

Learning by  
Field Level Workers

# 1 Field Level Learning: What and Why?

## 1.1 Background

Space for learning in humanitarian operations is often limited by the fluctuating environments in which operations take place, the nature of humanitarian bureaucracies as well as the reactive, time-pressured responses which characterise the sector. Space is further reduced in the highly politicised contexts of complex emergencies, particularly where western militaries are operationally involved as is currently the case in Afghanistan and Iraq. As introduced in Chapter 4, opportunities for field level learning require trust, transparency and flexibility, all of which are militated against by the opaqueness, distrust and hierarchical rigidity common to military–humanitarian operations; operations which, by their very definition, are political.

Yet in order to improve humanitarian response – an objective identified as necessary by successive *ALNAP Reviews* – it is important that individuals and organisations involved in humanitarian action do learn. And as humanitarian action is in large part dependent upon the ability of field staff to manage and implement humanitarian operations, this chapter focuses on field level learning – the field of operation being the place where much learning crucial to the success of humanitarian action takes place.

## 1.2 Introduction

When staff within an organisation respond to a humanitarian emergency – be it a host government, a UN agency, an NGO or a Red Cross organisation – they embark on a process of learning. This process is rendered all the more intense by the combination of time pressures, nature of the practical challenges encountered, and fluidity of the context. In the process of responding they acquire large amounts of information, converting this to knowledge. This is combined with previously acquired knowledge and applied to the design, management and implementation of the current organisational response.

How successful they are in this process will in large part determine their effectiveness and ultimately that of their organisations. How successfully they and their organisations are able to capture, transfer and redeploy the learning from that experience will largely determine how effectively they and their organisations perform in subsequent operations.

Within this process field level workers are central for it is their knowledge, experience, skills and attitudes that can mean the difference between, for instance:

- relief materials getting stuck at the port of entry and being delivered late or not at all, or relief materials being quickly moved through the port and delivered to the intended beneficiaries;
- a community resenting an agency's presence and not collaborating effectively with it, or the community welcoming the agency and supporting its work;
- a relief team being dysfunctional and ineffective, or the team working well together with each team member complementing the skills and attributes of the other members.

Many of the 203 evaluations of humanitarian action included in the four ALNAP *Reviews* have shown that field workers are the principal asset of any humanitarian organisation – they are the representatives of the organisation in the field and the key actors through which humanitarian action is implemented and the affected population supported. How field workers learn and are assisted in their learning and development is thus of central importance to the effectiveness of their agencies and the sector as a whole. This is the primary reason why ALNAP chose field level learning as the thematic focus of this year's *Review*.

### 1.3 The Research Process<sup>2</sup>

This chapter is organised around findings from 37 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with field workers, undertaken between December 2003 and mid-February 2004. Interviewees were selected by means of purposive sampling to ensure representation of several years experience, a range of different agencies, contexts and operations, and an attempt at gender balance. The final sample

included 21 men and 16 women who constituted 26 international and 14 nationally recruited staff. For the first 26 interviews, each interviewee was asked to focus upon two situations: one in which they considered their learning and learning support to have been effective and one where it had been ineffective. They were asked to describe the operational context, their learning before, during and after the operation, and the factors that had contributed to learning or its lack.

Reflection on the results of the first 26 interviews resulted in an additional 11 interviews being undertaken. The second round explored in more depth issues such as sources of knowledge, gaps in knowledge, mechanisms of knowledge transfer, inter-organisational relations and organisational culture, and key learning from experience. In total, 63 humanitarian situations are reflected through the interviews. While not representative, the sample includes most 'types' of field workers. Annex 4 provides details on the make-up of the sample.

Because of the limited size of the sample it was not possible to comment in detail about several issues appropriate to a discussion of learning in the humanitarian sector – for example, to provide a breakdown of responses by type or size of agency, by gender, by geographical location, by type of emergency (slow onset vs sudden vs chronic) or by type of staff (national/international; level of seniority, etc). The purpose of this chapter is rather to understand the ways in which field workers currently learn and to envisage how this can be supported; the qualitative methodology required for this therefore excluded selection of a larger sample which would have allowed for such comparisons. Nevertheless, qualitative assessments in relation to some of the features noted above are included where feasible.

For the most part interviewees were contacted by phone. Analysis of the interviews was predominantly qualitative and thematic. An earlier piece of research by Macnair (1995) which examined similar issues with 200 returned aid workers is used in some sections as an approximate qualitative baseline against which to measure change. It should be noted, however, that this earlier research covered both relief and development workers.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.4 What is 'the Field' and what is 'Learning'?

Quite simply, by 'field' we mean the arena of operation within the affected country, including the capital city where the responding agencies are usually based. By 'field level staff' we include all national and international staff involved in the operation from Country Representative level to Project Officers and Field Monitors directly involved in implementation.

Learning, conversely, involves complex processes and there is a large literature relating to its definition (for example, Senge *et al*, 1999; Kolb, 1983; Garvin, 1993). The definition used for this chapter has been developed from ALNAP's previous work on learning, further review of practice and conceptual literature, and in order to reflect the interface between current thinking concerning learning and knowledge management. From the perspective of ALNAP and for the purposes of this chapter, therefore:

**Learning is the process by which individuals, teams, organisations and groups of organisations create, transfer and use knowledge in order to achieve positive change and realise their goals.**

This definition makes explicit the relationship between learning and knowledge, sees learning as leading to positive change and as a process that, while focussed on individuals, can take place among groups of individuals – whether at the team or organisational level as well as across organisations. In this definition, transfer of knowledge involves the sharing and storing of knowledge while use involves the interpretation and application of knowledge to achieve certain goals.

### Box 2.1

#### The Difference between Data, Information and Knowledge

**Data** discrete, unorganised facts.

**Information** data that is organised into groups or categories which can alter the way a person perceives something.

**Knowledge** familiarity, awareness or understanding gained through experience or study. 'Because knowledge is intuitive it is difficult to structure, can be hard to capture on machine and is a challenge to transfer.'

CIO Council (2001).

Knowledge management is then the practical application of this learning process within and across organisations – notwithstanding that, in reality, this can be a chaotic and unpredictable process; also that individuals manage their own learning cycles within their larger organisational context. The successful management of knowledge involves the ability to distinguish between data, information and knowledge (see Box 2.1).

Kolb's learning model introduced in *Annual Review 2002* is worthwhile mentioning again here. This is because it explains that if learners are to be effective they require four key ingredients/abilities: concrete experience (including reading), reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation (thinking up new ideas), and active experimentation (testing new ideas in the field; Kolb, 1983).<sup>4</sup>

It is not uncommon for individuals and organisations to confuse information sharing with learning. In our understanding, information sharing is external to the individual and involves some form of exchange; the flow of information from one party to another including through networking and the exchange of, for example, a situational analysis report. Learning is 'internal' and involves the application and interpretation of information. In this respect, learning happens when information is converted into knowledge.

## 1.5 The Learning Literature

One of the key distinctions in the learning literature, and an important distinction in relation to humanitarian learning, is between tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge refers to knowledge that is held in people's heads – their experience, beliefs, values and wisdom which are generally taken for granted or may even exist below their level of daily awareness. Tacit knowledge can be made manifest in people's behaviour and through conversation. Explicit knowledge, on the other hand, can be written down and therefore processed by information systems, codified or recorded, archived and protected by organisations (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Some authors have also identified implicit knowledge as an intermediate category between tacit and explicit. For the purposes of this chapter a more straightforward dual typology is used which nevertheless recognises that there is some overlap between tacit and explicit – and especially during learning processes where explicit, standardised training and tacit 'on-the-job' instruction often combine.

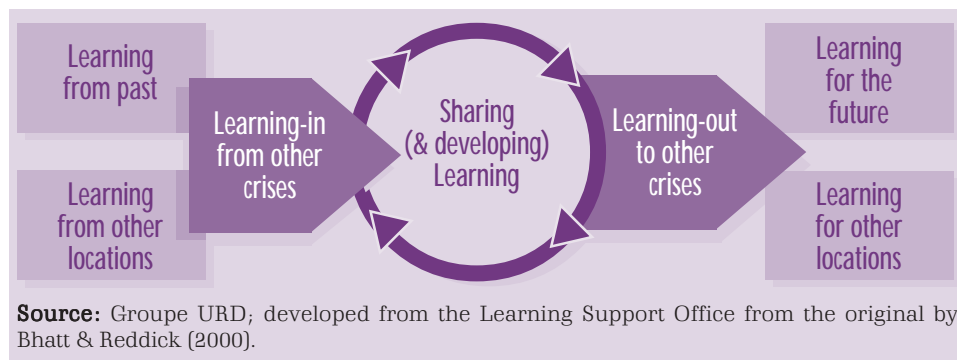
Examples of tacit knowledge include the intuitive reasoning acquired by field workers based on years of experience. This often gives them an ability to accurately ‘fill in the dots’ when presented with incomplete information on a situation and the actors involved. In terms of our dual typology tacit knowledge can be brought to the level of consciousness through, for example, conversation. Examples of explicit knowledge include situation reports, needs assessments, monitoring reports, and evaluations. Both these kinds of knowledge have their value but also constraints. For instance, quality control can be a particular issue with tacit knowledge given the different interpretations that may be taken away from a particular conversation by the participating individuals. With explicit knowledge one of the key concerns is the way in which it moves and is used within organisations. These distinctions and their implications for humanitarian learning are integrated throughout the chapter.

