

ALNAP Annual Review 2002

Humanitarian Action: Improving Performance through Improved Learning

ALNAP

Active Learning Network for Accountability and
Performance in Humanitarian Action

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Foreword

I am confident that this second publication in the ALNAP Annual Review Series will be received even more warmly than the first. Its arrival is timely. Dialogue has been renewed on issues related to accountability, performance standards, implementation quality and overall results achieved. This debate takes on an even sharper focus within the context of recent revelations concerning West Africa and the disproportionate emphasis of humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan.

Each Annual Review contains a synthesis of the findings of evaluations of humanitarian action and a meta-evaluation assessing the quality of individual reports using the ALNAP Quality Proforma. The ALNAP Annual Review 2002 covers forty-six individual evaluations and nine synthesis reports. These provide a mirror by which the Humanitarian Sector can reflect on its performance and on the quality of its current principal tool for accountability and learning – evaluation.

This year's focus is on learning to improve performance. It is a broad subject covering many perspectives, disciplines and organisational interests, yet vital given that the Humanitarian Sector has often stood accused of being unable to learn from its repeated experiences in providing assistance and protection. I am pleased that ALNAP has chosen to explore this central issue and that an earlier focus on evaluation is now complemented by a comprehensive approach to active learning. Though ambitious, this Review provides an excellent agenda for the Humanitarian Sector and an initial map to help guide it in addressing this agenda.

The picture that emerges is one of a sector that has, and is developing, a number of approaches to encourage and facilitate more effective learning, but that these do not on the whole measure up favourably with those of the 'comparable' sectors reviewed in Chapter 2. The Humanitarian Sector faces considerable challenges, requiring concerted action in a range of areas – human resources, training, funding, methodological work to test and improve field-level and cross-organisational learning, and information and communication technology architecture. The key message is that learning must be seen as a continuous process within a 'learning culture'. This presents a particular challenge to the leaders of those organisations

that make up the Humanitarian Sector, and in particular to those of funding organisations that need to make greater allowance in encouraging a genuine learning culture.

This is an ambitious agenda, but one that I am confident ALNAP members will embrace and work towards achieving.

Wayne MacDonald

Chair of ALNAP

(Head of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation,
International Committee of the Red Cross)
Geneva, April 2002

Chapter 1
ALNAP Annual
Review 2002:
Introduction

John Borton would like to dedicate his contribution to his mother Raye Borton who died as this Annual Review was being finalised.

1.1 Purpose and Scope of the Annual Review Series

The ALNAP Annual Review Series continues to play a central role in ALNAP's broader efforts to support and improve learning and accountability within the Humanitarian Sector, aiming to advance understanding and thinking, and thereby improve the quality of performance, by

- providing the Humanitarian Sector with the means to reflect annually on its performance, identifying generic strengths and weaknesses through a synthesis of the principal findings, conclusions and recommendations of the evaluations of humanitarian action made available to ALNAP in the preceding year;
- addressing each year a central theme of common and current concern to those within the Sector; and by
- monitoring the quality of evaluations of humanitarian action through a meta-evaluation of the annual evaluation set, highlighting good and poor practices as a means of maximising the benefits of evaluation – a key learning and accountability tool for the Humanitarian Sector.

The Series is relevant to all areas within the Humanitarian Sector: policy, operations, advocacy, organisational learning, knowledge management, human resource and evaluation. It also offers valuable insights to scrutineers and observers of the Humanitarian Sector such as parliamentary and congressional committees, journalists, researchers, and those involved in the design and provision of training for humanitarian personnel.

ALNAP's Annual Review Series aims to complement other publications focusing on the Humanitarian Sector, such as the *World Disasters Report* (IFRC, 2001), *Global Humanitarian Assistance 2000* (IASC, 2000) and *The State of the World's Refugees* (UNHCR, 2000).

1.2 The Annual Review 2002

1.2.1 A Review of Contents

Following some preliminary thoughts in this chapter, the *Annual Review 2002* goes on to address this year's central theme of 'learning within the Humanitarian Sector'. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the learning and knowledge-management literature before looking at the experiences of what are in some important respects 'comparable' sectors – the US Military, the National Health Service (NHS) in England, and the UK Construction Industry – suggesting areas of good practice for further consideration by the Humanitarian Sector. Chapter 3 then provides an outline of current learning and knowledge-management practices within the Sector, and an analysis of their strengths and weaknesses.

The annual synthesis of evaluation of humanitarian action (EHA) reports, completed and made available to the ALNAP Evaluative Reports Database (ERD) in the preceding year, is undertaken in Chapter 4, which for ease of access and comparison is framed around the main relief sectors identified in the reports. Chapter 5, as the concluding chapter, draws together the various strands, offering up a provisional 'learning' agenda for individual humanitarian organisations and the Humanitarian Sector as a whole.

The annual meta-evaluation (an assessment of the quality of the yearly evaluation set) has its own dedicated coloured section, a location it will retain in future Annual Reviews. Also included in the Meta-Evaluation Section is the latest version of ALNAP's Quality Proforma against which the evaluation set is assessed. Following its application in the *Annual Review 2001*, the Quality Proforma has undergone a further refinement and strengthening, setting a benchmark for commissioning agencies and evaluators alike. Discussion within ALNAP has also revealed the Proforma's potential use further 'upstream' in the evaluation process and in the programme cycle – in programme design and monitoring.

