

Chapter 4

Conclusions

Overview

4.1

This final chapter draws out the synergies between the various strands of this year's Annual Review. First it reflects on the findings that concern monitoring within the context of the sectoral picture provided by the evaluation synthesis and meta-evaluation. Then it provides an agenda for improving monitoring, for both donors and operational agencies. The chapter should be read in the light of the Annual Review's aim to meet the needs of different audiences – those already knowledgeable about monitoring and evaluation, and those less so.

The constraints almost all agencies face in developing adequate monitoring systems constitutes part of a wider problem concerning the establishment of adequate management and reporting systems. The question addressed at the end of this chapter is how strengthened monitoring can support more effective humanitarian action. This is considered key for improving both humanitarian action and its evaluation. If agencies and governments cannot learn both between and during emergencies their response will continue to exhibit the generic problems identified in consecutive ALNAP Annual Reviews.

Assessing the Performance of the Sector

4.2

This year's assessment involved 55 evaluation reports, allowing general conclusions to be drawn on the operation and achievements of the sector in 2002. What constitutes success in humanitarian action is open to varying interpretation. From the perspective of the stated objectives of many interventions – saving lives and/or maintaining nutritional levels – humanitarian action achieved its primary objectives. However, consecutive syntheses have revealed that humanitarian action is unable to create sustainable services or rebuild livelihoods in the medium to longer term. Successive Annual Reviews have given indications as to why this is the case by outlining systemic structural barriers which, if left unchecked, will continue to impede performance.

Nevertheless the achievements of humanitarian action should not be underestimated. In each of the four main sectors of humanitarian action – food aid, water and sanitation, health, and shelter – there were notable successes. Almost one half of the evaluations reviewed included a focus on food aid, and results illustrated the effectiveness of food aid in feeding the hungry poor in a number of challenging environments. However, several evaluations suggested that many vulnerable groups, particularly those outside refugee camps, may be bypassed by food aid; often the data is not available to substantiate who has actually benefited. Clearly more attention needs to be given to using data to ensure appropriate targeting. The importance of attempting greater local procurement was also raised in several reports.

Water and sanitation interventions were successful in meeting physical targets, for example, installing handpumps and protecting water sources. Health interventions largely met their short-term objectives, in particular stabilising mortality and morbidity rates and ensuring that infectious diseases were kept under control. While, as in previous years, temporary shelter and housing interventions were evaluated as significantly less successful than other sectoral initiatives, there was also some good practice that could be highlighted. An important finding is that self-construction, supported by external agencies, is likely to be the most effective reconstruction approach – as long as the fact that some vulnerable groups may not be able to reconstruct their housing is taken into account.

Problematic areas also re-emerged this year: limited attention to rights-based approaches and protection, with only two of 55 reports adequately evaluating protection; low levels of participation of primary stakeholders, in particular in planning and design; and poor quality of programming in relation to gender equality.

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This year's evaluation set also substantiated in significant detail worrying findings from the previous Annual Reviews. Most noteworthy, and a consistent theme, is the continuing lack of attention to sustainability/connectedness and the inability of the humanitarian response to establish a basis for longer term development processes – in essence, therefore, providing a sophisticated band aid solution. This problem plays out in a number of interconnected ways, in particular:

- 1 the failure to develop and support national and local capacity;
- 2 the tendency to build physical structures, such as hospitals, while paying inadequate attention to maintenance and operation;

- 3 lack of local procurement, which could prove both more cost-effective and support local capacity;
- 4 hiring of international staff when equally qualified national staff are available.

A compounding factor is underinvestment in capacity building of frontline agency staff, including lack of guidance and training on how to link relief and rehabilitation. All humanitarian agencies face persistent problems with this issue. This suggests that it should be a central focus for training and capacity building within the sector.

Overall the emphasis in humanitarian action remains very much on external agencies entering often unfamiliar localities, providing instant relief, and then moving on. The capacities and contributions of governments and primary stakeholders – in the latter case usually far more important than external agency input – are systematically ignored. The consensus from several reports is that coping strategies and vulnerability need to be better understood and may offer opportunities for agencies to move towards recovery activities and hence bridge the LRRD gap.