As shown by the interviews undertaken for this chapter individuals have different learning styles and needs, some of which are more related to tacit and some to explicit knowledge. Coupled with the organisational diversity within the humanitarian sector, this calls for a range of learning approaches and tools.

A further useful conceptual distinction is between learning before, during and after operations (see, for example, Collinson & Parcell, 2001). The distinction between these three phases may be less marked for those national and international staff who are cross-deployed between emergency, rehabilitation and development activities. Nevertheless the distinction is helpful for much humanitarian action. While learning during an operation forms a central element of field level learning, the effectiveness of this learning is directly influenced by organisational cultures, incentives, procedures and mechanisms that are in place before the operation or before the deployment of personnel to a new operation. Similarly the ability of individuals, teams, organisations and groups of organisations to learn from their experience during an operation is strongly influenced by their ability to learn after as well as during the operation. It is also related to what they learnt prior to action.

Through its earlier work in developing the Learning Support Office concept, ALNAP created a straightforward but helpful diagram that illustrates the principle elements of field level learning which incorporates the concepts of learning before, during and after. Thus learning from past operations and operations in other locations is brought into the current operation. During the current operation, previous learning is shared, new learning takes place and learning of potential use

in subsequent operations or in operations in other locations is brought out. In fact the project cycle itself could be seen as a large scale learning cycle as there are clear links between the project cycle and the learning phases. If this learning is managed well the knowledge on which it is based will be made explicit in order to aid future action – through, for example, real-time evaluation (RTE), strategic review, and after action reviews (AARs).



It is important to recognise that different agencies, and staff within these agencies, will have different learning needs. People in Aid (2004a) usefully differentiates between two types of agencies – larger better resourced agencies that tend to invest more in human resources, and smaller agencies that make up the majority of the sector and which generally struggle to make ends meet. But even within these larger agencies, rigid bureaucracies and risk-averse behaviour may constrain learning. The sample of interviews on which this chapter is based was not large enough to differentiate between these two different kinds of agencies, but it should be noted that most field workers, whatever their type of agency, commented on the lack of opportunities for learning. The issue may therefore be as much about organisational culture as about resources available.

## 1.6 Purpose and Structure of this Chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to increase understanding of the ways in which humanitarian field workers learn and the incentives and disincentives they face in learning. It explores ways in which field learning can be encouraged through simple changes in working practices and mechanisms that can be easily integrated by agencies.



Promoting learning across the sector through networking, exchange of information, dissemination of evaluation findings and research, is central to ALNAP's mandate. Given the findings of the 2002 *Annual Review* – which included an initial assessment of learning and knowledge management practices in the sector – it was considered timely to move the learning agenda forward through research which focussed on field level learning.

The intended audiences for this chapter are:

- Field level workers, who can use the chapter to compare their own experiences of learning to that of a broad cross-sector of personnel from the humanitarian sector.
- Humanitarian managers, who are encouraged to take forward the recommendations for change in practice.
- Personnel and units specifically involved in the promotion of learning, for example human resource and training departments.
- Evaluation offices and evaluators.
- Personnel working in policy who have a mandate to promote learning.

Section headings for the remainder of the chapter flow organically from the responses to the questionnaires. The chapter is therefore organised as follows. **Sections 2 to 4** cover learning before, during and after operations, analysing field workers' perspectives and the key incentives and disincentives to learning. **Section 5** summarises key points that cross-cut the interviews with field workers – the things that were on their minds and that they wanted changed so that they could learn more and turn that learning into action. **Section 6** concludes with some recommendations that can be taken forward by the sector, by 'learning' units and individual staff, and by ALNAP and the nascent Field Learning Support Initiative Working Group.

## 2 Learning Before an Operation

Briefing is the process by which specific information is passed to staff concerning subjects of importance, particularly relating to their role and responsibilities. Induction relates more to organisational orientation for new staff. Handovers involve more specific on-the-job, one-to-one training once in-country. The three processes may be conflated particularly in the case of newly recruited staff about to be deployed to the field. This may lead to an inadequate understanding of the role of the individual within the organisation.

The *People in Aid Handbook* (2004b) recommends a two-part briefing for expatriates: the first at HQ prior to departure and the second in-country. It suggests that the HQ briefing focus on areas such as administration, basic operational information, general security, and personal health and welfare. Areas such as the sociopolitical situation, culture, the local office, local security and details of the programme are preferably kept for in-country briefing.

The norm across the system appears to be to provide a one- or two-day briefing at HQ to introduce new employees to the organisation and to their jobs. More senior employees such as INGO heads of missions or managers in UN agencies receive a more tailored and thorough orientation; one-on-one meetings with key players are organised and/or provision made to have a one-week handover and mentoring from the in-country agency head upon arrival. Except for heads of mission, however, there do not appear to be any norms for handovers.

Based on interviews, areas that seem to be better covered in briefings are agency practice, to a lesser extent agency policy, and country context. What is missing is information about social dynamics such as local culture or office politics. Veteran field workers reported that they always ask about the office dynamics of their proposed field assignment. Cultural issues, resentments and personality conflicts were reported as having an enormous impact on people's ability to do their job, but are often tacit. In this respect a personal handover was seen as necessary partly because of the need to transmit tacit information. As one field worker commented: 'We need consultations where people say what they would never write' – that is, the

free-flowing and sensitive tacit knowledge only available to someone who has recently been in the field.

There was no clear pattern as to which organisations provide better briefings and handovers. Much seems to depend on the attitude of managers and the willingness of the person leaving the post to be proactive. The mixed experience in this area is corroborated by an exchange on handovers on the Aid Workers Network which can be found at <http://forum.aidworkers.net/messages/140/82.html?1037798494>. Draft handover guidelines can be found at <http://www.aidworkers.net/management/people/handover.html>.

The reasons for dissatisfaction with briefings and handovers comes across clearly in the following amalgamated quote:

I received no specific instructions for the assignment. A review of similar cases was not available ... Goals for the assignment were not clear, we were just told to go out and be professional. Also we did not have a clear outline of what tasks the job required ... There was no body of information to access. It would have been helpful to have a file of previous reports of what happened ... The easy answer is good handover notes, including a list of key people, but people aren't very careful about good handover notes.

The important point here is that briefings are often not adequately tailored to the specific needs of staff and that personal handovers are limited. Respondents would like better quality briefings in two areas: first, the objectives of the agency in the operation and how they fit into that – that is, their specific role – and second, social dynamics. It seems there has been some progress in the last decade, however, as Macnair's (1995:15) research with 200 returned agency staff found: 'Comments on pre-departure preparation ranged from "insufficient, superficial", "so cursory to have been a waste of the agency's money" and "a formal induction package should be mandatory" to those who said that there had been no time for any briefing or other preparation.'

The lack of adequate briefings and handovers is tied to two key weaknesses in the humanitarian system: not respecting the contributions of field workers, and a de-prioritisation and/or lack of situational analysis leading to poor understanding of local context and culture.

Field workers looked to their peers, colleagues and the internet as key sources of learning in areas where agencies were failing them – something also common during and after operations. None mentioned specific umbrella websites that covered all of their pre-departure needs. As self-starters, field workers often have the resources to make necessary contacts, network, and to carry out some pre-departure learning – which could imply that agencies are relying on field workers to do much of the orientation themselves.

### 3 Learning During an Operation

Learning during operations is difficult but necessary if humanitarian action is to improve. Respondents reported having little or no time to read but instead ‘learnt on the run’ from colleagues, peers and informal contacts, some of which originated out of more formal meetings. Responses made it possible to differentiate between gathering information or data (for example, on security) and learning (in our definition creating, transferring and sharing knowledge in order to achieve positive change).

#### 3.1 The Wrong Kind of Information and Guidance?

What was missing from respondents’ responses was almost as important as what was included. None of the respondents mentioned needs assessments, household surveys, or agency monitoring and reporting systems as sources of learning. As these represent the main methods by which agencies gather information it might have been expected that they would be seen as contributing to learning. Lack of reference to these mechanisms may result from their not generally being set up in a fashion that promotes learning. For instance the thematic chapter on monitoring in the 2003 *Annual Review* showed that information gathered during monitoring tends to flow upwards from the field, to national capital, to international HQ, and is rarely used as the basis for reflection and learning. The same can be said for much needs assessment which maps, rather than tries to understand, needs – the latter being closer to learning.

Neither did field workers find many of the guides and manuals produced by HQ useful as far as their learning was concerned:

Guidelines are nice, but they are big documents. It is also nice to have checklists. But we have so many now; too many. People don't pick any, [they] just go on working their own way. [On the other hand] it is good to have people you can call. You can get a lot out of a short discussion.

Like many field workers I learn best by doing. Experience in many environments has been very good. I don't see my teams learning through documents or websites.