This year's set of evaluation reports, selected on the basis of ALNAP's definition of evaluation¹, comprises 46 evaluations of humanitarian action and 9 evaluation syntheses, commissioned by 22 organisations to assess the performance of operations in some 44 countries.

Given the *Annual Review 2002*'s focus on learning, it is important to acknowledge that there are types of evaluation practice that contribute to learning within the Humanitarian Sector but don't necessarily conform to the ALNAP definition² – particularly with respect to the 'independence' factor. To distinguish them from those that do meet the ALNAP definition, the latter will where necessary be referred to as 'independent' evaluations.

1.3 A Shift of Focus

While 'independent' evaluation remains central to the Annual Review in the selection of the annual set for synthesis and meta-evaluation purposes, there

Box 1.1

Still Problems After All These Years?

Housing Provision Following Natural Disasters in Bangladesh:

The incidence of severe natural disasters has risen over the last decade in Bangladesh, mainly as a result of vulnerable households being forced to live in dangerous environments which are subject to flooding and cyclones. In responding to such disasters DFID provides funding to British NGOs to provide, inter alia, shelter and housing. Successive evaluations of UK NGO programmes undertaken in responses to the 1988 floods (Borton et al, 1990); the 1991 cyclone (Jones et al, 1994); the 1998 floods (DEC, 2000); and the 2000 floods (DFID-B, 2001) provide a longitudinal perspective on performance in the provision of shelter and housing over a 13-year period.

Common findings were

- because of the relatively large scale of the asset, coverage and targeting has been problematic, with leakage to the non-poor and overlap in geographical coverage;
- considerable demands are placed on the agencies' capacity to target the assistance effectively;
- wide variation in response, eg, between grants and loans, provision of replacement housing or parts of housing;
- delays in the provision of housing; and
- lack of participation of the affected population leading to inappropriate design.

is growing recognition that the particular learning needs of the Humanitarian Sector require a number of complementary learning mechanisms, of which 'independent' evaluation is but one.

In 2001, ALNAP Members adopted a new programme of work, 'Improving Performance through Improved Learning', to look at the wider issues of learning within the Sector – how it currently learns; the obstacles to learning; and strategy options for improving learning. The *Annual Review 2002* draws and builds on this work.

ALNAP's own journey towards this broader focus on learning, provides useful insights into evolving perceptions within the Sector, and is incorporated below. The remainder of this chapter sets the scene for Chapters 2 and 3, by outlining some of the central issues connected to learning within

Consider the following quotes

(Borton et al, 1990, p43, with reference to the 1988 floods):

'Some houses were found to have been allocated to households who were not even the poorest of those with homestead land.'

(Jones et al, 1994, with reference to the 1991 cyclone):

'Provision of housing is an extremely difficult intervention as it generally involves the transfer of significant resources to a relatively small number of beneficiaries ... These problems in the design of house-building projects were raised in the 1990 evaluation of ODA's support to post-flood rehabilitation, but regrettably many of the same mistakes were made after the 1991 cyclone.'

(DFID-B, 2001, p27, with reference to the 2000 floods):

'...it was clear that there were still significant problems with targeting and beneficiary selection in the housing programme (in common with other forms of assistance), such as the tendency for NGOs to focus resources on their own client groups'

Issues such as coverage and targeting are always problematic in humanitarian action, as are other points raised above. The issue here is that housing interventions are likely to be particularly prone to certain problems, and that this lesson has not been learned over a relatively long period, despite the commissioning of detailed evaluations.

the Humanitarian Sector, including key characteristics, and in particular those identified by two earlier studies as ‘perceived’ or ‘real’ obstacles to learning within the Sector.

1.3.1 Independent Evaluation as a Monitoring Tool

Although there are still many questions to be addressed in respect of the role of evaluation in learning (an issue discussed in some detail in the following chapters), evaluations play an invaluable monitoring role in revealing where past lessons have or have not over time been translated into changed practice.

The number of evaluations of humanitarian action being undertaken has grown rapidly over the last eight to nine years, with each identifying ‘lessons’ explicitly, or implicitly within the findings and conclusions of the evaluation report. Subsequent evaluations are then able to detect the extent to which ‘lessons’ identified in previous evaluations have been addressed over time (ie, properly ‘learnt’), and with the cumulative increase it is becoming more common to find evaluations referring back to ‘lessons’ identified in previous evaluations but seemingly not ‘learnt’. For instance:

There are no “quick fixes” to the problems facing the Great Lakes Region. Indeed, previous studies have put forth excellent recommendations that still deserve consideration. The study team’s first recommendation is that all who work for the United Nations in the Great Lakes Region be required to read at least the ‘Synthesis Report: The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons From the Rwanda Experience’ (ie, volume one of the multi-donor evaluation of the 1994 Rwanda genocide). There can be no excuse for not studying such a well-documented history and working to incorporate the still-highly relevant lessons into the UN response to emergencies in central Africa and beyond (Lautze, Jones and Duffield, 1998).

These recommendations, a number of which echo Professor Tansley’s of twenty-five years ago, require consideration at the highest levels in both the ICRC and the International Federation (Anema, Stone and Wissink, 2000).