Developing and Supporting Agency Staff Capacity

4.1.2

Problems related to high staff turnover are increasingly acknowledged as each Annual Review is published, and this is one of the first systematic analyses of this issue across the sector as a whole. High levels of staff turnover at both field level and HQ, pressurised work environments, excessive working hours, too many staff on short-term contracts, and not enough emphasis on employing regional and national staff are generic problems which lead to less effective performance and limited ongoing learning. As a consequence the importance of establishing sound information flows, including effective monitoring, are downplayed. A partial solution may be to hire more national staff. While there is often competition among external agencies for national staff during emergencies and rehabilitation, the knee-jerk reaction of external agencies is to send in expatriates. A longer term solution would be to build and support government capacity to respond – an area that is rarely covered in EHA.

Having said this, what is particularly striking (and paradoxical) is that the successes of humanitarian interventions appear to a large extent to be due to the enormous

efforts and commitment of humanitarian personnel rather than because of smoothly functioning aid systems. Last year, the Annual Review concluded that humanitarian staff compensated for inefficiencies and failings in the sector. The same is true this year. This is reflected in Chapter 2 where it was found that good monitoring depends as much as the quality of staff as it does on the systems themselves.

The most important area for agencies to focus on over the short term, therefore, is strengthening field staff ability to carry out participatory social science analysis – who is affected, why, what are their existing coping strategies, and how will any intervention support or hinder longer term development? Field staff also need to know how to analyse and package this information for agency consumption. Agencies should assess the current capacity of their systems in this area, and adjust accordingly.

Of course training will not be a universal panacea. No matter how strong the situation analysis there will be continuing pressure for profile, for example, to import expensive relief goods emblazoned with an agency's logo (ironically the greater focus on results, of which improved monitoring is a part, has also led to a need for greater visibility among the public, donors and executive boards). But even in this context training can support better overall quality of performance.

Changing the Financial Planning Horizon

4.2.2

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High staff turnover is directly influenced by the funding arrangements of many donors and operational agencies. Although the complexities of the relief-reconstruction-development 'continuum' are increasingly understood, leading to some modification of institutional arrangements within donor organisations, a high proportion of humanitarian assistance is still planned with a short-term perspective and funded through six to 12 month project grants. Agencies have not, or have not been able, to make substantial changes to funding patterns – mainly because of political and institutional reasons – despite this having been highlighted in a number of evaluations included in the Annual Reviews.

In practical terms there is a need to extend the financial planning horizon of agencies to create more flexible arrangements so that, among other things, staff can be hired on longer contracts. This will support work in three areas which have been

found in the Annual Reviews to be relatively weak: understanding of the context of the emergency; building partnerships with national and local institutions; and engaging with the recipients of humanitarian assistance. This in turn would increase the potential for national capacity building.

Meta-evaluation of Evaluation Quality

4.3

The meta-evaluation, included in the coloured pages at the back of this Annual Review, provides an overview of the quality of evaluations based on an assessment against the ALNAP Quality Proforma (QP). Strengths found in previous years were repeated in this year's evaluation set, in particular the ability to assess management and human resources and to measure agency performance against several of the DAC criteria. There was also a significant improvement in the assessment of sustainability/connectedness. However, previous weaknesses were also repeated and analysis of data over the three years found no significant improvement; in some cases even a decline in quality of evaluation reports. Particularly problematic areas continue to be:

- 1 the failure to substantiate the findings of reports, often because of inadequate delineation of methodology;
- 2 the failure to consult adequately with primary stakeholders or to detail consultation that has taken place in a way that informs report findings;
- 3 poorly formulated recommendations.

A number of recommendations are made in the meta-evaluation section as to how to improve evaluation practice. Most importantly, the limited substantiation of key findings with adequate evidence undermines the credibility of many reports, and in fact EHA itself. There is also some evidence to suggest that, based on feedback from country and sector specialists, evaluations are providing a somewhat rosy picture of agency performance – an area the Annual Review must consider in future issues. This relates partly to the evaluation process where internal evaluation offices commission evaluations from 'independent' consultants, who then proclaim that the

evaluations themselves are ‘independent’ thus ignoring the many levels of negotiation and debate which usually take place both within agencies and between evaluation offices and evaluators before evaluations are published. It also relates to the narrow scope of many evaluations, which focus on output-related issues such as providing food or water to the exclusion of rights-based issues such as protection and gender equality.