While the generic nature of many centrally produced manuals and guidelines may appear off-putting to field workers who want information tailored to their context and operation-specific needs, something more than the length and format of manuals appears to be at play here. Possible factors involved may be the invariable difference of perspectives and frequent tension between the field and head offices and the lack of field level 'ownership' of the manuals. The apparent reasoning relates to the idea that 'If this manual was produced by people in head office and I and the field workers I respect did not have input into it, then it is unlikely to be of much use to me'. Stories of field teams preparing their own guidelines because the ones from head office were regarded as being of little use despite the fact that the final product is little different from the original head office product are not uncommon.

Maps were mentioned by four respondents as one key source that allowed them to digest large amounts of information quickly, including maps produced by the UN OCHA Humanitarian Information Centres (HICs).

## 3.2 Mentoring, Peer-to-Peer Learning, and Networking

Field workers interviewed tended to turn to peers and colleagues to support their learning when agencies did not do so. Nine respondents (about one-quarter) focused on **mentoring** as one of the best means of learning. They contrasted this method to more formal means:

My best information is from mentors. Documents exist, but mentors who have implemented them [and] know the best way to implement them, they

are the best source of my information. I could be more in touch with mentors in HQ.

What I would like to see happen is much more work with teams at the field level, and work with managers on the ground on how you support them through the process of working with teams. A checklist is not going to make much difference. I would really like to have seen a mentor for emergency situations, to have free discussions, no evaluations built into the process. But systems as they are, they're always looking for someone to blame.

The contrast between formal mechanisms, such as guidelines, and on-the-job learning is striking. Guidance and checklists do have a role but need to be complemented with more personal learning approaches. Difficulties involved in mentoring should also not be underestimated: 'In our regional response team we each have a couple of people that we mentor. To be quite frank, it is very difficult at a distance. It is a full time job.' Clearly agencies need to give more thought to the likely benefits of on-the-job learning through mentoring, as well as the costs involved in this.

Mentoring is one element of what has been termed transformational leadership (Bass, 1996). This involves managers motivating others and acting as role models rather than as superiors to be obeyed. Transformational leaders have more challenging expectations of their staff and typically achieve improved performance through individualised attention to staff developmental needs. This style is contrasted by Bass with transactional leadership, which concentrates on day-to-day work and short term results; in this model rewards are used to ensure compliance and punishment or discipline is introduced for failure to comply with agreed upon norms. It may be that there is a preference for field managers with transactional skills in humanitarian action, given its focus on short term results and day-to-day operations. This preference may come at the expense of key elements related to learning such as mentoring.

Interviewees also emphasised **peer-to-peer exchanges** as key to learning, again in contrast to more formal methods. One respondent noted, however, that while peer-to-peer learning is key, inter-agency competition may prevent this from occurring freely. To move beyond such competitive behaviours, systemwide peer-to-peer exchanges might be best organised by non-NGO actors such as ECHO or the UN.

Fifteen respondents, or about 40 per cent of those interviewed, described **networking** as a key source of on-the-job learning; in several cases it was seen as the best learning source. Only three of these respondents, however, also mentioned mentoring as a key learning factor. This suggests that aid workers have different learning styles and needs – albeit that this chapter is based on a small sample.

Respondents described networking in two main ways. First, they referred to the formal and semi-formal networking of agency staff who group around a particular sector or theme, such as health. There is an overlap here with coordination groups and meetings. Second, they discussed informal networks of colleagues, friends and peers that had developed over years, maintained through personal contact and e-mail. Of these types of networking there was a preference for informal networking and learning – that is, through tacit means.

The following quotes provide a flavour of how field workers view networks: 'Networking in the field is important because everybody has a little bit of the puzzle'; 'I mostly work with a network of people and information, documents, and workshops. I give and get information constantly; it is an iterative process of building knowledge'; 'I am in touch with others doing the same work. It is not a deliberate network. It would help to be more in touch, in learning online. People are pointing out your blind spots. It helps to see another perspective.'

Some respondents were cautious about formalising networks. Partly this related to competition between agencies and partly to time. One field worker noted: 'I think those communities of practice, that is exactly what is needed. But in today's world where can you find time to constructively contribute to a network?' Another commented: 'It's a good idea not to formalise the communities of practitioners too much. We do need consultation where people could say what they would never write up.' Here we can see how sharing knowledge is applied both formally and informally, and occurs at both the tacit and explicit level. As noted in Chapter 4 and subsequently in this chapter, however, field workers need the space in order to be able to connect and so manage their information sharing, knowledge and learning in an optimal fashion. While many field staff create their own space for individual learning, if the sector is to improve then organisational and systemwide learning needs to be more consciously managed.

In terms of gender differentiation with regard to networking and mentoring, no clear patterns were revealed. Of the 16 cases where respondents highlighted networking,

six were women and 10 men – roughly proportionate to the sample. And for those highlighting mentoring, five were women and four men. There was also no clear pattern in relation to whether the respondent was international or nationally recruited in the case of networking, although only two of the nine respondents who highlighted mentoring were national. However, the sample is too small to draw any general conclusions from this breakdown.

The humanitarian sector is supported by a number of formal information networks such as the Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN), the Emergency Nutrition Network, LA RED in Latin America, and Duryog Nivaran in South Asia (see ISDR, 2004 for further details on disaster related networks). Mechanisms that facilitate peer-to-peer learning, however, are few. One example is the Aid Workers Network, a managed internet peer exchange mechanism that links relief and development field staff in order that they may share support, ideas and best practice as well as guidelines and checklists (see Box 2.3 in Section 5.4).

### 3.3 Recognising Field Workers' Contributions, and Incentives

People in Aid (2004a:53) comments that there has been 'enormous progress in almost all aspects of human resources, staff and their management – in general, staff and volunteers are better selected, better prepared, better skilled and better managed. This is particularly true of the larger agencies, the development agencies and the agencies with substantial unrestricted funding.' However it notes that smaller agencies, which make up the majority of the sector, struggle much more with human resource issues; also that significant human resource issues remain in most agencies.

Field workers included in the sample generally did not feel valued by their organisations. One reason was that agencies provided their staff with few incentives and little space to learn. While one or two positive comments peppered the sample, the following quote from an NGO Country Director is representative: 'In some situations, really good pieces of practice get lost in a sea of complaints a year later about what wasn't done. Field people often feel disillusioned at not being understood, and being on the receiving end of criticism.' This links the lack of learning opportunities and space to a hierarchical bureaucracy that gives limited credit to the field worker.



Several respondents made suggestions as to how to correct this situation. Two suggested that learning needs to be linked to performance appraisal – that is, to incentive structures that support learning. Others suggested longer term contracts. But the overwhelming view was that agencies need to get away from an environment where workers are seen as commodities and that it is ‘really important that somebody takes an interest’, in the words of one international NGO staff member. One means of doing this is through promoting learning: ‘People feel that you care about them if you try and educate them. If you have an accountant working for you for 10 years, you need to introduce him to programming.’

### 3.4 Learning from the Affected Population and Others

Perhaps the major gap in field level learning is the lack of learning from the affected population and other actors such as local government personnel. In the 37 interviews, only three respondents, all national staff, mentioned affected population participation; none, however, mentioned learning from the affected population. Comments such as: ‘We visited such and such a community, learnt through discussions with them that our strategies were inappropriate, and changed our approach’ were absent. Previous *Annual Reviews* have pointed out that coping and adaptive strategies are not well understood by humanitarians, and that there is limited learning as to how far it is possible to build on these strategies or the extent to which external interventions undermine them. A good example involves the targeting of food aid, as discussed in Chapter 3. This lack of learning is linked to the ways in which information tends to flow vertically through formal mechanisms such as needs assessments and monitoring, as discussed earlier.

While all levels of learning need to be strengthened, the lack of learning about and from affected populations and other local actors when all agencies strive for a participatory approach – at least in their policies – seriously undermines the credibility of humanitarian action. Part of the issue is a conceptual one, as learning from communities is unlikely to take place when ‘experts’ are expatriates with a ‘we know best’ attitude (Kent, 2004). At the same time there are several institutions that have taken learning from communities as a central feature of their work – for example, the Disaster Mitigation Institute (DMI) in India, Groupe URD (including through its work on the ALNAP Global Study on Participation by Crisis-affected

Populations in Humanitarian Action), and the Tufts University project on livelihoods in Afghanistan (for example, Lautze *et al*, 2002).

Constraints to learning from affected populations should not be underestimated, particularly in complex emergencies. Security considerations may make access difficult and curfews may keep contact brief. On the other hand much humanitarian action takes place in relatively stable situations such as refugee camps. Following Kent (2004) it may be that participatory organisations that create the space for openness and reflection can themselves be involved in greater learning from affected populations – such as those organisations mentioned in the previous paragraph. And while we may know more about livelihoods than 10 years ago, the mechanisms for translating this knowledge into practice are still underdeveloped.