It is regrettable that evaluators often fail to make themselves aware of relevant previous evaluations and the lessons they contain, but the opportunity to make comparisons across evaluations is greatly facilitated by ALNAP's Evaluative Reports Database (ERD) and, progressively so, by the Annual Review synthesis.

Box 1.1 provides an example of how successive evaluations of similar operations in the same country, undertaken over a 13-year period by the same bilateral donor, identify similar problems.

Although the implication appears to be that evaluation reveals lessons but fails to engender learning that results in improved practice, there are many examples where evaluations of humanitarian action have contributed wholly or in part to changed policy and practice:

- an evaluation of the UK response to the Southern African Drought (Clay et al, 1995) resulted in a significant decentralisation of disaster response functions from the Overseas Development Administration's (now DFID) Head Office in London to regionally-based Development Divisions (D. Nabarro, Head of Population Division, ODA, personal communication, 1997);
- the *Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda* (JEEAR, 1996) had a significant, and some would argue continuing, impact on the humanitarian system as a whole, contributing in part to the development of the Ombudsman Project (now the Humanitarian Accountability Project) and the Sphere Project (JEFF, 1997);
- the comprehensive *Evaluation of Danish Humanitarian Assistance* (Danida, 1999) resulted in major changes in Danish humanitarian policy;
- two ECHO evaluations covering the period 1991–96 and 1996–99 resulted in a Commission Communiqué setting out clearer policies on EU humanitarian responses (European Commission, 2000);
- Suhrke has identified ways in which an evaluation of UNHCR's response to the Northern Iraq crisis resulted in changes that improved the agency's performance in its response to the 1999 Kosovo crisis (Suhrke, 2000);
- UNHCR's evaluation of its response to the Kosovo crisis (Garlock et al, 2000) has clearly influenced that agency's approach and response during 2001 to the humanitarian needs generated by the Afghanistan conflict, though some would argue that the level of criticism of the agency's

performance preceding the evaluation guaranteed good follow-up and improved performance in the next large-scale operation.

These positive examples are fully in keeping with the four evaluation uses identified by Weiss (1998): i. Guidance for Action ('Instrumental Use'); ii. Reinforcement of Prior Beliefs (bolstering the confidence of those who want to press for necessary change); iii. Mobilisation of Support (for a particular change); and, iv. Enlightenment (increased understanding). However, the 'non-learning' cases, such as Bangladesh, clearly demonstrate that organisational behaviour with respect to learning is determined by many other factors than those of evaluation or evaluation practice alone.

In some ways it is unfortunate that much of the evidence for learning and non-learning within the system is drawn from evaluations, as it tends to focus attention on the effectiveness, or not, of the evaluation mechanism itself.

1.3.2 Organisational Behaviour

In 2001 ALNAP commissioned a study entitled *Follow-up to Evaluation of Humanitarian Action* (van de Putte, 2001) to look at the organisational factors in the follow-up to evaluation that might constrain or enhance 'learning'. The study examined the follow-up to eight evaluations of humanitarian action (two bilateral donor organisations, two UN agencies, one NGO and one member of the Red Cross Movement)³ and complemented this with a questionnaire survey of ALNAP Full Members, and interviews with key individuals in ALNAP and other organisations.

Van de Putte identified four key factors that enhanced follow up:

- **where evaluation is part of a broader learning process** promoting ownership of outcomes, and incorporating an established follow-up procedure;
- **where 'windows of opportunity' are identified and exploited** – eg, choice of subject (where there might be heightened organisational awareness of a particular issue), timing, or external scrutiny;
- **where formal authority explicitly backs the process** – eg, senior management, a governing board, or a statutory obligation; and
- **where an active and diverse approach to dissemination of evaluation results is adopted** – eg, different 'products' (written, work-

shops, video) aimed at different audiences; use of translation; active follow-up in the evaluated operation(s) and the evaluated organisation(s).

The findings of the ALNAP Follow-up study were similar to those of the development-focused 'Evaluation Feedback for Effective Learning and Accountability' (EFELA) Workshop convened by the DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation in Tokyo in September 2000 (OECD, 2001).

While both looked at learning through an evaluation lens, inevitably raising the dual objective dichotomy, the OECD Background Synthesis Report concluded that '[evaluation's] two objectives [learning and accountability] are not necessarily incompatible, and many agencies are looking hard at how to find compromise methodologies that satisfy both sets of criteria,' (Background Synthesis Report, OECD, 2001), and each recognised and pointed to the urgent need to better understand organisational behaviour as a first step to improving organisational learning. The first point on the EFELA Workshop generated 'checklist of action points' was 'Take steps to understand how learning happens within and outside the organisation, and identify where the blockages occur,' (OECD, 2001, p.45).

Parallel conclusions were also being reached by individual humanitarian organisations beginning to explore ways to enhance their own organisational learning:

- UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU) adopted a variety of evaluation approaches, experimenting with self-evaluation and real-time evaluation – eg, in Eritrea (Jamal, 2001) and more recently during the humanitarian operations in and around Afghanistan;⁴
- the UK Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) commissioned a synthesis of five independent evaluations undertaken in 1999 and 2000 of DEC-funded interventions (Lawry-White, 2001). The synthesis resulted in a review of the DEC's approach to evaluation and consideration of a range of measures to increase the learning from the investment in the evaluation process, while preserving the DEC's accountability requirement to the UK public that supports its appeals.