EHA is of course not alone in facing these methodological and procedural challenges – they are an inherent part of any evaluation process. In our case, pointing out system-wide areas of weakness appears to have had limited impact in terms of changing practice as evidenced by the consistent poor performance in some evaluation areas highlighted in the meta-evaluation. Many of the problems highlighted in the Annual Reviews may already be known to agencies, but they cannot be fixed because of lack of resources and capacity and/or intra-agency political pressures. For this reason, this year ALNAP is following up with individual agencies as to the results of the quality of their evaluations as well as initiating a discussion of minimum standards for EHA in key areas – for example, the need for substantiation of conclusions, attention to gender equality, and adequate and fully documented consultation with primary stakeholders. This will be one step toward further professionalisation of EHA along the lines of, for example, the African Evaluation Association, which has adapted the evaluation standards promoted by the American Evaluation Association for its own purposes.

Monitoring

4.4

Refocusing the Reporting Agenda and Learning from Monitoring

4.4.1

Chapter 2 reported on an ALNAP research project to examine the contribution that monitoring can make to more effective humanitarian action and EHA. The focus on monitoring is part of a growing trend in EHA to look outside the ‘evaluation box’ toward more innovative means of assessing results, promoting lesson learning and, as a consequence, improving performance.

The added value that monitoring can bring to the humanitarian endeavour lies in its ability to assess and reassess continually the relevance and impact of interventions. In addition, monitoring can examine social process – that is, the complex set of relations between agencies and primary beneficiaries, on which intervention results are largely dependent; evaluation as it is currently carried out as a ‘one-shot’, usually brief effort, cannot do this in any detail. Monitoring is therefore crucial for organisational learning processes. Given the current low quality of monitoring there is significant potential for improved monitoring to lead to improved performance – i.e. investing in monitoring is likely to both improve results and be cost-effective.

The short research project on which Chapter 2 is based found that, in current practice, monitoring is usually perceived as less important and more routine than evaluation. This is because monitoring has tended to focus on largely internal functions such as financial inputs and physical outputs, while evaluation has covered higher profile external areas including outcomes and impact. However, evaluation often happens too late to improve performance of ongoing humanitarian action, although it should facilitate learning for future operations. Four connected phenomena are leading to a rethinking of monitoring and evaluation functions in relation to humanitarian action:

- 1 Increasing understanding that recovery from emergencies does not normally follow a linear progression from relief to development. In the case of complex emergencies, but also to a large extent natural disasters, many poor and vulnerable households do not appear to move along any kind of continuum. The idea that emergencies have a definite end at which point an external evaluation can take place is, therefore, increasingly questioned. The varied stages of response to the emergency therefore require different reporting functions.
- 2 The recognition of the importance of understanding process and feeding ideas back into ongoing interventions on a continuous basis, leading to an uptake in the use of, for example, RTE, by larger agencies such as UNHCR and WFP. The meta-evaluation of evaluation quality found that of 36 evaluations for which data was available, 16 evaluations were conducted on ongoing interventions. Moreover the number of evaluations carried out during ongoing operations is probably due to the long-term nature of many interventions.

- 3 Increased attention to lesson learning, to which monitoring can be central, and also one reason for greater focus on RTE.
- 4 The availability of methods and techniques for ongoing assessment of social process, such as utilisation-focused evaluation, participatory rural appraisal, and process monitoring, which make it difficult to argue that sound methods for monitoring are unavailable.

Current Monitoring Frameworks

4.4.2

Chapter 2 found that there are two main complementary foci for agency monitoring:

- 1 Situation, or contextual, monitoring
- 2 Results/performance monitoring

While in a holistic monitoring system both of these approaches are used, the extent of their use will depend on the type of emergency. The longer an operation, the greater the importance of moving from monitoring inputs and outputs to processes, impacts, and strategies, and the greater the importance of maintaining a realistic analysis of the causes of the problems humanitarian interventions are meant to tackle. Evidence from evaluations suggests that it remains a constant challenge for agencies to move their monitoring from administrative or logistical issues to those related to impact and strategy. A closely related challenge is to maintain an updated situation analysis.