## 4 Learning After an Operation

### 4.1 Debriefing<sup>8</sup>

In over half of cases, respondents had no individual exit interview or debriefing process in-country. Most debriefings, held outside the country of operation were unsatisfactory experiences and often left staff with a sense that no one cared or that they were not heard. In many cases the emphasis was on personal debriefing with a focus on counselling, and debriefings in general were not considered to have supported learning. For example: 'Had a debrief for three hours and they asked mostly psychological questions. I remember they said I was a psychologically sound person, but I said I am ill. I was sick for a year. At that time it would have helped to meet with other aid workers once a month.' Comparison with Macnair (1995) suggests that there has been little or no improvement in debriefing practice over the last 10 years.

## 4.2 End-of-Project Reporting and After Action Learning

Most organisations use end-of-project reporting. This varies from financial reporting to evaluation workshops and/or reflection exercises, only some of which may support learning. For many agencies the procedure is to produce a report for HQ or leave an end-of-mission report in the office, with little sense of how these documents should be used or feedback on them from supervisors. Clearly such practices do not promote or provide space for learning.

The reports constitute organisational property and are not usually shared with other organisations. Typical reasons given are that the reporting is about accounting for budgets, which an organisation would not want to reveal, or that it is too operational; also that an organisation would not want to admit mistakes and jeopardise its chance of future funding. The disincentives for sharing with partners are said to be increasing as donors exert ever greater pressure for results-based reporting which heightens the climate of competition. The absence of systematic post-operation feedback mechanisms to field level workers does little to validate their experience.

Furthermore the culture of secretiveness in the sector (see Kent, 2004) does little to support lesson learning. As two respondents noted: 'Sharing mistakes has a lot of value, but it is usually kept secret. There is no opportunity to raise problems'; 'Things that had gone wrong were never shared. They could happen again.' One respondent also noted the lack of follow-up: 'The biggest gap in learning in the field [is lack of follow-up]. We do collect the lessons learned and push them down to the field. What we don't do is that we are not systematically going back to the field and seeing where learning was applied.'

AARs – defined as the professional discussion of an event or action with a focus on performance that enables participants to discover for themselves what happened and why and how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses – are one means of post-operation learning. The ALNAP sponsored study on AARs suggests that they can be flexible learning mechanisms that can lead to immediate change in performance and as such offer much potential for the sector (Sexton & McConnan, 2003); further details on AARs can be found in the 2002 *Annual Review*.

There is significant potential for cross-organisational learning at the end of programmes that have invariably involved many agencies working together, but a

dearth of mechanisms for achieving this. Evaluations may be useful for learning within organisations, but because there are so few joint evaluations cross-organisational learning is rare. One respondent noted that facilitated meetings of agency staff post-operations for an inter-agency AAR would be enormously helpful. Such an event would not only validate the experiences of field workers but also provide an opportunity to disseminate key findings about the operation as seen through field workers' eyes and so to complement more formal evaluations. One constraint to this is who should take the initiative in this area, and who will provide the resources given the lack of mandate and sectoral incoherence around responsibility for learning.

The timing of after action learning events is critical. Many expatriate staff leave at the end of programmes as do national staff hired on short term contracts. It is therefore important to hold learning events before these staff have left. As observed by the Learning Support Office test in Malawi, many key staff had left by the time other staff had begun to relax and have space to reflect on their practice.

## 5 Key Cross-Cutting Themes and their Implications for the Sector

### 5.1 Use of Tacit Knowledge Assets

What emerges from the previous sections, and to a degree that might appear surprising to those outside the sector, is that humanitarian field workers draw heavily on tacit knowledge assets through conversations with colleagues. Such conversations may take place at the margins of coordination meetings, in the car park afterwards, in coffee bars, and in restaurants and bars in the evenings. They are seen to be beneficial for two principal reasons:

1. The ability to access critical information quickly.
2. The ability to complement written, explicit knowledge with tacit knowledge.

Obtaining information through discussion with peers offers field workers a fast, more direct route to the critical information and knowledge they need. While much of the information and personal knowledge conveyed in such conversations may be available in written form, this may be held in unknown locations and would take time to access, read and apply before turning it into personal learning. Another attraction of obtaining knowledge in a social way is that it enables the questioner to assess the credibility of the person providing the information as well as the quality of the information being provided. Such assessments can be made through, for example, supplementary questions about the extent of the informant's field experience, where they have travelled in the country, their sources of information, their tone of voice and their body language. However, as previously discussed, questions of quality control in the transfer of tacit knowledge remain.

Commenting on the interviews, Foster & Faulkner (2004) write: 'Aid workers reported the usefulness of formally shared security information and maps provided by OCHA, but they also benefited much from hearing informally from each other about where roads were safe or not safe, about the difficulties other organisations were encountering, who to contact about something, what resources could be shared, and many other such types of shared tacit knowledge that helps them to conduct their own operations.' On the basis of the interviews Foster & Faulkner listed sources of explicit and tacit knowledge assets (Table 2.1) as follows:

Table 2.1 Sources of Explicit and Tacit Knowledge	
Sources for Explicit Knowledge Assets	Sources for Tacit Knowledge Assets
Designated contacts	Supervisor and peers
MOUs and agreements	Social networks
Written briefing materials	Partner organisations
Manuals, SitReps	Coordinating groups and meetings
Supervisor orientation	Field visits and contacts
Org. charts and written briefings	
Own organisation	
Written briefing materials	
Shared methodologies	
Written materials	
Org. reports and data	
Partner reports and data	
Agency reports	
Own managers Reports	
Own managers	

In one situation because it was a slow onset emergency it was possible to use documents, everyone was working in a consortium, and it was a nice environment of sharing ... In another case where basically the situation was changing very rapidly, day-to-day, the daily briefing by OCHA was very helpful; there was a good flow of information through these briefings. Then after meetings, usually there was some chatting – who has heard what from what part of the country. Some other organisations had been to parts of the country that we were not in. A lot of what we pick up at that time is hearsay and word of mouth, but it helps ... The informal communications will always remain important. Some things may still be relevant, but they would not say it in front of 60 people.

If tacit knowledge gained through face-to-face sharing is especially valuable in faster moving contexts then this provides important pointers for the design of measures to support learning in such contexts. Nevertheless, it is clearly not sufficient for such operations to rely on learning that is limited to social encounters that are inevitably limited in their reach. Not only is there a limit to the number of people who can be involved in any one conversation but such flows of information and knowledge exclude certain groups, such as those who don't drink alcohol or those with families who may prefer to spend their evenings at home. Bars and social clubs may also be more frequented by men, and may exclude national staff.

Another difficulty with learning in such social contexts is that notebooks are rarely present and the information and knowledge shared may not be accurately remembered or recorded. One respondent commented that 'there is no trace of the work we did'.

One possible approach to addressing the difficulties of exclusivity and capturing shared knowledge could be to create opportunities for informal exchanges that are more open and more structured than the type of exchanges that typically take place in a car park or bar – for example, after-work social gatherings in a relaxed but quiet environment where soft drinks as well as alcohol are available. This is supported by one respondent who reported:

I set up an informal get together every couple of months, somewhere social. It's a way of decompressing in an informal manner. Something I've noticed around the world, it's more than camaraderie, it's a way of solving problems

... The psychological relief is also good. My whole life is work in a sense ... These kinds of gatherings gain importance the further out you go from the capital ... The main thing is for workers to have respect, listen, intuit what a person is saying, not be rigid.

A complementary approach could be to organise workshops that bring together field workers from different agencies with the specific objective of encouraging the sharing of tacit information and capturing it in written form for subsequent sharing with a larger group – in short, for converting tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge.

Another interviewee who works as a trainer in the humanitarian sector stated: 'I take tacit knowledge captured in training groups and make it explicit in manuals for the whole humanitarian sector.' Such a process is precisely that supported by the ALNAP Learning Support Office test during the relief operations in Malawi in 2002. This process represented the capturing of tacit knowledge held by an initial group of field workers and rendering it explicit so that it could be shared with all the field workers involved in the national programme for general ration distributions. It was highly rated by the participating agencies (see Box 2.2).

Faulkner & Foster comment (2004a:22):

[W]hat we see as the learning need during a field level assignment is for very rapid assimilation of new knowledge assets specific to the immediate task, the key ones of which will be in tacit form. The right sources for these are not always evident so aid workers need skills, partners and tools to be able to smell out and unearth these truffles. Even if these are made explicit efficiently, the fluidity of field conditions is likely to create a demand for new tacit information tomorrow. The explicit is always in catch-up mode. Explicit knowledge from other situations may be of interest (if people know that it exists), but few have the time to plough through others' reports to find the truffles they need. The best form of explicit knowledge in this situation is in the form of highly distilled checklists and methodologies based on a wide range of evaluations and organizational experiences, which can serve as tools for locating more local tacit knowledge.

### Box 2.2 The JEFAP Workshop Manual Training Cycle

In September 2002, WFP and the 12 NGOs comprising the Joint Emergency Food Aid Programme (JEFAP) Consortium decided to undertake a process of revising the initial guidance material that had been issued three months earlier. The process comprised three workshops run in the north, south and central regions of the country. The workshops brought together selected field officers from each agency (70 in all) with the objective of sharing experience gained during the first three months of general ration distributions and indicating areas where the earlier guidelines could be modified and strengthened.

