in DRC and Kenya described these as the result of a combination of existing programme design models used by their organisation, cluster coordination discussions and donor priorities.

Moreover, while many country staff say that their programme designs are influenced by aid recipient consultation, these consultations often take place only after the proposal has been agreed with the donor, at which point very few alterations can be made.

Standardisation. Several larger humanitarian organisations have standardised their programme designs, typically through HQ-based technical advisors. Standardisation of programme design is motivated by a desire to better assure the quality of programming across a diverse range of settings, and by the belief that programming should be based on the best available evidence for what works to reduce mortality and morbidity for people in crisis. It is also driven by the use of common performance indicators by some donors, which can enable aggregation and consistent comparison of humanitarian programmes. Finally, standardisation has played an important role in getting overlooked needs – such as those related to protection – recognised as fundamental to humanitarian action by placing protection services in the standard emergency response package.

While it may have benefits, standardisation removes decision-making from field and country teams and reduces an agency's ability to significantly change or adapt programme design in response to contextual factors or more meaningful consultation with crisis-affected populations. There is also limited evidence supporting the benefits of standardisation compared to context-to-context variation across programme designs. Standardisation may be more useful when it occurs within a single context, through coordinated multi-agency processes that identify the most appropriate programme designs for that context.

Project- and sector-based. Humanitarian programming is organised according to discrete projects and often to specific sectors (e.g. nutrition, WASH). While some problems faced by crisis-affected people fall within a single sector, others can cross multiple sectors. For example, in an evaluation of an otherwise flexible shelter project in Ethiopia, the lead agency was unable to respond to aid recipient complaints about mosquitoes and other pests as these were deemed 'water, sanitation and hygiene' or 'non-food-items' concerns and therefore outside the shelter project's scope (Mutunga et al., 2015). Creating a wider range of action is core to flexibility in humanitarian response: if the problems that humanitarian actors are trying to address do not map onto the ways in which they structure and organise their solutions, this can limit their ability to respond.

Activity-oriented (rather than outcome-oriented). Humanitarian staff may not see that a programme needs to change if they are not looking at its outcomes. Much of humanitarian programming and its reporting is

oriented around 'reaching' target numbers of crisis-affected people with goods and activities, rather than reporting on the outcomes achieved for these individuals. Seeing whether outcomes are being achieved can provide crucial information for understanding whether change is required to an intervention: this is strongly supported by having clearly defined and observable outcome indicators.

Programme cycle management tools do not capture change. The challenge with many programme cycle management frameworks is that they do not reflect the process of making changes to programming within a programme cycle – something which is both desirable in many cases and also a reality in practice. As a result, many changes that are made to programmes during implementation go uncaptured and learning from these changes is not transferred after the project ends.

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3.2.2 Creating more flexible programme design and management

General considerations

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Decentralising decision-making is about really acknowledging that one, we don't know the answers. We're not experts. Every problem on the ground is different and needs a different solution, needs local or detailed understanding that can only be received at a local level, that we don't have the communication skills to just extract data and information and make correct decisions. From that you learn to pass power down the line and try to have your organisation act autonomously at times, at different levels, to find better results.

Workshop participant

Flexible programming looks different depending on whether anticipatory or adaptive strategies are used. However, there are some characteristics that cut across both good anticipatory and adaptive strategies. Generally, flexible programming:

▪ creates meaningful space for problems and objectives to be defined locally, either by local humanitarian actors or with communities themselves
▪ uses existing experience and evidence but also clearly identifies areas where judgement must be taken in situ, and identifies unknown or uncertain aspects of a theory of change or intervention design up front

- assumes that changes will need to be made (these are not 'exceptions to the plan') and encourages ceasing activities that are not seen to be working
- is outcome-oriented, meaning that it seeks to achieve outcomes and objectives, and maintains openness as to which activities or outputs will be best placed to do this (this is particularly true in relation to adaptive strategies)
- is informed by good response analysis and design (particularly for anticipatory strategies)
- is well-resourced for monitoring and small operational research activities, to inform learning throughout the programme
- uses decentralised decision-making as much as possible[2]
- uses facilitation and collaboration with other actors and with communities to expand the range of flexibility: is not simply 'us doing it all'.

Depending on the nature of the crisis and the urgency of need, it is likely that organisations will need to apply different programme management strategies at different periods of time. Participants at the 2018 ALNAP workshop discussed the potential for 'staging' flexible programming, either by combining different strategies, or by starting with traditional programme management before a transition to more adaptive approaches.

The remainder of this section describes anticipatory and adaptive approaches to programming, then provides a few examples of how these approaches might be used in combination with one another or in combination with standard programming approaches.

Anticipatory strategies for programming

Contingency and scenario-based planning. When the triggers for change and the best response designs are well known, flexibility across different activities or operational modes can, to some extent, be facilitated through planning and preparation. Preparedness and contingency planning fall within this category and they are the most common approach to increasing the range of action in humanitarian agencies. This is unsurprising: contingency planning allows agencies to become more open to change while still maintaining a strong risk management approach.