A number of other humanitarian organisations (Concern, 2001; ActionAid, 2001) also synthesised the results of evaluations and internal review processes, and are now considering their approaches to learning.

It would seem, therefore, that ALNAP's experience reflects a shift, both within the Humanitarian Sector and beyond. While there is sharp recognition of the need to strengthen and adapt the evaluation genre to enhance its contribution to 'learning', there is also growing recognition of the importance of other learning mechanisms to complement the role that evaluation can play.

The positive cases cited above show that, with the right combination of factors in place, evaluation can have a positive impact on organisational policies and practices. At a more aggregate level, the evaluation mechanism has an important role to play in providing an objective means of assessing whether 'lessons' identified in relation to previous operations have actually been 'learnt', as demonstrated by improved practice in subsequent operations. In addition, by virtue of its accountability function and its ability to draw attention to particular issues, evaluation has an important role to play in incentive frameworks to encourage agencies to learn and improve their practice.

1.4 **Learning in the Humanitarian Sector: Preliminary Thoughts**

All sectors have a particular set of characteristics that make them in some way 'unique', and before considering learning within the Humanitarian Sector, it will be helpful to outline its principal characteristics:

- the Humanitarian Sector encompasses a range of international and local organisations in one or more of the following roles: funding, implementing, coordinating and resource channelling. Although they broadly share the objectives of saving life and reducing the suffering that results from natural disaster, conflict and other crises beyond the coping capacities of the affected populations and local authorities, each organisation has its own history, mandate or mission and perceived niche;
- the conditions under which the Sector operates are invariably arduous, dynamic and often dangerous. Basic infrastructure is likely to be partially or wholly non-operational, and normal accountability mechanisms such as the police, judiciary and local press, often severely weakened or absent;

- humanitarian operations involve combinations of organisations from different countries, as few as ten to as many as three hundred as in the case of the Kosovo operations in 1999–2000. Interventions are multi-sectoral and involve specialists in food, health, logistics, shelter, water, agriculture, reconstruction, etc, and in the initial phases of operations the Sector operates under significant time pressures and often under the intense gaze of the media. In any particular context, there may be significantly differing assessments of needs, how these are best provided for, and each agency's role therein;
- the Sector is funded by a combination of public funding (provided by taxpayers from up to 30 countries) and voluntary private funding. Though commercial organisations participate in these operations (primarily in the provision of transport services), the Sector itself is not motivated by profit. Significantly, resources flow in a top-down direction and the consumers ('beneficiaries') exert little or no influence on the way assistance and protection services are provided.

The Humanitarian Sector is clearly concerned with action, so that learning in respect of ALNAP's work is taken to relate to the application of knowledge. Although a review of the conceptual literature on learning and knowledge management (a central component of any learning system) is undertaken in Chapter 2, the following may help to ground these preliminary thoughts:

[L]earning is not a purely intellectual phenomenon, but a process which is linked to a change of practice. It is not enough to identify a problem and propose a solution. The solution must be put into practice before learning can occur, (Carlsson and Wohlgemuth, 2000).

There are different types of learning, that take place at different levels and in different ways. However, what is perceived as 'learning' by some may not be perceived as such by others. For instance, compare these two perspectives on 'learning' during the Kosovo crisis:

We found few traces that lessons from previous crises had guided the international response to the Kosovo emergency, despite many similar challenges to humanitarian actors, (Minear, Sommers and van Baarda, 2000).

The lessons learned in the previous conflict in the region ie, the Bosnia war, has permitted ECHO to avoid a catastrophic outcome. This relatively positive result mainly originated in the field thanks to the fact that most of the ECHO's correspondents had already been exposed to the previous conflict and had relevant, efficient and timely initiatives. [However the] institutional memory is still very much an individual memory. It works quite well in the course of immediate field decision-making. It is less efficient in storing the lessons learned and drawing contingency operational conclusions conducive to an overall policy of crisis preparedness and predictability, (ECHO, 2000b – Kosovo Evaluations Synthesis Report).

And, to keep us on our toes, not all learning is 'right'. As noted by Suhrke (2000) 'Wrong learning occurs when a situation is mistakenly diagnosed, when inferences are incorrectly drawn, or when lessons are applied in non-comparable situations.' In the literature wrong learning is often conceptualised as 'inaccurate' or 'inefficient' learning (Levy, 1994).

Given such complexities and subtleties it is vital that great care is taken in analysing learning in the Humanitarian Sector.

1.4.1 Does the System Learn?

While many observers (and evaluations) identify continuing areas of poor performance and dysfunction in the international Humanitarian Sector, few would disagree that, in aggregate terms at least, there has been considerable improvement in performance over the last 30 years. Famines have for the most part been largely eliminated from the human experience, and where they do occur are almost entirely in areas where conflict prevents access by national and international humanitarian actors. The international response to sudden-onset natural disasters is now considerably more rapid than 30 years ago.

Yet, to what extent does this improved performance result from learning, or from changes that would have occurred anyway, or been driven by forces external to the Sector? Technical progress has clearly been a critical source of improved performance – eg, improved and cheaper airlift capacity and telecommunications have played a vital role. In his 1998 discussion paper Minear notes:

Aid agencies are subject to the same forces that are producing changes elsewhere, however idiosyncratic the dynamic among humanitarian organisations may be. These forces include new technology, changing roles of government and non-state actors, disparities between resources availability and demands, greater media scrutiny, a more informed public, growing competition in the marketplace, and a newly global environment, (Minear, 1998).