Participants were separated into three groups which rotated between three 'stations' with each station being managed by a Facilitator and a Recorder (this is known as the Carousel Method among workshop organisers). The three 'stations' corresponded with the three main themes of the guidelines, namely:

- i.** community sensitisation and targeting;
- ii.** food distribution;
- iii.** monitoring and reporting.

Each group spent approximately two hours at each 'station' and then moved to the next station leaving the Facilitator and Recorder to work with the next group. At each station the group members were led through three key questions:

- 1.** What is supposed to happen? (according to initial guidance)
- 2.** What is actually happening? (current practice)
- 3.** What should be done differently? (recommendations for revised guidelines)

The Recorders captured the discussions on flipcharts that were typed-up and circulated after the workshop as part of the record of the event.

Following the third workshop a drafting group made up of the three station Facilitators, two WFP staff and the LSO Project Director began preparing a JEFAP 'Manual for the Provision of General Food Distributions during Emergency Programmes in Malawi'. The manual significantly expanded the initial guidance and incorporated information of use to field officers on the origins of JEFAP, national coordination mechanisms, and relevant Codes of Conduct. Each member of the group took responsibility for drafting different chapters of the manual. In addition to the material from the workshops the manual drew on pertinent sections of manuals produced by WFP, CARE and Concern Worldwide. Once the JEFAP manual was complete it formed the basis of 11 one-day training courses that were delivered to all 245 JEFAP Field Officers in different locations around the country.



## 5.2 High Staff Turnover and Lack of Continuity

Interviews revealed once again that high staff turnover and poor practice in relation to handover and knowledge transfer continue to pose a considerable barrier to learning and knowledge continuity in the field. Similar findings have been a theme of evaluations synthesised by ALNAP since 2004 and a recent survey of 38 European NGOs concluded that 'Career planning and development and the (recruitment and) retention of experienced staff and managers were the most important issues for respondents ... the same issues [that were] ... recorded as priorities ten years ago' (People in Aid, 2004a).

While individual agencies may monitor trends in staff turnover and the incidence of satisfactory handovers their results are rarely directly comparable and, in the absence of any aggregate monitoring, it is not possible to know what the trends actually are in relation to either staff turnover or the incidence of satisfactory handovers between staff.

High staff turnover is the product of short term assignments and/or poor staff retention and the factors contributing to both are well summarised in People in Aid (2004b). Of course many of the departing staff go on to work for other humanitarian agencies so while their knowledge may be lost to their former organisation it may represent a gain for the new organisation. However, from the perspective of knowledge transfer within a particular programme or within a particular agency, high staff turnover and poor staff retention are negative outcomes.

It appears that progress is, however, being made in some agencies vis-à-vis staff retention. Over the last four years the IRC, for example, has more than doubled its retention of field based health coordinators and health programme managers from one-and-a-quarter to three-and-a-half years. This is tied into a learning programme whereby each year health coordinators are brought together for a meeting (the Annual Health Coordinator's Conference) to share their learning and discuss their concerns. They also evaluate the Health Unit's performance in terms of the support it provides – including the timeliness and quality of technical assistance, contributions to programme design, quality of field visits, and the identification and provision of training opportunities. However, such significant improvements in retention remain exceptional.

Given the reality of high staff turnover it is vital that agencies maximise the transfer of knowledge from the departing staff member to her/his successor. As noted in Section 2, many handovers are not satisfactory, the sector does not appear to have norms for handovers for staff below the most senior level, and there appears to be little accountability within most organisations for ensuring that knowledge is effectively transferred.

Lessons for humanitarian agencies wishing to reduce the operational knowledge often lost as a result of high staff turnover are available from the corporate sector and the emerging field of knowledge continuity management which involves identifying the processes involved in ‘the efficient and effective transfer of critical operational knowledge – both explicit and tacit, both individual and institutional – from transferring, resigning, terminating, or retiring employees to their successors’ (Beazley *et al*, 2002). Six steps to achieving effective transfer are identified, starting with a knowledge continuity assessment which involves mapping the state of knowledge continuity/discontinuity within an organisation. Subsequent steps involve: determining the objectives and scope of the continuity management initiative; establishing coordination responsibility; planning the initiative; the creation of a ‘methodology to harvest and transfer’ the critical operational knowledge; and the final step of transferring the operational knowledge.

The humanitarian sector could adapt and simplify such approaches to provide agencies and their staff with ‘Handover Guidance’, tailored to the particular needs and language of the sector. Such guidance could encourage the allocation of responsibility for ensuring that a proper handover takes place as well as the provision of ‘Handover Templates’ that can be adapted to suit the type of agency and the post in question. It could also include guidance instruments to encourage organisational monitoring of handovers and assessments of the effectiveness of the handover process by the leavers and their successors. In light of Section 2, monitoring opportunities provided for face-to-face handovers should be encouraged in the field posts of all humanitarian agencies.

### 5.3 The Role of Managers in Creating the ‘Space’ and Culture for Learning

Knowledge management is regarded by some sceptics as nothing more than simply good management. This view is strongly supported by interviewees who conveyed a

clear sense of the importance of managers in creating, or not creating, connecting (sharing) space for learning by their staff – as well as collecting (storing) knowledge. For instance:

For me the basic skill of a good manager is facilitation, and in my organisation we do simple things like holding the management meeting with the chair in rotation. I want to give others the experience of leading meetings, paraphrasing and making minutes. This is where we implement the learning experiences for them.

Where variation occurs in the management approach within the same organisation this could imply either that the organisation does not have standardised approaches for the encouragement and support of learning at field level, or that it is not holding team managers to the standards that do exist. It would be interesting to compare the guidance provided to managers in different organisations and the expectations made of them in relation to the encouragement and support to learning and to reporting on their activities.

Another aspect of management that relates to learning revealed by several interviews is the importance of performance appraisal mechanisms as a means of providing feedback to staff, and of giving them a sense of their strengths and weaknesses and thus their future development.<sup>9</sup>

The challenges facing a manager in the field are captured by Foster & Faulkner (2004):

In humanitarian organisations the aid manager faces the double challenge of extreme time pressure and orienting large numbers of new people. While the manager constantly faces a huge pressure of ‘upward delegation’ to make daily decisions, he faces the need to ‘downward delegate’ in order to get the work done, but to people who may be inexperienced. Yet humanitarian work with its big turnover of people is exactly where managers need to spend time monitoring performance and making sure that their staff can be brought up to speed as rapidly as possible. Most field workers report not getting enough feedback from supervisors. Workers often reveal cases of horrific management styles (with which subordinates were stuck) or of major changes in style which can only be explained by a change of person, not an organisational set of standards.

Almost 10 years ago Macnair's (1995) survey of aid workers found similar problems. It is not possible on the basis of these two surveys alone, however, to assess whether the quality of management has improved over the decade. What is apparent is that the quality of managers continues to be a central concern of field workers and that progress in encouraging and providing support for field level learning is significantly dependent on the views and willingness to change among this cadre of field workers.

## 5.4 Undervaluing National Staff and Local Actors

The importance of national staff and local implementing partners and other actors as sources of knowledge for international staff and agencies came through clearly from the interviews. This is a theme of this *Review* as a whole; as noted in Chapters 1 and 2, national staff play a significant role in the success of emergency operations. Two of the international staff interviewed commented:

Obviously you can find general stuff on the internet about the country and one buys books, but the real knowledge is with the local staff. As international staff, it takes us a while to find out where the memory is. They don't just have the organisational knowledge but the history. It's also about how you approach things. People may feel threatened if you pepper them with too many questions at the beginning.

Only in recent years have local staff been seen as worthy of investment. We need to have local staff involved in what we are doing, as people who think with us.

However, there was a strong sense that the knowledge and insight held by national staff was undervalued and often bypassed, particularly in those organisations that hired new national staff on short term contracts and did not subsequently integrate them into the regular staff. This results in the waste of a key knowledge asset of any agency. As *People in Aid* (2004a:36) notes: 'The first and most significant problem which arises in trying to analyse nationally recruited staff – is that very little is known about them. The literature is very sparse, but even more surprisingly the agencies themselves often do not know basic information about their own staff.'

Cultural differences, not only between different nationalities but also between development staff and incoming emergency personnel, may be partly responsible for the undervaluing of knowledge held by national staff. However, in the light of the discussion in Section 5.3 above, national staff may be underrepresented in the socialising that appears to play an important role in the exchange of information and tacit knowledge. Expatriate relief workers who shun the bars frequented by international staff and socialise in ways that are more in tune with local mores are often able to gain more insight into local knowledge and attitudes than their international peers.

Knowledge held by local partner agencies and other local actors also seems to undervalued: some local NGO workers described international NGOs as 'arrogant' and 'being in a hurry'. One respondent commented: 'Relations between international and national NGOs are not easy. They look down on locals ... International NGOs are sometimes very arrogant; they don't want to listen to you [local NGOs].'

Certainly language differences present a major barrier to the sharing of knowledge between national and international agencies. As one international interviewee commented: 'Everything is about communicating, we work with translators but it is a barrier.' The use of expatriates without adequate language skills creates barriers to the sharing of knowledge within teams and the ability of international agencies to access local knowledge that is vital to their effective operation.