The idea of having a range of scenarios then we hope is to give actors the idea that, okay you might be programming and you might be doing your contingency plans for the most likely scenario, but is your programming flexible enough? How would you tweak your programming if this scenario happened? Or if that scenario happened? Or if there was a sort of spike in wheat prices because we didn't get flour into the country, could you adapt?

Workshop participant

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2   The evidence is mixed as to whether decentralised decision-making supports greater flexibility: while this is true for some functions, it is not the case for others. Instead, regardless of where the locus of decision making is placed, it is most important to have streamlined processes that can be fast, and clarity on what can be changed and by whom.

Good anticipatory programming approaches:

- identify measurable triggers for crisis and/or change in a context – typically using historical data and scenario building
- use this data and analysis to plan a range of specific actions that can be taken: single actions are not prescribed, but a menu of options is provided for decision makers to quickly assess and select
- identify the resources required for a menu of actions and pre-position or mobilise these resources in advance
- are revised regularly based on new information and analysis from responses.

Contingency and preparedness planning have been used around in the humanitarian sector for decades. But these approaches have historically lacked specific triggers and defined action plans, making them difficult to implement (Levine et al., 2010). More recently, there has been some progress in improving the quality of contingency planning, as well as the use of anticipatory analytics – especially for early action (e.g. so-called 'forecast-based early action' (Tanner et al., 2019)). There have also been efforts to improve the way in which humanitarian actors create and use scenarios to map out potential situations and increase their response capacity to handle these: resources include ACAPS's Technical Briefing on Scenario Building (ACAPS, 2016), and examples of this being put into practice include World Visions' Fragile Contexts Programme Approach, where country teams use context analysis to project three potential scenarios and plan different interventions for each.

But acting on contingency plans with timeliness continues to be a challenge, in large part due to financing. In cases of rapid onset emergencies such as floods, donors and agencies may disagree on whether the trigger for funding has been satisfied. Meanwhile, in slow onset emergencies such as droughts, humanitarian donors remain reluctant to fund early action and there have been significant delays in accessing and implementing contingency funds from development actors (see Obrecht, 2019).

While in principle contingency planning enables organisations to engage in a wider range of actions through pre-planning, there are two important caveats. First, by relying on planning, these approaches risk increased rigidity and non-responsiveness to the context when a crisis unfolds in unexpected ways. For many sectors, contingency plans should be paired with adaptive management approaches, such as a single-stream iterative approach (see the following sections), to allow for changes to targeting or services based on real-time information.

Second, experiences in applying contingency plans in drought settings show that such plans could improve how they approach response analysis and design. In particular, these plans could support a more nuanced and phased approach, in which different stages of a crisis are planned for separately, with specific actions (Bailey et al., 2018). An example of what this might look like can be seen in the IMAM Surge model, developed by Concern Worldwide and applied to health facilities in Kenya by the Ministry of Health, in partnership with UNICEF (Box 4).

Box 4: IMAM Surge: a contingency approach to changing demands for health services

The Integrated Monitoring for Acute Malnutrition (IMAM) Surge model is an approach to nutrition programming, run through the Kenyan Ministry of Health in partnership with UNICEF and Concern Worldwide, that offers a potentially valuable model for flexible health programming in times of shock or stress. The model works at county level, setting indicators to monitor both the health of the population (demand) as well as the resources and capacities of the health institutions needed to address malnutrition (supply). Both of these can vary, and the IMAM surge approach begins by recognising that adequate preparedness must take account of the specific capacities of each health facility and create specific contingency plans based on these (Ministry of Health, 2016).

Indicators for monitoring are established in each county, and thresholds are set for each health facility to understand what constitutes an 'alert' or 'alarm' situation. For example, if a facility's capacity is low, a 10% increase in intake may be enough to push it from 'alert' into 'alarm', whereas a better-equipped facility can absorb this increase without it becoming an emergency.

For each phase, specific actions are outlined for the health professionals to take, starting with mitigation to crisis response.

Early use of the model is promising. The IMAM Surge was singled out as UNICEF's most important contribution in an evaluation of the agency's 2016–2017 drought response and was noted as an example for early action that other sectors should attempt to follow (Hailey et al., 2018). To work well, such a model needs to be integrated across all levels of Kenya's health system.

Modular programming. Common component or modular programming refers to the offering of a basic service that can be adapted or customised by supplementing this with 'add-on' features or services if a context changes. Modular programming is a predictive strategy because it identifies and resources all possible components or varieties of a programme in advance and establishes clear expectations for when modifications to a programme can be made.

As discussed in section 3.1, modularity is a concept used by flexible supply chains in the business sector as a way of increasing agility and adaptability while keeping costs fairly stable. In the humanitarian sector, a modular approach is sometimes used for NFI kits, in which a standard basic package is offered and then adapted within-context with specific items identified through needs assessments (see Anticipatory strategies for logistics, supply chain and procurement).

Multi-sectoral programming is another area where modular approaches can be used – some agencies using multi-sectoral programming have initially offered a set of core services, for example in nutrition and health, which is then expanded to include protection or WASH programming for communities with those specific additional needs.