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Situation and Performance Monitoring in Different Kinds of Emergencies

Monitoring in acute crises

Although findings from the synthesis of evaluations in Chapter 3 suggest otherwise, most of the head offices of agencies interviewed as part of the research for Chapter 2 felt that their monitoring systems worked reasonably well in acute crises, mainly because of the strong interaction between HQ and field staff and a widespread use of informal means of monitoring (especially phone calls, e-mails, and field visits). However, the discrepancy between the synthesis of evaluations and findings from the

monitoring survey may be explained by the fact that what characterises the early stages of an emergency is the very strong demand for information, and hence a strong degree of usually informal communication. While HQs feel they are receiving the information they need, this does not necessarily mean that adequate systems are in place for the transference of both formal and informal information.

Monitoring in longer term emergencies

A key feature of more chronic or longer term emergencies is the importance of a strong situation analysis as well as the ability to constantly update and refine this. From a monitoring perspective there may be little difference between longer term emergencies and development interventions. Donor fatigue is an increasingly common element in longer term emergencies: to counter this, operations need greater capacity to monitor and report on their impact and to make linkages to local civil society and government.

Monitoring for protection

The protection agenda has greatly increased the range of issues humanitarian workers are now expected to monitor. While the focus used to be on the successful delivery of assistance to affected populations the agenda has shifted to include the extent to which the rights of civilians are respected, particularly in armed conflicts.

Chapter 2 summarises the numerous types of monitoring currently taking place in the humanitarian sector, and reached three main conclusions:

- 1 accountability is for the most part upward to meet agency needs, rather than downward to primary stakeholders;
- 2 methods tend to be either quantitative or a mix of quantitative and qualitative;
- 3 there are multiple monitoring approaches, many of which overlap. This in itself is part of the problem – each individual agency has developed its own system and approach, leading to a lack of harmonisation, over-complexity, and multiple monitoring requirements from different donors.

Current Performance and Constraints in Monitoring

4.4.3

The research carried out for Chapter 2, as well as the synthesis chapter, have established that current monitoring practices reflect the problems inherent with systems in the sector as a whole: limited primary stakeholder involvement; lack of adequate administrative systems; poor levels of communication and inadequate feedback; and lack of qualified staff. Monitoring is in general considered a low-priority activity, is under-resourced, and is confined to routine and bureaucratic activities. Straight-jacketed to ensure upward accountability, monitoring fails to build meaningful and continuous information exchanges between stakeholders. It therefore currently offers limited potential for supporting ongoing learning.

The synthesis chapter, as well as previous analyses such as that related to Kosovo in Annual Review 2001, found general weakness in monitoring practice. The ad hoc nature of monitoring comes across in a number of reports this year, and the one report that notes high quality monitoring does not elucidate how this was achieved. On the other hand the analysis carried out in the meta-evaluation of evaluation quality showed that the assessment of monitoring performance in EHA is relatively strong and that this area rated well above the average for areas covered in the ALNAP QP. Nineteen per cent of evaluations were rated as 'good', and 44 per cent as 'satisfactory' in relation to their analysis of the intervention's monitoring and/or real-time evaluation mechanisms, and the effect of these on intervention results. Along with the research carried out for Chapter 2 we therefore have a sound basis for our conclusions concerning monitoring.

A particular problem that needs to be highlighted is that of staff overload. Agency staff are already heavily committed with reporting and other requirements and do not prioritise monitoring. We may now be faced with the irony that results-based management systems, which were meant to enhance accountability and decentralised management, have simply added to field staff burdens and made staff performance less rather than more efficient. The added gains in knowledge concerning impact may not balance this tendency, especially if results-based information is not being used. Earmarking of funds also adds to overloading as it requires extra levels of reporting. The current situation can be summed up as: more demands, less resources, and confusion as to the value of monitoring in the first place.

One conclusion from Chapter 2 is that many agencies are requiring staff to monitor against a wide range of commitments, including in relation to development goals.

Monitoring now needs to cover commitments to international protocols and resolutions, including minimum standards; ethics in humanitarian response; gender equality; and human rights and protection issues. International initiatives like the Red Cross/Red Crescent Code of Conduct, the Sphere standards and indicators, and the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP), greatly increase the range of issues to be covered. All of these have perfectly valid aims. The question is whether the agencies concerned can field sufficient human resources to ensure that they are all monitored effectively. If the human resources cannot be found and deployed, how in practice should staff cope with these different and increasing monitoring requirements?