A related issue drawn from the interview material by Foster & Faulkner was that national staff had significantly less access to knowledge assets than international staff. National staff obtained most of their knowledge from their own organisations, from their working partnerships with international organisations, and to a lesser extent from their country context. They had only limited involvement with on-site coordinating structures where they could gain a broader perspective and acquire tacit humanitarian operational knowledge. In contrast international staff participated heavily in group meetings where much tacit operational knowledge is exchanged (workshops, country teams, networks, evaluation exercises, etc). Foster & Faulkner (2004) found that 'international staff accessed approximately 10 times more explicit knowledge assets from their organisations than the national staff. International staff also attended co-coordinating structure meetings at approximately 10 times the rate of national staff.'

### Box 2.3 Peer Support and Practical Knowledge Transfer: The Aid Workers Network

Launched in 2002, Aid Workers Network has become the pre-eminent knowledge sharing and practical support network for field workers of relief and development agencies. It is run for and by professionals who may be isolated from peer support due to their remote geographical location, employment by an organisation with limited capacity, or short term nature of their contract. Many individuals are motivated to share ideas, experience and thinking with their peer group across the globe – giving and gaining insights across continents and sectors.

Unlike many information and knowledge sharing networks that focus on the dissemination of published and 'grey' literature, Aid Workers Network has a strong practical orientation and regards its members as the key knowledge repository. It has close to 6,000 members in over 150 countries and receives 12,000 visitors to its website each month: [www.aidworkers.net](http://www.aidworkers.net)

The principal services currently offered to members are:

- A **discussion forum**. The 'Aid Workers Forum' enables members to pose questions to network members. Direct responses and pointers to additional resources have been submitted on over 1,000 topics. More than 4,500 messages have been posted on subjects ranging from how to label goods, handle bribes, use translators, identify reputable suppliers and deal with visits by donors, to questions on rights-based approaches, capacity development, human rights, roundabout pumps and food distribution. This discussion has been used to create an online archive that can be accessed and added to by others.
- Aid Workers' **advice pages** that support 'open source' knowledge creation. Prepared voluntarily by members and invited contributors, these pages provide practical 'how to' guides, checklists, background briefings and links to proven sources. The 30 subjects covered to date include: financial management; buying a new vehicle; addressing demands for programme inclusion; preventing malaria; and increasing your effectiveness as a people manager. Members' comments and additions add value and are captured in order to build the knowledge base created.
- A weekly **email bulletin *Aid Workers Exchange***. This is used as a means to reach field workers with email but without satisfactory web access. It alerts

CONTINUED

### Box 2.3 Peer Support and Practical Knowledge Transfer: The Aid Workers Network *contd*

members to new themes and website content, flagging both new advice pages and selected discussion topics and encouraging members to contribute.

Aid Workers Network is the virtual equivalent of asking your colleagues for advice in the corridor or over coffee. Opinions can be shared and challenges tackled using ideas emerging from personal and widespread professional experience. The quality assurance of information is always a challenge – is the advice given proven to be best practice? Does it take into account the latest learning? Is it universally applicable? In many fields peer review is the mechanism used to assure quality. Aid Workers Network relies entirely on members to produce information resources, moderate discussions and provide the Network services – this is voluntary, undertaken in people’s spare time, and therefore limited by its very nature. However, limitations are countered by creating links to existing centres of knowledge, such as research centres, universities, aid agencies and sector based communities of practice. Increased participation by representatives of these knowledge centres and networks offers the potential for enhancing the quality of Aid Workers Network services.<sup>10</sup>

## 5.5 Training and its (Limited) Role in ‘On-the-Job’ Learning

Training did not feature strongly in the material generated by the interviews. Why this was so is unclear. Traditionally training courses have taken place away from the field and involved subject matter that is not tied to immediate learning needs. However, in recent years training courses in security management, Sphere Standards and the IASC Code for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Women and Children in Humanitarian Response have been delivered in the field during ongoing operations. Possibly the sample of those interviewed did not include participants in such courses.

Where training was referred to by interviewees it was not always regarded positively. For instance, two interviewees commented:

I think adult learning is really about sharing experiences. The practice of teaching courses has to stop. We need to encourage facilitation of staff

learning face-to-face, not just going off to courses. The ideas coming to us are not from the field but from people outside, which is dangerous. We're losing a lot if we don't capture what's happening on the ground.

It seems that in the context of discussions about field level learning, traditional classroom based training courses are not regarded as especially useful. Reasons might include the lack of real world situations and experiential learning involved in classroom based teaching, the difficulty many field workers experience in applying their teaching once back 'on the job', and the insidious association that has developed between the words 'training course' and 'per diem' in many countries. The issue of the immediate relevance of classroom based teaching was raised by one of the interviewees who actually works as a trainer: 'The key learning about my training is that there is no immediate impact. I work for the medium to long term, letting time pass before [course participants] can assimilate the knowledge into their behaviours. It takes time for them to assimilate new knowledge and change their behaviours.'

Interestingly very few of the evaluations submitted to ALNAP assess training activities provided to field level workers, although there is more discussion of training for the affected population. One of the rare detailed assessments of training in evaluation reports can be found in the ECHO evaluation of its Sudan nutrition programme (July, 2003:14).

That classroom based teaching is not well-regarded by field workers is nothing new. A 1999 Review of Staff Training in UNHCR concluded that conventional training courses were neither effective or sustainable and the organisation has since undertaken a strategic shift in its approach to staff training and development. As a result 20 per cent of the staff development budget has been allocated to field offices for use in addressing the learning needs they have identified. On-the-job learning (coaching, shadowing, action learning, guided missions, etc) is encouraged. Training courses are being reshaped into distance learning modules or mixed self-study elements and workplace application. E-learning was introduced in 2003. Based at the UNHCR Regional Centre for Emergency Training in International Humanitarian Response in Tokyo (known as 'The e-Centre'), this offers online courses on management, personal effectiveness and communications skills (<http://www.the-ecentre.net/>).



## 5.6 The Role of IT in Knowledge Transfer

The rapid pace of developments in IT is opening up significant possibilities for using IT in knowledge transfer. For example, e-learning is now possible for those field workers who enjoy fast internet access. Access to published and grey literature documentation is possible through portals such as the World Bank's Development Gateway and ID21 (operated from the Institute of Development Studies in the UK), and of course there is ReliefWeb with its country specific collections of assessment reports, press releases and coordination mechanisms. HICs with a good web presence have been established in six humanitarian operations. One development of particular relevance to field level learning and the provision of support to staff in the field has been the establishment and rapid growth of the Aid Workers Network over the last two years.

Despite favourable comment from many interviewees about improved email and internet access, it should be noted that several interviewees referred to the difficulties they still encounter in their current locations. Even some based in UN agencies referred to slow access which deters them from downloading material from websites. Given current developments in IT, this situation is likely to change relatively soon. Nevertheless, while dramatically improved access to documentation and (remote) peer support bodes well for field level learning, the results of this survey point to the continuing importance of social learning, experiential learning and face-to-face communication in the humanitarian sector.

## 6 Conclusions

The results of the interviews with 37 field workers yielded a wide range of insights into learning at the field level and how the process is perceived by agency personnel at the 'sharp end' of humanitarian operations. Some of the findings serve to reinforce messages contained in the 2002 ALNAP *Annual Review* such as:

- High rates of staff turnover significantly hamper knowledge transfer and learning within programmes.
- Learning from the affected population, national actors and national staff is limited; the knowledge that they hold is not adequately accessed by international agencies or their expatriate personnel.
- Field workers do not feel adequately valued or supported by many of the organisations they work for.
- The mechanisms for briefing, debriefing, handovers, end-of-project reporting and learning events are still poorly developed in many agencies, though in others progress is being made.
- Field workers prefer 'on-the-job' methods for learning such as coaching and mentoring rather than classroom based training events.

Fresh insights have also been provided by the interviews, such as:

- Personnel at the field level have very specific needs both in terms of the knowledge and learning methods they require during an operation; many of their knowledge and learning needs are not being met by current approaches and mechanisms. Methods of knowledge sharing, learning and training that are able to respond to the specific operational requirements of field workers are favoured over those that impart knowledge, learning and training that is not focussed upon their immediate needs.
- Mechanisms that agencies tend to regard as tools for learning and knowledge sharing, such as guidelines and manuals, in addition to the current mechanisms

for gathering and transferring information, such as monitoring, reporting and surveys, are not rated as important sources for learning by field workers.

- Field workers rely to a significant degree upon each other for accessing the learning and knowledge they require. Even where knowledge is available in documented form, field workers often find it preferable to access this through conversation with fellow field workers because it saves time and enables them to assess the quality and operational credibility of the source, as well as interrogate the source in order to better understand the knowledge and information being conveyed. Frequently conversation with fellow field workers enables them to access knowledge that is not available as an explicit knowledge asset but as a tacit knowledge asset that requires conversation, body language and trust between the individuals involved to articulate and transfer it.
- Managers play a critical role in determining whether sufficient space is created for field workers to learn and whether or not a culture is created in programmes and country offices that encourages and supports learning.