> ### Box 5: MSF Spain's modular approach to population-centred mobile health units
>
> Faced with the bombing of hospitals in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Spain has moved to a modular approach when it comes to providing medical care in these regions. Instead of operating out of large hospitals – which can easily become targets for bombings – MSF Spain has created modular mobile health units which consist of a 'minimum package' of an intensive care unit and a surgery unit, that can be expanded to include maternity services or immunisation, if the security context allows.
>
> These additional services are part of MSF's standard repertoire, and discussions of whether they can be adapted to an ongoing response are based on a shared risk and security framework discussed within MSF.

▷ **Listen to Teresa Sancristoval, Operations Director, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) talking about MSF's modular approach to health services.**

Adaptive strategies for programming

Single-stream iterative. Some approaches to adaptive programming work with a single intervention or programme logic, which is then changed and iterated based on learning within a project or changes in the operating environment. This results in a single intervention or service being delivered and then changed over time, unlike the portfolio and experimental approaches, which run multiple activities or services to address the same problem simultaneously.

Iterative programmes look the closest to how traditional humanitarian programmes are managed, and some field teams may already feel as though they are engaged in adaptive programming as a part of routine response. But there are several important differences between a single-stream iterative programme and the way in which many humanitarian programmes are managed currently:

- In traditional humanitarian programmes, changes are considered a *deviation* from the plan, or an *exception to the rule*; in single-stream iterative programmes, plans are understood as a set of working hypotheses rather than perfect predictions, and changes are expected and encouraged rather than seen as exceptions (Wild et al., 2015; Goeldner Byrne et al., 2016).
- Changes made to traditional humanitarian programmes tend to be ad hoc and highly reactive, whereas single-stream iterative programmes will have a strong internal system or set of practices for capturing learning and using this to inform changes. These mechanisms can vary widely in their formality but will be intentionally and explicitly included in the management of the programme (Ramalingam et al., 2019).
- Changes made to traditional humanitarian programmes are typically not reported on or used to modify the programme's log frame or theory of change; in a single stream iterative programme, the intervention logic is updated to reflect learning and changes made (ibid; Wild et al., 2017).
- In traditional humanitarian programmes, it can take a long time to make adaptations, whereas in a single-stream iterative programme, improvements to the programme are prioritised and actioned quickly.

Applications of user-centred design in humanitarian action are an example of single-stream iterative approaches to adaptive programming. User-centred design is understood as a creative problem-solving approach used to design products, services and programmes across a wide range of sectors that puts the needs and experiences of intended end-users at the centre of the design process and engages the users throughout this process (Bourne, 2019; see Box 6).

Portfolio. This approach to programme management runs a humanitarian programme like an investment portfolio, hence its name. Multiple activities (a 'portfolio') are implemented simultaneously to address a problem or achieve an objective. Performance is routinely assessed, the lowest performing interventions are dropped and those that are working well are given further resource and potentially expanded (Wild et al., 2015; Goeldner Byrne et al., 2016; Wild et al., 2017).

Portfolio approaches may be more suitable for more complex interventions or operating contexts – for example, protection, resilience or early recovery. Because they run multiple activities at the same time, and review and discontinue some on a regular basis, this approach can look 'quick and dirty'. It can also risk increasing redundancy costs because multiple activities might be achieving the same outcome, when only one is required.

To be successful, portfolio strategies rely on a high degree of budget flexibility, well-defined outcomes and strong monitoring to provide the information needed to identify low-performing and high-performing activities. Applications of a portfolio-type approach have faced challenges in post hoc evaluation where they have lacked a robust monitoring system. They can also underperform if there are bureaucratic donor approval processes that limit their much-needed flexibility to switch and expand activities (Grossman-Vermass et al., 2015).

Like all forms of adaptive programming, portfolio approaches also rely on a significant shift in the mindset of donors, agency staff and even aid recipients, all of whom are accustomed to waiting out poor-performing projects instead of being able to review and change them. Of all adaptive programming approaches observed for this study, the portfolio approach offers perhaps the biggest departure from traditional programme management approaches – and therefore changing mindsets will be a significant challenge.

Importantly, all the examples of portfolio approaches observed in ALNAP's research were financed through multi-year funding. It is therefore unclear whether such an approach can be supported adequately with multiple iterations of annual funding alone.

The International Rescue Committee's Context and Evidence Framework proposes that experimental strategies are most appropriate in contexts that are more predictable or better understood by programme staff. In situations that are highly uncertain or changeable, a portfolio or single-stream iterative approach may be more appropriate (IRC, internal document).

Experimental approaches are closest to the processes used in humanitarian innovation[3] and incorporate research methods used for generating evidence of 'what works' in humanitarian programming. There is now guidance available on managing research designs within humanitarian innovation, which programme staff could use in setting up and designing an experimental approach to programming (Elrha, 2018).

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3 The difference between an innovation project and an experimental approach is one of degree. But typically an innovation project is starting from scratch, with an idea that has not been developed or implemented in humanitarian settings before (Obrecht and Warner, 2016) while in an adaptive programme applying an experimental approach, programme designs may exist but there is significant uncertainty as to which one will work in a particular context.