Thus, in assessing learning in the Sector, it might be helpful to conceptualise three different sources of changed performance over time:

- formal learning mechanisms and processes (evaluation, lessons-learned reviews, etc);
- informal learning (individual experience, chance learning and transfer of lessons); and
- changes in the external environment (technological, ideological, changed accountability pressures and scrutiny, etc).

Assessing the relative contribution of each is extremely difficult and beyond the scope of ALNAP's current work. Nevertheless, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that improved performance in the Sector may occur for reasons other than effective learning within the Sector.

1.4.2 Previous Studies on Learning in the Humanitarian Sector

Considering the extensive literature developed over the last decade on organisational learning (eg, Senge, 1990; Argyris and Schon, 1996; Denton, 1998; Pearn, Mulrooney and Payne, 1998) and knowledge management (eg, Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Allee, 1997; Dixon, 2000; Collison and Parcell, 2001), there are surprisingly few previous studies of learning in the Humanitarian Sector.

Within this limited field, particular contributions have been Van Brabant (1997), Minear (1998) and Suhrke (2000). Significantly, the two latter rely heavily on evaluations as their lens or primary source.

The Van Brabant paper (a discussion paper commissioned by ALNAP on institutional learning in the Humanitarian Sector) is comprehensive in its

scope covering, inter alia, motives for learning, obstacles to learning and the internal and external changes necessary to creating 'learning organisations' in the Humanitarian Sector. It was presented at the second ALNAP Biannual Meeting in October 1997 at a time when ALNAP's governance structures were in their infancy, and the potential agenda for ALNAP to address extremely broad. Though recognised as central to ALNAP, the organisational-learning agenda was widely perceived as being highly complex and, because the paper was framed as 'opening a dialogue' the steps that ALNAP might take to carry the work forward were not readily apparent. It is only now, in the wake of the evaluation follow-up study, that ALNAP Members have prioritised work on learning.

Minear's paper, which characterises the Sector's learning curve as 'lacklustre', was prepared for an international 'lessons-learned' meeting on humanitarian coordination and focuses on the Great Lakes experience, and in particular on the role played by the *Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda* (JEEAR, 1996) and its unique follow-up mechanism (JEFF, 1997), and the IASC study of coordination in the Great Lakes region (Lautze, Jones and Duffield, 1998).

Suhrke's paper used the evaluation studies of UNHCR's response to the 1991 Northern Iraq crisis (Crisp, Martin and Prattley, 1992) and the 1999 Kosovo crisis (Garlock et al, 2000) to assess organisational learning within the agency. She concluded that:

It is evident that the organisation had learned several lessons from the first crisis. These were incorporated into standard emergency procedures, and, as implemented, helped the agency respond much more effectively than it otherwise would have done to the second crisis. In this sense, there was a real element of learning involved. Other lessons had been learned but not implemented and some had hardly been learned at all, (Suhrke, 2000).

More specifically she identified a tendency for technical lessons not requiring organisational adjustments (such as central stockpiles and emergency rosters), rather than lessons that would require structural change in the organisation (such as intra-agency competition for staff resources during emergencies), as those most likely to be implemented. In some areas, such as early warning, lessons were 'recognised in principle but

behaviour remained constrained by cognitive and political factors and did not change', (Suhrke, 2000).

Obstacles to learning in the Humanitarian Sector

Among the obstacles identified by Van Brabant (1997) were: hierarchical, 'top down' management and control, inhibiting teamwork and stifling innovation; poor information management; competition for profile and funds in an unregulated market that makes organisations acutely concerned with their image and 'forces agencies to come up with success stories and downplay problems and failures' (Van Brabant, 1997); profound financial insecurity caused by low and inadequate provision for overhead costs and reliance by the many agencies on short-term, voluntary, funding; substantial reliance on short-term contracts; high rates of staff turnover; and limited rewards for those organisations that do learn or those that consciously invest in learning.

Minear (1998), with some overlap, identified four 'cultural impediments':

The tendency to approach every crisis as unique While recognising that the idiosyncratic dynamics of individual conflicts and disasters need to be taken into account, Minear notes that at a fundamental level no crisis is unique. 'Each crisis pits the same institutions (the United Nations, governments, NGOs) against the same interlocutors (government and insurgent groups and military host officials), in a continuing effort to find solutions to recurring problems (the obstruction of humanitarian access, the manipulation of relief, inequitable economic relationships, the absence of viable and accountable local structures). As long as every crisis is perceived as wholly without precedent or parallel, there will be little scope for institutional learning,' (Minear, 1995 cited in Minear, 1998).

The action-oriented nature of the humanitarian ethos 'There is an underlying tension, if not contradiction between the can-do spirit of concern for suffering humankind and the discriminating calculations needed for effective functioning in today's internal armed conflicts,' (Minear, 1998).

Defensiveness to critics '... [I]nstitutions dependent upon public support are understandably reluctant to wash their dirty linen in public or to see others hang out their laundry,' (Minear, 1998).