The interviews also revealed a wide variation in practice in relation to learning and support to learning within the humanitarian sector. Such variation has important implications for field level learning. First, the fact that such variation exists needs to be borne firmly in mind by readers of this chapter; what resonates with a reader familiar with one type of agency may look strange to a reader working for another type of agency. Second, the variation means that 'one size fits all' solutions are probably not available. At the same time any proposals for learning across the sector need to take into account its overall structure which constitutes a minority of well resourced agencies that are likely to have quite rigid bureaucracies, with a majority of under-resourced agencies that have limited capability to invest in human resources (People in Aid, 2004a) but possibly more flexibility in terms of experimenting with different learning methods.

As a consequence, generalised assessments about the rate of progress in relation to learning and particularly support to field level learning are problematic. Our sense is that progress is being made in improving learning in individual agencies, and there is growing recognition of the importance of knowledge management and learning. However, many field workers who appear to intuitively recognise the importance of learning are not being supported by their managers and agencies in their attempts to learn.

What are the overall messages that can be teased out of these findings for humanitarian agencies and the sector generally? What are the challenges that remain for the sector in its efforts to improve its learning, and what steps might be taken to address some of these challenges?

In considering these questions it is important to differentiate between:

- the agenda for individual agencies in terms of supporting their staff and orienting their culture more towards learning;
- the agenda for the sector as a whole in terms of supporting cross-organisational and sectorwide learning at the field level.

### **Key Message 1**

**Greater recognition and support should be given to field workers' preference for specific information and knowledge directly related to their operational priorities, and for accessing such information and knowledge through conversation with other field workers.**

**At agency level** The high value attached by field workers on face-to-face exchanges of information and knowledge rather than documented sources, including in social settings, needs to be recognised in agency strategies for information dissemination, knowledge sharing and learning. In doing so agencies might consider the following range of issues:

- Their expectations of field workers in terms of how they use generic manuals and guidelines.
- Provision of 'quick-scan' summaries of key points in all lengthy documentation and (even) greater use of checklists.
- Complementing documented sources with face-to-face presentations and discussion opportunities.
- Providing 'Help Desk'-type support capacities either within the organisation or by supporting sectorwide support capacities such as the Aid Workers Network.

Where possible the 'Help Desk' should have a physical presence or representative in the country/area of operation to meet the preference for face-to-face interaction, and have the capability to serve as interlocutor/interrogator of remote support capacities and resource centres/libraries.

- Reviewing the balance of on-the-job training through coaching and mentoring as compared to classroom based training.
- Reviewing the number and type of opportunities for face-to-face exchanges between field workers and adding more frequent informal meetings where appropriate. Care should be taken to ensure that informal events are inclusive and sensitive to gender and cultural concerns such as alcohol or the location of the get-togethers.

**The key role of managers in organising and leading such events and in creating and supporting learning generally should be recognised by agencies.**

Finally, care should be taken in the use that is made of email and website resources. While interviewees revealed that the internet was a useful source of learning, in particular prior to an assignment, during emergencies they turned to their colleagues, peers and mentors as their main sources of learning. Processes for information exchange and knowledge sharing that are dependent on the IT may well be unsatisfactory substitutes for the face-to-face exchanges and the sharing of tacit knowledge that is so valued by field level workers.

**At the sectoral level** Similar points need to be considered in relation to inter-organisational learning, though account will need to be taken of the likelihood of inter-agency sensitivities and politics and the necessity to establish a degree of mutual trust among the participants. Among the types of events that would be useful are:

- The holding of informal after-work gatherings and discussion groups that provide field workers from different agencies with the opportunity to share and discuss common or possibly individual concerns.
- Holding workshops or AAR-type events that provide opportunities for field workers to share their knowledge and experience gained up to a certain point

during an ongoing operation – such as the JEFAP workshops facilitated by the ALNAP Learning Support Office test in Malawi.

- Organising inclusive social gatherings to follow coordination meetings or other events that bring together large numbers of field workers
- Identifying trusted ‘outsiders’ who might be included in coordination meetings and learning events and social gatherings, and who can bring and represent broader knowledge than that available to most field workers

Responsibility for organising or supporting such inter-organisational events could be agreed among groups of agencies or at coordination meetings. In some contexts it may be appropriate to identify a neutral capacity to facilitate such activities. The important point is to recognise that such a role can benefit all the agencies involved and the effectiveness of their overall efforts.

## **Key Message 2**

### **Stronger incentives are needed to encourage agencies to support and facilitate learning at field level and for more sharing of best practice in approaches**

While some agencies have developed sophisticated and well-resourced mechanisms for facilitating learning by their field staff, as well as capturing lessons for the organisation from different operations, others give low priority to learning generally let alone specific methods for supporting their field staff to learn. Interestingly, however, the examples of good practice described in this chapter are not the sole preserve of the larger, better funded organisations. Moreover many of the good practices identified by interviewees are not high cost procedures that will always remain out of reach of smaller organisations. Providing regular opportunities for teams to reflect on their action is much more an issue of prioritisation and commitment to learning within the team and the organisation – in other words, a matter of organisational culture.

If good and poor practice does not split solely along the lines of size and funding, then why is it that good practices have not spread more evenly across the sector? Certainly good practice is spreading: many agencies are strengthening their HR capacities and procedures and seeking to encourage and support learning at different levels within their organisations. But such changes are not being

undertaken by all agencies and invariably are being undertaken separately and with only limited sharing of experiences between organisations and agencies. If some organisations in the sector can achieve good practice then so may others – given sufficient incentive and support. Providing more encouragement for agencies to support and facilitate learning and opportunities for agencies to share their learning experiences and their approaches to supporting learning would be powerful means for increasing the number of agencies following recognised good practice.

To a degree, incentives are already present in the funding mechanisms within the sector: some donor organisations encourage their NGO partners to include learning activities in their funding proposals while others encourage their partners to demonstrate their commitment to learning or to indicate their learning from previous operations and how it will be used in relation to new operations. For instance:

Proposals shall incorporate specific references to relevant lessons learned from previous disaster situations and/or development programs in the affected area' (OFDA Guidelines for Proposals and Reporting, 2004).

Partners undertake to develop jointly a *quality partnership* based on: ... the promotion of a learning culture based on the evaluation of humanitarian operations and in sharing and disseminating lessons learnt and best practices (ECHO Framework Partnership Agreement for NGO Partners, 2004).

One of the principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship is that donor organisations 'Support learning and accountability initiatives for the effective and efficient implementation of humanitarian action' (Principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship, 2003).

While such provisions are welcome it is notable that for many donor organisations the explicit encouragement relates much more often to evaluation than to other forms of learning, or more precisely to field level learning. Greater articulation by funding organisations of the types of learning processes that they would like to encourage and are considered good practice would be desirable. An indication of the types of questions that might be asked of implementing agencies in their partnership agreements or funding proposals is provided by the organisational learning self-audit tools available, such as that provided in Box 2.4.

## Box 2.4 An Organisational Learning Self-Audit

**Instructions** Answer these questions for your organisation. Discuss your responses and their implications with co-workers.

1. Are managers who support learning rewarded? Yes  No
2. Is there reflection and feedback at the end of meetings? Yes  No
3. Are learning opportunities provided as part of all meetings and gatherings of employees? Yes  No
4. Can employees direct their own learning? Yes  No
5. Does every job include some form of on-the-job training? Yes  No
6. Do training events have planned preparation and follow-up components?  
Yes  No
7. Are the principles of adult learning applied to training programmes? Yes  No
8. Are employee knowledge, skills and attitudes linked to the strategic goals of the organisation? Yes  No
9. Do employees receive frequent formal and informal feedback on their job performance, and do they discuss what they need to learn in order to improve their performance? Yes  No
10. Do employees have individual learning plans? Yes  No
11. Do managers have a mentor or coach who can help them implement their individualized learning plans? Yes  No
12. Are managers clear about their coaching role with the people they supervise?  
Yes  No
13. Is experimentation and risk-taking for the purposes of learning supported, and not punished? Yes  No
14. Does the organisation encourage and facilitate knowledge-management and best practice transfer? Yes  No
15. Do teams plan for group learning? Yes  No
16. Are there opportunities for whole organisation learning? Yes  No
17. Are the physical space of the office and the service and production areas designed for learning and productivity? Yes  No

(Reproduced from Gill, Stephen 2000 *The Managers Pocket Guide to Organizational Learning* Amherst MA:HRD Press)



How effective are current mechanisms and structures for sharing good practice on learning within the humanitarian sector?

Unlike some of the more technical capacities within humanitarian agencies, the linkages between sections concerned with learning and support to field learning appear poorly developed and patchy (see, for example, People in Aid, 2004a). Moreover, organisational capacity for learning and the location of responsibilities for supporting learning, particularly at field level, are often not clear to personnel let alone to outsiders. In some organisations responsibility for supporting learning is separately located in a learning unit; in some the lessons learning capacity is co-located with the evaluation function; in others learning responsibilities are woven into the operational departments. And behind them all are the human resource departments which have a critical influence upon the type of individuals selected as field workers and the degree to which the organisation develops a learning oriented culture. The lack of clarity about where the responsibility for learning and support to field learning during humanitarian operations actually resides is a challenge for those attempting to develop effective networks for sharing experiences on learning as well as effective ways of supporting learning at field level.