Other problematic monitoring areas are summarised in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Problematic Areas in Monitoring	
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of planning; absence of logical framework or similar planning tools. ● Insufficient linkages between planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation in the project cycle and management practices.
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Narrow focus on monitoring for donors. ● Focus on inputs and outputs rather than impact. ● Focus on quantitative analysis rather than analysis of social process.
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Financial: monitoring needs to be included in budgets. ● Human: lack of investment in training and capacity building. ● Systems: poor performance of monitoring systems.
Stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of involvement or strengthening of capacity of government institutions and implementing partners. ● Limited participation by primary stakeholders in the monitoring process at various stages (e.g. design, implementation, feedback). ● Ineffective communication across different stakeholders.
Constraints linked to emergency situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Security and access. ● Fluidity of the situation. ● Lack of baseline survey/data against which to monitor.

How to Improve Monitoring

4.4.4

Improving Trust and Feedback

A key issue in acute crises is the degree of trust between field staff on the ground and their colleagues in country, regional and head offices. Frontline staff have to both understand and feel comfortable with their agencies' monitoring systems. However, what emerges from our analysis is a picture of monitoring as a control tool, extracting data to verify the status of specific projects. The accountability function of monitoring eclipses the learning one, and compliance overrules adaptation.

A key indicator of the strength and relevance of a monitoring system is the quality of feedback that those generating the information receive. Feedback has multiple functions. It can be limited to just basic quality control and queries about the data submitted. But it can also provide field staff with real encouragement to improve the quality of information they are supplying and to acknowledge their accomplishments. Feedback, of course, is closely linked with learning.

Related to trust is perceived use and ownership. Staff are probably more likely to spend time and effort collecting data if they are confident that those whose job it is to analyse and use that data will take account of it and act upon it if necessary. Note the vicious circle: ineffective monitoring systems are not likely to be used fully, and the fact that they are not used discourages staff from contributing to them. In fact lack of use of findings seems to tie monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian action together.

Monitoring is not simply about collecting information, but is about the capacity to circulate it swiftly to those who need and can act upon it. While formal monitoring data sits in donor reports, managers make their decisions on the basis of more informal consultations with staff or implementing partners. The challenge would then be to institutionalise and professionalise this informal communication so that it can support learning more fully.

Determining and Explaining Information Needs

Staff developing generic monitoring systems are not always the best communicators of the uses to be made of the information gathered. In their guides and manuals agencies need to do a better job of illustrating:

- 1 What needs to be monitored, and why?
- 2 Who should be involved?
- 3 What skills are needed to do the job?
- 4 How will the information be used?

The information needs as perceived by fieldstaff are often not prioritised. In the case of food aid interventions in Malawi, and under the umbrella of ALNAP's LSO over the last six months, field staff from NGOs were able to meet and define their own priorities for monitoring as part of a wider process of information sharing and learning facilitated by the LSO. The field staff themselves prioritised targeting, especially economic status; household size; vulnerability, malnutrition and admission to Nutrition Rehabilitation Units; asset sales; and the impact of rations received, including the use made of food supplied and the impact on local production.

Simplifying Systems

Donors should consider simplifying reporting needs for fund recipients, in particular in relation to earmarked funds. Within individual agencies one partial solution to staff overload may be to nominate staff with appropriate skills and experience to draw together monitoring information and summarise it regularly in a way that will be useful at the organisational level.

The review of collective monitoring initiatives within the humanitarian sector included in Chapter 2 revealed mixed findings in relation to both what constitutes collective monitoring and whether this is desirable or indeed feasible. OCHA-sponsored Humanitarian Information Centres (HICs) appear to offer good potential for stronger collective monitoring, at least in terms of a more organised and collective situation analysis across the whole sector. HICs aim to manage information for systematic sharing of information, which should lead to more informed decision making.