The prevailing lack of accountability ‘The lessons-learning process is undercut by “the culture of impunity”, that is the failure to hold actors responsible for their actions,’ (Minear, 1998).

The problem of ‘high staff turnover’ highlighted by Van Brabant appears to be particularly acute in the Humanitarian Sector, and receives further exposition in Chapter 3 as it has potentially profound implications for approaches to learning in the Sector.

1.4.3 **Can the Sector Overcome these Obstacles?**

Despite the success stories noted, evaluations of humanitarian action continue to evidence a repeated and unacceptable failure by the Humanitarian Sector to learn and implement lessons from past experience.

The profiling of the Humanitarian Sector and outlining of key obstacles to learning, paints a picture of both real and perceived constraints, commonly echoed in the litany of reasons proffered by those who work in or observe the Humanitarian Sector as to why ‘learning is difficult’ or why ‘learning doesn’t happen’. Chapters 2 and 3 seek to demonstrate that despite some of its unique characteristics, degrees of commonality do allow the Humanitarian Sector to benefit from the experiences of other sectors, by borrowing and/or adapting techniques and concepts developed elsewhere; and, that learning systems can be tailored to overcome obstacles and accommodate the particular characteristics of the Humanitarian Sector.

Chapter 2
Learning and
Knowledge Management:
The Literature and
Experience of
'Comparable' Sectors

2.1 Introduction

Drawing on an ALNAP commissioned mapping study¹ this chapter provides an overview in Section 2.2 of the literatures on ‘learning’, ‘organisational learning’ and ‘knowledge management’, highlighting some key terms and concepts of use in considering current practices in the Humanitarian Sector. Section 2.3 reviews what three other, to some degree ‘comparable’, sectors may have to offer in respect of approaches to learning and knowledge management. Highlighting key points for consideration by humanitarian organisations in their efforts to improve performance through improved learning.

For the purpose of identifying effective learning mechanisms for the Humanitarian Sector, learning is taken to be *the process of disciplining the mind to search for relevant data to support particular actions in particular contexts*. Responsibility for learning rests with the individual and responsibility for providing a learning environment with the organisation. Effectively managed knowledge is the cornerstone of all learning activities and systems.

2.2 The Literature: Definitions and Key Concepts

The conceptual literature can be ambiguous and fragmented in its definition of terminology, an ambiguity often reflected in practices. While the origins and development of organisational-learning and knowledge-management literatures have been quite separate, they are increasingly interlinked, both conceptually and in practice, a critical factor in the development of learning systems.

2.2.1 Learning

The literature tends to differentiate between three interacting ‘levels’ of learning: ‘individual learning’; ‘small-group learning’; and ‘whole-organisational learning’ (eg, Gill, 2000).

Because organisations are staffed and led by individuals, individual learning provides the critical building block for learning at all levels. However,

translating individual and group learning into whole-organisation learning is generally acknowledged as the most difficult to achieve, and it is at the organisational-learning level that the most pronounced differences in the literature are found.

Experiential learning

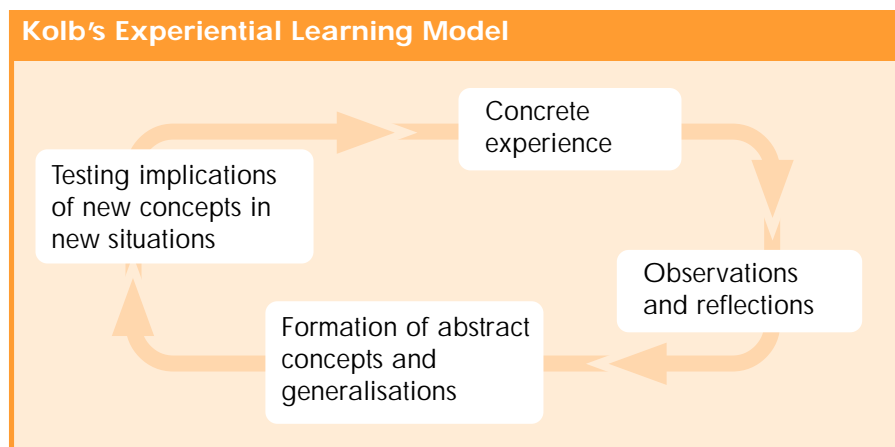
Experiential learning is the process by which experience is translated into concepts then used to guide choices in new situations, building new experiences. Building on earlier work by social and educational psychologists, Kolb (1983) developed the notion of experiential learning as a four-stage cycle (see Figure 1).

The model sees immediate concrete experience as the basis for observation and reflection. These observations are assimilated into a theory from which new implications for action can be deduced. These implications or hypotheses then serve as guides in acting to create new experiences. In the process of learning one moves in varying degrees from actor to observer, from specific involvement to general analytic detachment. Learners, if they are to be effective, need four different abilities – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Kolb, 1996). Interestingly, these abilities are quite similar to the organisational characteristics felt to be required for effective organisational learning (see Box 2.1).