Box 6: User-centred design in humanitarian WASH programming

In 2017 the Humanitarian Innovation Fund launched a WASH Innovation Challenge to develop and deliver user-centred WASH projects in acute emergency humanitarian settings. The purpose of this challenge was to understand 'how to design, implement, and evaluate approaches to user-centred sanitation that incorporate rapid community engagement and are appropriate for the first stage of rapid-onset emergencies' (WASH Challenge Handbook 3).

Following a call for proposals and two rounds of applications, including a workshop on user-centred design for shortlisted applicants, the Humanitarian Innovation Fund selected three partnerships to implement the challenge: Qatar Red Crescent (QRC) and the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) at Qatar University; Welthungerhilfe (WHH) and Snook; and Save the Children UK (SCUK) and Eclipse Experience.

User-centred design is characterised by a set of key principles:

1. **'User-centred'**, meaning that it is focused on producing solutions that are built around the needs, experiences and lives of end-users, instead of requiring the users to adapt their lives and preferences to match the solutions.

2. **Participatory**, meaning that people who are identified as users of the product or service that is being designed are involved in decision-making throughout the design process, from the problem identification stage to the final roll out of the complete solution. The level of this involvement can vary but it generally falls on the spectrum from user consultations to co-creation of solutions with the users.

3. **Iterative**, meaning that instead of progressing in a linear way, with the complete product or service being delivered at once and to standard specifications predetermined by the implementing agency, user-centred design projects are a sequence of research-design-test loops, where user research findings feed into the design of subsequent versions of a product or service that are tested and improved on in incremental steps.' (Bourne, 2019: 9)

While user-centred design processes can vary widely in their application, they generally follow the following three stages: (1) understanding the needs and perspectives of users; (2) designing and iterating potential solutions to these needs based on fast prototyping and evaluations that enhance the understanding of users' experiences; and (3) delivery of a refined solution.

> **Listen to Sofya Bourne, Design Researcher, Eclipse Experience, explaining the ALNAP spotlight study on user-centred design.**

Box 7: The portfolio approach in the BRCiS consortia programme

Building Resilient Communities in Somalia (BRCiS) is a multi-year humanitarian programme that combines short-term emergency support with longer term resilience programming in Somalia. Created after the 2011 Famine, it is implemented through a consortia of agencies: Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) (lead), Concern Worldwide, International Rescue Committee, Save the Children and Cesvi.

BRCiS is a rare example of humanitarian funding being applied to community-based programming approaches. Consortia members worked closely with local civil society organisations, communities and aid recipients in 22 Somali districts to identify problems relating to resilience and design programmes to address these. The result was a programming structure in which multiple projects are run simultaneously, with unsuccessful projects discontinued and more successful ones expanded on a routine basis.

The management of BRCiS required a significant departure from standard programme management approaches. The budget was set at the outcome level, allowing flexibility across activities and a separate and simplified budget template was created to track forecasted funding against expenditure as activities continually changed. Local partners and field staff could then request and receive approval for budget and activity changes by phone and email.

The programme also uses a standing rule to select the 10% lowest-performing activities each year and discontinue these to create space for better ideas. This establishes an expectation among staff that they will learn and adapt, and also shows communities that projects that are not working will not receive further support.

'A lot of [adaptations] comes from the village being like, okay we actually have this bigger problem over here. And that second iteration we do, we have a new plan. Maybe in that first year, there was a 20-30% change of activities, though how much you change your activities each year has to do with how much time you have and how well you're staffed. Every time we come up with a new activity – especially a new activity we've never done before – we've got to figure out how to do it. It takes a lot of staff time so we can't just change everything all at once. It has to happen in stages. Now I can change 15-20% of my activity portfolio a year.' Former Programme Manager, BRCiS

The transition has not been easy: during the first year, both community members and field staff approached the projects as 'business-as-usual', with community members making suggestions for activities they felt the agencies were prepared to deliver rather than offering their own authentic suggestions for what should be done. Once the consortium members and donor had established that there truly was flexibility in programme design and implementation, the nature of the projects began to change.

3.2.3 Using adaptive and anticipatory strategies together, or in sequence

A combination of adaptive and anticipatory strategies can be used, depending on the urgency of the crisis and the degree of certainty in the programme model (i.e. how certain aid workers are that the programme model will be effective at addressing the problem).

At the ALNAP workshop, participants discussed different types of adaptive and anticipatory programming approaches and when these were most useful. There were also several examples of times at which it would be inappropriate to make significant changes to a programmes' objectives – such as when these had been agreed with a targeted population or when changes would negatively affect another organisation's programme.

During these discussions, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) presented their four-part matrix for identifying different designs for adaptive programming, depending on the degree of confidence (i.e. uncertainty) in the context and the degree of confidence (i.e. evidence for theory of change) in the programme. The draft decision tree in Figure 1 reflects the key points from this discussion on when it is most appropriate to engage in flexible programming, and which strategies to select for this.

Further work is needed to provide a more detailed decision tree, similar to those that have been developed for supporting the application of adaptive programming approaches in development aid (see: Baker, 2019).

Photo credit: ALNAP.

Box 8: Applying an experimental approach in the Alternatives to Communities in Crisis (ARCC) programme

The Alternatives to Communities in Crisis (ARCC) programme was a seven-year cash-based assistance programme in DRC, managed by UNICEF and implemented with multiple international non-governmental organisation partners.