It may, however, be over-ambitious to propose convergence in monitoring systems across the sector, but there is certainly a need for greater debate on the overall objectives of monitoring. ALNAP should consider promoting collective work for the improvement of monitoring in a similar way to its work on defining standards

for, and reporting on, the quality of EHA. However, before ALNAP decides to follow up on its preliminary study with any kind of training programme, the Network may wish to consider helping its members design an ‘auditing’ system which reviews how well an agency’s planning and monitoring system responds to different types of emergencies.

Making Connections with Civil Society and Government

Accountability lines in most donor-funded operations tend to be vertical, with information going back up the line either to a donor agency or to a country, regional, or head office. However, if they are to develop adequate situation analyses, agencies also need to develop strong horizontal linkages with governments, civil society and other agencies. Better use could be made of national capacity, or building of that capacity could be supported where it does not exist.

Shifting the Focus to Impact

Given the difficulties of LRRD, as highlighted yet again this year, monitoring should be able to focus on what actually happens after emergency aid delivery has taken place. Monitoring could provide contextual information – ‘information bridges’ – between these different activities.

As already noted, perhaps the most important added-value of monitoring (in relation to evaluation) is that it gives agencies the potential to keep track of progress as part of a process of continual assessment. So, ‘rather than addressing impact as a question to be answered only once, usually after the intervention has been made, the relevance and usefulness of services should be continually assessed. Through this learning process, the organisation can adapt its services to better meet the needs of users’ (Johnson & Rogaly, 1999). Currently staff do not have the resources for covering impact, and incentives lean toward a focus on the input and output levels. This is particularly worrying in long-term or chronic emergencies where ample opportunities exist to develop relevant monitoring capacities, but where performance has generally proven to be little better than in short-term interventions.

A focus on impact in turn will have implications for the way in which humanitarian actors set the objectives of their interventions. Most intervention objectives are currently couched in terms of outputs or at best outcomes – and, as noted, are assessed as successful because they have achieved satisfactory results at this level. This practice is questionable and appears to be supporting conceptual problems with

LRRD, which in turn contributes to the poor performance on supporting sustainability/connectedness highlighted in Chapter 3. A shift to include impact monitoring will necessitate a re-examination of potential humanitarian action results, and support a realistic focus on what is achievable in terms of LRRD.

Shifting to a Balanced Quantitative and Qualitative Focus

Monitoring data should include both its current quantitative approach but complement this with a qualitative assessment. One of the main strengths of a reporting system that is 'real-time' is that it can establish why particular results are achieved – who the main actors are, who benefits, and who loses. If monitoring data can explain why an intervention has achieved particular results it may be more likely that this data will be useful and used.

ALNAP's research has not provided a sufficient empirical basis to judge the exact scale and nature of the trade-offs that each staff member must deal with, and thereby suggest what an optimal use of resources would look like. This topic will be explored further in the coming year as ALNAP looks more deeply into fieldlevel learning. The challenge is to be able to build the most appropriate mix of methodological techniques into the programme planning process, and to ensure that incentives are in place to encourage staff to use both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This would, however, require a substantial commitment by agencies in terms of training.

Consultation with Primary Stakeholders and Downward Accountability

There is a need for agencies to find an improved balance between reporting for upward accountability and downward accountability to primary stakeholders. There are good grounds for presuming that various interagency accountability initiatives aimed at improving downward accountability have not made a real difference. For example, over the three years of the Annual Review, 86 per cent of evaluations were rated as unsatisfactory in terms of consulting with primary stakeholders.

There is conceptual and policy agreement that consultation is both ethical and necessary. What is needed now is guidance on what is a minimum adequate level of consultation – what is feasible in different situations, how much it will cost in time and resources, and the necessary methods. The ALNAP Global Study on participation is well placed to provide guidance in this area.

An Agenda for Improvement

4.5

Chapter 2 concludes with a set of recommendations for operational agencies, donors, and networks in response to the points raised above, with a focus on simplifying and harmonising systems and promoting downward accountability. Perhaps the most important recommendation for the sector as a whole is that a ‘community of practice’ be formed to continue dialogue on this issue and seek ways to implement the recommendations made in Chapter 2. It should be remembered that Chapter 2 constitutes a first, preliminary assessment of monitoring across the humanitarian sector. Having identified the key problems and constraints, highlighted good practice and made some suggestions for change, it is now up to key actors to take this agenda forward.