Individual learning styles

Kolb developed this work to identify the strengths and weaknesses of individuals, in relation to the four abilities, identifying four dominant

Fig 1 **Kolb's Experiential Learning Model**



Requirements of a Learning Organisation (LO)

While the literature is not agreed on what is required to become a 'learning organisation', three perspectives are offered here.

i) Garvin (1993) sees LOs as skilled in five main activities:

- systematic problem solving;
- experimentation;
- learning from past experience;
- learning from others;
- transferring knowledge.

ii) Pearn, Roderick and Mulrooney (1995) identify five components of their 'working approach' for a learning organisation:

- it places high value on individual and organisational learning as a prime asset;
- it is working towards full utilisation of all individual and group potential for learning and adapting in the interests of meeting, and eventually setting and renewing, organisational objectives (mission and vision);
- it does this in a way that also satisfies the needs and aspirations of the people involved;
- inhibitors or blocks to learning are being identified and removed and strong enhancers and structural support for sustaining continuous learning are being put in place; and
- a climate of continuous learning and improvement is being created.

iii) Pedlar, Burgoyne and Boydell (1997) identify 11 characteristics of 'the learning company' organised under five headings:

Looking In

- Informing (using IT not only to store but also to empower front-line staff to act on own initiative)
- Formative accounting and control (structuring budgeting, accounting and reporting systems so that staff can understand how money works in the business)
- Internal exchange – between individuals, groups and departments
- Reward flexibility

Strategy

- Learning approach to strategy and policy formation
- Participative policy making

Structures

- Enabling structures (viewing all structures as temporary that can easily be changed to meet job, user or innovation requirements)

Learning Opportunities

- A learning climate (the facilitation of experimentation and learning from experience)
- Self-development opportunities for all

Looking Out

- 'Boundary workers' as environmental scanners
- Inter-company learning

learning styles. Honey and Mumford (1992) simplified Kolb's results to make them more accessible and useful to those designing learning programmes. Honey (1994) described the four dominant types and their learning preferences as:

activists, who learn best from new experiences/problems, can engross themselves in short 'here and now' activities, have a lot of limelight and are thrown in at the deep end;

reflectors, who learn best from activities where they are encouraged to watch, think and reflect before acting, able to review what has happened and given time to reach decisions;

theorists, who learn best when they have time to explore methodically the associations and interrelationships between ideas and events, are in structured situations with clear purposes, have the chance to probe the methodology or logic behind the subject and are intellectually stretched; and

pragmatists, who learn best when there is an obvious link between the subject matter and a problem or opportunity on the job, when they can concentrate on practical issues, and have the chance to try out techniques with coaching/feedback from a credible expert.

There appear to be no systematic studies on learning styles in the Humanitarian Sector, although intuitively it would seem likely that the Sector contains a higher than average proportion of Activists and Pragmatists. This supposition is supported by a UNHCR survey of emergency roster staff which found that coaching was the preferred method of learning (UNHCR, 2000a). If this is so it has implications for:

- the design of effective learning systems (eg, on the job coaching may be a more effective means of supporting learning than, say, guided-reading programmes);
- the composition of teams to maximise their effectiveness as learning teams;
- the overall learning effectiveness of the Sector, which may be less than if it had a more balanced mix of learning types. 'The nature of the learning process is such that opposing perspective, action and reflection, concrete involvement and analytical detachment, are all essential for optimal learning. When one perspective comes to dominate others, learning effectiveness is reduced in the long run ... the most effective learning systems are those that can tolerate differences in perspective,' (Kolb, 1996).

Research should be undertaken to assess the balance of learning styles in the Sector.

Defensive reasoning and blame

Among the many actual and potential barriers to learning described in the literature (Antal, Lenhardt and Rosenbrock, 2001) 'defensive reasoning' (Argyris, 1990) is one that may have particular relevance to the Humanitarian Sector, with its vocational nature and high levels of personal and professional commitment. Argyris's work over many years has shown that individuals develop defensive routines to protect themselves from threatening situations, such as 'critically examining their own role in the organization' (Argyris, 1991). These routines limit their ability to discover 'how the very way they go about defining and solving problems can be a source of problem in its own right,' (Argyris, 1991). In short they block the ability to learn to see or do things differently.

Organisational culture may reinforce the defensive routines of staff and so build barriers to organisational learning. '... [I]f learning is to persist, managers and employees must also look inward. They need to reflect critically on their own behaviour, identify the ways they often inadvertently contribute to the organization's problems, and then change how they act,' (Argyris, 1991). Argyris' work found that highly skilled professionals are often the most effective at deploying defensive reasoning for they have spent much of their lives gaining credentials, developing their reasoning skills and applying them to solve real world problems. In addition, 'because many professionals are almost always successful at what they do, they rarely experience failure. And because they have rarely failed, they have never learned how to learn from failure. So whenever their single-loop learning strategies go wrong, they become defensive, screen out criticism, and put the "blame" on anyone and everyone but themselves. In short their ability to learn shuts down precisely at the moment they need it the most,' (Argyris, 1991). To overcome this requires managers to lead their staff in 'learning how to reason productively' by critically examining their own practices, and assumptions. Such a process 'can be emotional – even painful. But for the managers with the courage to persist, the payoff is great: management teams and entire organizations work more openly and more effectively and have greater options for behaving flexibly and adapting to particular situations,' (Argyris, 1991).

Box 2.2

Blame and Gain Behaviours

Blame Behaviours

Judging

'You were wrong.'

Showing emotion

'I'm furious with you.'

Reacting to what you think happened

'You should have ...'

Blaming people for getting it wrong

'You should never have let this happen.'