ARCC was based on early success in piloting NFI voucher fairs with communities, before which assistance in DRC was primarily delivered through in-kind goods. It was designed as a multi-phase programme, beginning with an operational research phase to test different design options for cash-based assistance. In this phase, UNICEF contracted a research and evaluation partner to help them design and conduct control trials, and NGO partners conducted their own qualitative studies to assess the three main variables in programme design – delivery plans (e.g. lump-sum or multiple payments), delivery mechanisms (e.g. cash or voucher) and transfer targets (e.g. wife or husband). Different designs were run simultaneously and then compared at the end of this first phase to establish which were most effective at achieving the desired outcomes, namely: an increase in access to basic needs, services, and livelihood opportunities, and a reduction in use of negative coping strategies (Bonilla et al., 2017).

In the next phase, ARCC partners refined and adapted their programming based on the findings from Phase I. They began developing a standard set of tools and approaches for cash-based programming in the DRC context. Many of the programme's learnings – for example, that mobile-based money is ineffective in many parts of DRC due to lack of capacity in local financing institutions for mobile banking – have supported an adapted approach specific to the DRC context. ARCC was formally integrated into another UNICEF programme in 2018 and continues to be used to inform context-appropriate cash-based programming in DRC.

▷   **Listen to Gabriele Erba explaining the experimental approach in ARCC.**

"

Current monitoring systems and practices have a long way to go in the humanitarian sector to support the reflective analysis needed for flexible programming.

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3.3 Monitoring systems

Monitoring systems in humanitarian action play a number of important functions. They help ensure that programme implementation is going according to plan, improve the relevance and appropriateness of programmes, support accountability, and enable organisational learning between projects (Warner, 2017). In exploring the support factors for flexible humanitarian response, three types of monitoring arose as relevant:

- monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems for programming
- situational and context monitoring
- monitoring that supports the function of internal systems, such as supply chains.

Both anticipatory and adaptive approaches to flexibility rely on cycles of analysis, reflection and applied learning. To this extent, monitoring data appears to be the lifeblood of flexible humanitarian organisations, which would suggest that monitoring systems are essential to flexibility.

But practice suggests a more complicated relationship. Current monitoring systems and practices have a long way to go in the humanitarian sector to support the reflective analysis needed for flexible programming (Wild and Ramalingam, 2018; Dillon, 2019). The broader challenges with monitoring systems in humanitarian action are detailed elsewhere (Warner, 2017; Sundberg, 2019a; Dillon and Sundberg, 2019), but participants at the ALNAP workshop highlighted several specific areas where existing practice fails to support more flexible programming and operations.

3.3.1 How monitoring practice can fail to support flexibility

Failure to consider use. Monitoring systems are not always designed with the purpose, or intended use for monitoring information, clearly in mind (Warner, 2017). This means they end up being designed for too many types of decision maker or designed for only one decision maker at the expense of other decision-making needs. This can result in the collection of information that is not used by any decision makers at all.

One ALNAP workshop participant described the attempt to rely on a single shared monitoring system for many layers of decision-making at their organisation as attempting to create the perfect 'swiss army knife' for everyone rather than using differentiated monitoring tools for different purposes. As a counterexample of this phenomenon, ALNAP's research on outcomes monitoring notes that the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) carried out a user analysis for its monitoring data and, on this basis, decided not to pursue global aggregation of outcome indicators as there was no clear decision-making need for this information (Dillon and Sundberg, 2019).

The clearest example of this is seen in monitoring data for donor reporting: data collected for financial reporting is not viewed as sufficient or necessary for informing learning within a programme or identifying improvements. Often this data focuses on activities and outputs, or on highly simplistic outcomes that are easier to measure for accountability purposes.

One ALNAP workshop participant described the attempt to rely on a single shared monitoring system for many layers of decision-making at their organisation as attempting to create the perfect 'swiss army knife' for everyone rather than using differentiated monitoring tools for different purposes.

Poor practices in collecting and using aid recipient feedback. Aid recipients should play a role in monitoring the quality of programming provided to them, but in reality they rarely have a meaningful say in service delivery (Donino and Brown, 2014; ALNAP, 2018). One of the challenges is a lack of understanding regarding how feedback from affected people is used in decision-making (IRC, 2017). In ALNAP's diary-based research on decision-making, only 10 out of 1,035 decisions submitted to ALNAP from field-level decision makers were concerned with making changes to a humanitarian project or programme based on feedback from affected populations (forthcoming, Campbell and Knox Clarke 2019).

Restrictive monitoring tools and lack of incentives. ALNAP workshop participants discussed the much-maligned logical framework ('log frame') and whether it should be avoided completely or just used differently to support more flexible programming. Some participants felt that the issue lay more in how log frames are used rather than their inherent structure; although some agencies and independent consultants are developing alternatives to log frames (see, for example the Theory of Change for Adaptive Management approach), there is as yet no rival to the log frame (Wild and Ramalingam, 2018).