Yet such challenges can and are being overcome. For instance, the UN system has developed the UN Learning Chiefs Group that shares best practices and develops common approaches to learning and staff development within the respective UN agencies – a process that is supported conceptually and through staff training by the UN Staff College. Within the NGO sector, international networks such as and KM4Dev that aims to share information and best practices in the field of knowledge management and organisational learning are increasingly being complemented by national level networks, the UK Senior Managers Organisational Learning Network (SMOLNet)<sup>44</sup> being one example. However, the primary focus of such networks and groups in their sharing of approaches to knowledge management and organisational learning is the development sector rather than the arguably more challenging humanitarian sector. There is a case for extending or complementing such networks to provide a more specific focus on the sharing of good practice on approaches to supporting learning within the humanitarian sector. The nascent ALNAP Field Learning Support Initiative (FLSI) Working Group plans to develop and support a community of practice on approaches and techniques for supporting and facilitating learning at field level.

### **Key Message 3**

**The current 'architecture' of the humanitarian sector is not sufficiently supportive of knowledge sharing or cross-organisational learning, and some reorientation and gap filling is required.**

Over the last decade the humanitarian sector has developed a quite complex 'architecture' of organisational structures, mechanisms and programmes aimed at improving coordination and information exchange between the large number of organisations and agencies comprising the sector. Examples of the mechanisms and programmes concerned are joint agency assessments, VAMs, CAPs, HICs, IRIN, and ReliefWeb. Such initiatives have had a positive effect on coordination and have greatly increased the volume of data, information and, to an extent, knowledge available to agencies and their personnel. However, gaps remain in relation to knowledge sharing and much more could be done to use the existing architecture to support and facilitate cross-organisational learning.

Gaps in the current architecture include the following:

- While ReliefWeb and Forced Migration Online<sup>12</sup> go some way to providing the humanitarian sector with an equivalent of the World Bank's Development Gateway facility for the sharing of published and 'grey' literature, the humanitarian sector lacks a direct equivalent.
- The sector would benefit from a centrally maintained Yellow Pages of past and current field workers with names, emails and specialities who are willing to pass on their knowledge to new and current field workers. It would also benefit from a single 'one-stop' website aimed at providing international staff with country briefings (culture, language, customs, contacts, etc) before taking up post in a new country. Organisations such as the Aid Workers Network or People in Aid might be encouraged and supported to take on such roles.
- Apart from some of the activities undertaken by ALNAP, cross-organisational and sectorwide learning in the sector is not systematically managed. Learning is rarely transferred from one operation to another on a systematic basis, which leads to repeated and significant loss of knowledge. There is no ownership of learning in the sector as a whole which makes it difficult to map, coordinate and encourage the incorporation of learning into existing planning and coordination

mechanisms etc. As noted by Kent (2004) hierarchical, risk-averse humanitarian bureaucracies appear to be particularly poorly placed in terms of promoting learning. ALNAP and/or the IASC might be encouraged to take on a more explicit role of facilitating cross-organisational learning events at the end of operations.

- The focus of most of the structures aimed at improving coordination and information exchange is to improve information; they do not directly address the learning needs in the sector by supporting and facilitating processes of learning from experience. Perhaps this reflects a lack of clarity within the sector about the differences between information, knowledge and learning: improvements in information flows and knowledge sharing may be resulting in a belief that learning is being facilitated and achieved when this is not necessarily the case. However, the fact that these mechanisms and structures may not adequately address or facilitate the learning needs in the sector does not necessarily mean that they could not do so in the future. There may well be room for adding on more explicit learning support roles to the existing mechanisms and structures (see Box 2.5).

### Box 2.5 Coordination Mechanisms as Opportunities for Cross-organisational Learning?

The substantial investment in the architecture and processes of coordination within the humanitarian sector over the last decade offers considerable potential for encouraging and supporting field level learning. Three particular mechanisms are considered here: the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) and its integral Consolidated Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) process, the Humanitarian Information Centres (HICs) and inter-agency coordination meetings.

#### **CAP/CHAP**

In recent years the CAP process has developed to cover the full programme cycle with the CHAP covering the activities involved in preparing the Consolidated Appeal (ie, context analysis; needs assessment; scenario building; goal setting; role/responsibility setting and response planning). Workshops of 2–3 days duration are now central to the CHAP process. Such workshops provide an excellent opportunity for:

**CONTINUED**

**Box 2.5** Coordination Mechanisms as Opportunities for Cross-organisational Learning? *contd*

- consideration of lessons from previous operations in the country (including previous CAP activities if available);
- 'bringing in' relevant learning from operations elsewhere;
- creating communities of practice around particular activities;
- bringing together the work of different inter-agency sectoral working groups.

The monitoring, evaluation and reporting activities undertaken after the launch of the Appeals also offer excellent opportunities for cross-organisational reflection on experience and the identification of lessons. While the current CAP/CHAP arrangements recognise the importance of learning, it would seem that the considerable potential for making learning integral to the process and exploiting the opportunities presented has yet to be fully realised.

### **HIC**

The HIC model of a 'common framework' coordination support and information sharing service to humanitarian agencies (whether UN, NGO or government) is generally highly valued. HICs have now been implemented in seven operational contexts (Kosovo, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Iraq, Liberia and Darfur). While this list is somewhat limited in relation to all the locations where humanitarian operations have been undertaken, it does include many of the larger operations. As technically competent entities sharing large volumes of information and knowledge, and viewing all humanitarian agencies as its clients, the HICs have significant potential in supporting field level learning among and between humanitarian agencies during an operation. However, the provision of learning support is not currently on the agenda of the HICs; the 'to do list' of HICs is already crammed and coordination support will always be the top priority. A recent OFDA/DFID evaluation gave no consideration to such a role (Sida & Szpak, 2004).

**CONTINUED**

**Box 2.5****Coordination Mechanisms as Opportunities for Cross-organisational Learning? *contd*****Inter-Agency Coordination Meetings**

Coordination meetings are often the only time that representatives of many of the organisations participating in an operation actually come together. Most coordination meetings seek to maximise the amount of information shared in the shortest possible time and generally offer few if any opportunities for reflection or learning. In addition there are often a significant number of ‘new faces’ at each meeting and participants take care about what information they share with the full group and how they express it. The time-pressured context and limited levels of trust operating within many coordination meetings serves to limit their potential as mechanisms for field level learning. Nevertheless, there may be room for building reflective questions into the agenda (for example, where do we think we are doing well/making good progress? Where do we feel we are being challenged/being less effective?) or for encouraging smaller group meetings to take place before or after the main meeting in order to create more opportunities for building trust and giving time for more reflective exchanges.

## Notes

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- 2** This chapter draws heavily on a background paper commissioned by ALNAP from Fernande Faulkner and Brian Foster. This paper is available on the ALNAP website at [www.alnap.org/pubs/pdfs/faulkner2004.pdf](http://www.alnap.org/pubs/pdfs/faulkner2004.pdf). Fernande Faulkner and Brian Foster conducted the interviews on which this chapter is largely based, and presented their findings at various ALNAP venues.
- 3** The fact that Macnair's study included both development and relief staff may make the data only very roughly comparable, as development workers might be expected to receive more adequate support for learning from their organisations.
- 4** Concrete experience is the basis for observation and reflection, from which new action can be deduced. In order for new action to happen, and in the process of reflection, a person will create his/her own ideas (theory) about how something might work. This new theory then serves as a guide in terms of how to produce the new action and how to test its implications.
- 5** This chapter draws heavily on a background paper commissioned by ALNAP from Fernande Faulkner and Brian Foster. This paper is available on the ALNAP website at [www.alnap.org/pubs/pdfs/faulkner2004.pdf](http://www.alnap.org/pubs/pdfs/faulkner2004.pdf). Fernande Faulkner and Brian Foster also conducted the interviews on which this chapter is largely based, and presented their findings at various ALNAP venues.
- 6** The fact that Macnair's study included both development and relief staff may make the data only very roughly comparable, as development workers might be expected to receive more adequate support for learning from their organisations.
- 7** A number of job postings in Darfur, Sudan, being circulated at the time of writing (July–August 2004) expect appointees to be in the field within a week, which allows scant time for briefing.
- 8** For further details on debriefing, see the *People in Aid Handbook* (2004a).
- 9** Performance planning by the supervisor and worker is forward rather than backward looking and may well be a more positive experience for the worker and may help the worker avoid negative behaviour and defensiveness.
- 10** Aid Workers Network aims to protect the openness and accessibility of the Network, and therefore has chosen not to introduce a subscription fee. A negative consequence of this decision is the on-going difficulty in establishing a sustainable funding base. Despite ample evidence that demonstrates Network services meet expressed demand, and hint at the enormous latent potential among the international development community for horizontal, demand-led knowledge sharing, the continued development of this innovative community of practice is at risk.
- 11** <http://www.bond.org.uk/lte/smolnet.htm>
- 12** <http://www.forcedmigration.org/>

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