This may soon change. M&E systems have become a significant area of focus in work on adaptive management in the aid sector, reflecting the recognition that a move to more flexible operational and programming models also requires monitoring practices that can change and be adapted throughout a programme cycle. However, there are few good practices to draw on for creating monitoring and evaluation approaches that are robust yet enable flexibility. The Global Learning for Adaptive Management initiative (GLAM) is seeking to address this gap by developing new approaches to monitoring and evaluating adaptive programmes and piloting these in fragile settings (Wild and Ramalingam, 2018).

Both the GLAM scoping work and ALNAP's recent work on monitoring in humanitarian action have identified further challenges with designing M&E systems for flexible humanitarian action in addition to those described above:

- The timeliness of M&E activities. Using monitoring data to make changes to programming requires timely data collection and quick analysis and interpretation for decision-making (Ramalingam et al., 2019). It is difficult to find approaches that can do this robustly yet rapidly, and without incurring significant time costs for staff.
- Integration between monitoring and evaluation practices. Much evaluation activity in the humanitarian sector is summative, happening at the end of a project or programme and used more for accountability

rather than learning (ALNAP, 2016; Dillon, 2019; Ramalingam et al., 2019). Within adaptive programmes, 'an important shift is to the move from evaluation as something that is often considered only at the design and end stages of a programme, to evaluative thinking as a capacity and process which is embedded throughout the implementation of an intervention' (Ramalingam et al., 2019: 2). This is because the information demands for adaptive programmes 'typically cut across both monitoring and evaluation systems' and potentially require a reconsideration of the separation between monitoring and evaluation functions (Dillon, 2019: 9).

3.3.2 Creating more flexible monitoring systems

General considerations

Designed for use. Monitoring systems need to be designed with a clear purpose and end user. This means understanding whether information is being collected for accountability purposes, or for informing decisions about which action to take. If data is being collected to guide action, then there should be a clear understanding about who can make and implement those decisions and what are their specific information needs.

Thinking about use is important for deciding how centralised or decentralised a monitoring system needs to be. Flexible programming rests on decentralised decision-making (see section 3.2) and needs to be paired with decentralised monitoring systems that can be adapted easily and according to the programme team's evolving information needs.

By contrast, flexible supply chain capability for large organisations may benefit from monitoring systems that are more centralised and integrated across the entire organisation (while still allowing for decentralised decision-making that can draw down supply from across the network).

Selective. Monitoring systems need to be nimble and reasonably light-touch if they are to be useful for timely and meaningful adaptations. This means that these systems will need to be selective in the indicators or variables they use. Staff from several of the adaptive programmes observed for this study noted that one initial challenge was trying to measure or monitor too many things at the same time.

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The problem that I see in North East Nigeria, and is very common across context, and this is particularly true for protection people, is the failure to articulate the question. What is it that we need to know? In order to know what we need to know, we've got to have a sense of purpose. What is the outcome we're aiming for and the design backwards from there. Therefore, our ongoing information collection and

analysis needs to enable us to make the following decisions. I think that what we see from context to context is a failure to do that. So, you've got this massive flow of information, which is all very interesting, but ultimately unused and sometimes unusable because it's not purposeful in the sense of speaking to, I've got to be able to make the following decisions and understand the following actors.

Workshop participant

Most adaptive programming approaches begin with large sets of indicators that are whittled down as staff become more comfortable with the approach and know which variables and indicators are most relevant for them. This is partly because decision makers tend to think they need more information for an adaptive decision than they actually require: early findings from ALNAP's forthcoming work on decision-making suggest that decision makers want more information even if this does not substantially aid them in making better decisions (Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2019; Shaxson et al., 2016). Moreover, it will be difficult to know at the start of a new programme or project which indicators or issues will be most relevant for tracking success. For this reason, iteration and flexibility in a monitoring system is also important.

ALNAP workshop participants described the challenge of identifying a 'good enough' level of monitoring and analysis that would facilitate changes to programming. Undertaking a review of previous monitoring practices and decision-making and using this to create a needs analysis for information demands at different levels of the organisation can help support this.

Iterative and sense-making. Decision makers use information in different ways for adaptive action. In some cases, there are clear information gaps that need to be filled. But more commonly, when decision-making is decentralised, the information need becomes more of a 'sense-checking' or 'gut check' to make sure that what field staff are seeing or experiencing is validated by other sources of information (Dillon, 2019). For example, in Mercy Corps' Humanitarian Access Team's work in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, a large part of their role is to engage in dialogue with field teams to fact-check information and triangulate data about security and access:

You see this daily dialogue about, 'Can you tell us more about this? That doesn't sound right. How about X and Y setting? What's happening here?' So, it's very, very iterative. The analysts themselves appreciate that dialogue because it allows them to look at different angles and test theories and test their own knowledge.

Workshop participant

Having a monitoring system that regularly tracks the same set of indicators may be needed for accountability purposes, or for comparing programme performance over time. But flexible programming approaches will also need a more iterative, and still robust, monitoring *service* that responds in real time to the information needs of programme teams. This should help field-level decision makers make sense of their environment and the interaction between the context and their activities. Qualitative data should form a critical part of this service but has been difficult for humanitarian agencies to collect and use in decision-making (Sundberg, 2019b).

At the same time, there are also examples of iteration in monitoring systems that are used for accountability purposes. In these cases, donors or funders recognise that, as circumstances change, the criteria used to assess performance should also change. The Disasters Emergency Committee, for instance, encourages a review every six months of performance indicators in its members' reporting to reflect any changes in a response setting and rethink objectives.

Monitoring outcomes. Flexible programming tends to be more outcome-oriented: activities and outputs are changed because they are not seen as being the best route to achieving a desired objective or set of outcomes. There are different ways to monitor outcomes: agencies can pre-define expected or intended outcomes and establish indicators in advance or use more open-ended approaches to identify and 'capture' emerging outcomes, such as outcome harvesting processes (SaferWorld, 2016; Sundberg, 2019a).

When we talk about early action, or kind of protective cash transfers, what does that actually trying to protect? What are the negative coping strategies, in particular, that we're trying to prevent? Because if we're not clear about that, then we can't actually monitor whether what we've set up is actually going to make any difference or not.

Workshop participant

Supports a strong framework of inquiry. Field and country teams need to put the 'E' into their M&E practices to support the kind of reflective learning needed to identify programme improvements (Dillon, 2019). As one key informant put it, flexibility requires monitoring 'for action rather than of action.' A key characteristic across all flexible operations observed in ALNAP research, and reinforced by participants at the workshop, was the ability of systems and practices to support regular analytical thinking and critical reflection.

Both anticipatory and adaptive approaches rely not just on good data or information, but on strong frameworks of inquiry to translate this information into knowledge and action. Anticipatory strategies for flexibility structure learning around previous M&E data by asking: 'What happened in this situation? What were the anticipatory triggers for these things happening? What did we do? What happened as a result of our actions, and was this of value? When similar things happen in the future, what should we do next time?' In contrast, adaptive strategies build inquiry into the response, regularly asking and answering: 'What is happening? What does this mean? What action do we take now?' (Eoyang and Holladay, 2013).

For some adaptive programmes, this has meant going beyond monitoring systems and employing a research assistant to carry out small, targeted research projects to address questions not covered through programme or context monitoring information. For other field teams, structuring monitoring systems around testing hypotheses, or tying them to programme requirements to make adaptations, was a useful way to ensure these systems supported use.

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> We found [it was] empowering the people to actually take the decisions. We did the exercise of defining, okay, what type of adaptation requires whichever type of decision and who validates? Taking the decision really requires you to already make the analysis on why you want to make the change, so you are not just saying to your boss, this is not working. No, you come already with a solution that you've discussed with your team, and it's just a validation. So, it also gives the responsibility to the front-line staff to make decisions, and analyse why they want to make those decisions.

Workshop participant

Embedded across functions. Supply chain and logistics staff note that they rarely receive programme monitoring data to understand how changes requested by programme staff have affected quality and performance in a response (see section 3.1). Similarly, positive feedback from aid recipients after changes have been made to kits based are not passed on to all staff. Integrated monitoring functions that connect to programming as well as logistics and supply chain management are important in supporting an organisational culture of identifying and making improvements to responses.

For adaptive programming, monitoring data provides the ability to close the adaptive loop for all staff, demonstrating the benefits of having made the change and reinforcing the value of flexibility. For anticipatory programming, integrated monitoring supports learning on whether scenarios and plans have played out as expected, and where tweaks or changes might be required when revising preparedness plans across all departments.

Anticipatory approaches to monitoring

Anticipatory approaches to monitoring begin with a substantial planning phase. This should draw on past evaluations and monitoring data to outline potential changes in the humanitarian situation and the menu of actions that could be taken in response. To be flexible, this contingency planning should draw on multiple scenarios, using risk analysis and forecasting.

For example, for the implementation of a flexible programming approach in fragile contexts, World Vision has supported five country teams to develop a set of scenarios for each of their particular contexts. These scenarios are informed by World Vision's existing context analysis tools, such as the Good Enough Context Analysis for Rapid Response, and include scenarios for both improvements and for deteriorations in the situation. The needs assessment agency ACAPS has produced guidance for humanitarian actors on using scenario building to plan for a range of possible response requirements, which can be helpful for setting up an anticipatory M&E system (ACAPS, 2016).

Existing early warning systems can provide a basis for anticipatory monitoring – though they tend to be oriented around monitoring a single scenario (e.g. drought or conflict) rather than tracking indicators for multiple potential situational changes at the same time.

Contingency plans can either be too rigid – pairing particular actions with particular triggers – or too open-ended and fail to guide action. Getting the balance between over- and under-prescribing actions is a core challenge for any anticipatory strategy. This points to the need to ensure that such systems have strong periodic reviews to reflect on whether the proposed menu of actions is valid and appropriate.

Box 9: An anticipatory strategy for monitoring in FAO Kenya's Forecasting for Drought

Anticipatory monitoring typically relies on time-staggering, which offers different levels of accuracy. For example, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Kenya, in partnership with Texas A&M University, has created an anticipatory system using vegetation-condition satellite and other situational indicator data that enables a range of forecasting up to six months in advance.

The six-month predictions are less accurate but offer information on potential medium- to long-term trends, while three-month predictions offer much greater accuracy and are used to inform decisions on pre-positioning and fund mobilisation. FAO used this system to respond early to the 2016–2017 Drought in Kenya and was one of the first international agencies to begin implementing early action and mitigation activities with the Government of Kenya (Obrecht, 2019).

Adaptive approaches to monitoring

As already highlighted, M&E systems for learning and improving programmes have been identified as a key gap in adaptive approaches to development (Wild and Ramalingam, 2018), as well as a gap in supporting stronger in-programme learning in humanitarian settings (Warner, 2017; Dillon, 2019). Humanitarian innovators have faced similar challenges (Obrecht, 2017; Warner, 2017). To support adaptation and improvement, the M&E tools developed for use in humanitarian innovation projects could be applied in humanitarian programming more broadly (see Box 10: Theory of Change for Adaptive Management).

Beyond this, there are additional innovative approaches to embedding evaluative thinking into programme monitoring such as the use of developmental evaluation and complexity-sensitive approaches (e.g. social network analysis or agent-based modelling: see Box 11).

▷ **Listen to Ian Gray, Director, Gray Dot Catalyst, explaining his TOCAM approach.**

Photo credit: European Union/Anouk Delafortrie.

Box 10: Theory of Change for Adaptive Management

Theory of Change for Adaptive Management (TOCAM) is a tool and approach to programme monitoring developed by the consultant Ian Gray and Toybox, a development sector organisation. Gray has since adapted and applied TOCAM with nearly a dozen humanitarian organisations working on innovation projects and elements of this are featured in Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Guide.

TOCAM uses elements that are similar to mainstream programme management tools but emphasises particular parts of programme management that are crucial to learning, and identifying and implementing programme changes. It begins with entire teams – including logistics and procurement staff – developing a theory of change for the programme. While mainstream programme management approaches, such as log frame, involve identifying assumptions, participants in the TOCAM process classify assumptions and develop monitoring strategies for these.

For example, assumptions are classified according to whether they need to be 'tracked' –features in context or situation that are expected to change but are fairly well known – or whether they need to be 'tested' – connections or outcomes where there is a high degree of uncertainty or ambiguity, and which need further evidence. Teams are asked to prioritise assumptions based on their best available knowledge, but these are also revisited and changed throughout the process as new learning emerges.

Quarterly reviews are critical to the TOCAM approach, enabling teams to reflect as a group on what they are learning and what they need to change (the 'what-so what-now what' cycle). Using a set of structured questions, teams look at integrated monitoring data, including aid recipient feedback, and review the theory of change. More often, these reviews are an opportunity to review the rapid changes that happened in the previous quarter, to look at how those decisions were made and reflect on whether they were right. They also provide a space in which to discuss team disagreements about the direction taken or about what changes need to be made, and to identify missing information. Conflicting views on what to do can be difficult to manage and so it may be useful to combine a quarterly monitoring review with the good practices for team building piloted by Mercy Corps (see section 4: People and culture).

Several organisations who have used TOCAM noted that having an external facilitator – though not easy – was extremely valuable for these quarterly reviews, as it helped them think outside their normal framing and interrogate their assumptions. Also, while reviews within the TOCAM approach have largely been quarterly, their frequency can be increased to suit the organisation or the context.

A description of how assumptions are approached in the TOCAM can be found in the Elrha Humanitarian Innovation Guide, and more information on the approach, including worksheets, can be found through www.graydotcatalyst.com.

Box 11: Breaking the Mould: Approaches to 'adaptation-ready' M&E systems

Many humanitarian agencies struggle to use the information generated by monitoring and evaluation systems for much beyond donor reporting. Using that same information for ongoing decision-making and learning at project-level remains a challenge that few have truly cracked.

The ALNAP Secretariat has conducted background research into the options for changing the way project-level M&E is done, with a view to maximising its usefulness for the sorts of ongoing decision-making and informal learning processes that often characterise humanitarian work.

M&E specialists in sectors as diverse as health, education and social innovation, have been tackling similar issues for some time. Approaches such as realist evaluation, outcome harvesting, developmental evaluation, soft systems methodology and others have been trialled and used in a range of different contexts since the late 1990s. The ALNAP Secretariat has produced a paper that summarises the most promising approaches for strengthening humanitarian M&E for flexibility and adaptation. It identifies three key areas for supporting 'adaptation-ready' M&E: (1) timing of M&E data provision; (2) flexibility of M&E frameworks to evolve with programme change; and (3) approaches to integrate di perspectives on project implementation in a meaningful way. The paper looks at a collection of approaches currently being used in each of these three areas through a series of 'practice examples', considering the key lessons learned. For more, see: Breaking the Mould (Dillon, 2019).

▷   **Listen to Neil Dillon, Research Fellow at ALNAP, discussing ways to engage in 'adaptation-ready' M&E systems.**

Related ALNAP publications

- Dynamic gridlock: Adaptive humanitarian action in the DRC
- Adapting According to Plan: Early action and adaptive drought response in Kenya
- User-Centred Design and Humanitarian Adaptiveness
- Breaking the Mould: Alternative approaches to monitoring

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