Finding fault

'You only have yourself to blame.'

Focusing on effects

'This is going to cause enormous problems for me.'

Assuming the person should feel guilty/be contrite

'You really only have yourself to blame.'

Seeing mistakes as something that must be avoided

'This must never happen again.'

Gain Behaviours

Exploring

'What happened?'

Remaining calm

'Try not to worry about it.'

Finding out exactly what happened

'Let's take this one step at a time.'

Focusing on the process that allowed the mistake to happen

'What could have been done differently?'

Providing support

'This must be difficult for you but don't forget this has happened to us all.'

Focusing on causes

'What I want to focus on is all the things that enabled this to happen to us all.'

Assuming the person wants to learn

'What are the main lessons for us?'

Seeing mistakes as part of a learning process

'We can learn a lot from this.'

A point frequently made in the literature is that openness and the encouragement of critical, reflexive practices (ie, the critical examination of the self in action), requires an environment where there is no allocation of blame for things that go wrong. In their book *Ending the Blame Culture*, Pearn, Mulrooney and Payne (1998) identify 'blame behaviours' and 'gain behaviours' (see Box 2.2).

2.2.2 Organisational Learning

As a concept and field of study, organisational learning represents an amalgam of influences from different disciplines, including individual learning, education, systems theory, action learning, organisational development, and human resources management. Important contributions were made to the learning and organisational-learning literature between 1960 and 1990², but it was Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, published in 1990, that really popularised the notion of organisational learning and sparked a massive increase in the literature. Key texts in the literature since then include Pedlar, Burgoyne and Boydell (1997); Senge et al (1999); Marsick and Watkins (1999); Russ-Eft, Preskill and Sleezer (1997); de Geus (1997). The organisational-learning community is now extensive.³

The organisational-learning literature has a dominant focus on private companies/corporations (ie, competitive organisations seeking to maximise profit or shareholder value), much of it prescriptive in approach and tone. Books focusing on public and not-for-profit organisations are few in number (eg, Cook, Stanforth and Stewart, 1997). There are also marked differences of perspective and approach. While Garvin (1993) writes that most scholars view 'organisational learning as a process that unfolds over time, and link it with knowledge acquisition and improved performance' he notes 'they differ on other important matters. Some, for example, believe that behavioural change is required for learning; others insist that new ways of thinking are enough. Some cite information processing as the mechanism through which learning takes place; others propose shared insights, organisational routines and even memory. Some think that organisational learning is common, while others believe that flawed, self-serving interpretations are the norm,' (Garvin, 1993). Another review detects '... a lack of congruence in terms of theories of how learning is

achieved,' (Nicolopoulou, 2000). Another feature of the literature is a lack of comprehensive techniques for measuring learning.

Not surprisingly there are numerous definitions of organisational learning, some of which are quite contradictory. However, for the purpose of this Annual Review, the following will be used:

Organisational learning is the intentional use of learning processes at the individual, group and system level to continuously transform the organisation in a direction that is increasingly satisfying to its stakeholders, (Dixon, 1994).

Fundamental to achieving organisational learning are the skills that Garvin associates with learning organisations: 'a learning organisation is an organisation skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights,' (Garvin, 1993).

2.2.3 Knowledge and Knowledge Management ⁴ (KM)

In addressing knowledge management, it is important to distinguish between 'data', 'information' and 'knowledge'. According to the Chief Information Officers Council (CIO Council): data are discrete, unorganised facts; information is data that is organised into groups or categories and is able to alter the way a person perceives something; knowledge is familiarity, awareness or understanding gained through experience or study. 'Because knowledge is intuitive it is difficult to structure, can be hard to capture on machines and is a challenge to transfer,' (CIO Council, 2001).

Churchman (1971) characterises knowledge as having a number of elements and strands, and, although in the popular literature on knowledge management, knowledge is sometimes taken to mean a 'systematic collection of known facts', it is how the human reacts to the 'collection' that matters.

Knowledge is pragmatic in so far as it enables someone to do something correctly, providing the potential for action. The application of knowledge is linked to continuous learning and refinement, and the development of awareness of the self and the potential of the self in action, an important point for the Humanitarian Sector, because this view is commensurate with

the notion that knowledge is derived from experience and not narrow scientism. It is the basis of action-research and associated derivations such as action-learning (see Churchman, 1979; Lewin, 1951).

The term 'knowledge management' was reportedly first used by Karl Wiig in a keynote address at an International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conference in 1986 (CIO Council, 2001). As with organisational learning it quickly became a business mantra and the literature developed rapidly. A key contribution was that made by Nonaka and Takeuchi with their book *The Knowledge Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation* (1995). Multinational oil companies played an important role in the uptake and operational development of the concept (eg, Collison and Parcell, 2001).⁵

It is also useful to differentiate between knowledge as a 'state of knowing', as a 'process of getting to know', as an 'artefact that contains knowledge' (this book contains knowledge), or as 'having algorithmic qualities' (this computer programme will work out the answer).

Nonaka and Takeuchi introduce an important distinction between 'tacit knowledge' and 'explicit knowledge', the former, obscure and difficult to access, is that which people carry in their minds (such as a craftsman with years of experience); whereas explicit knowledge is easier to capture, store and share, existing in both structured form (eg, documents, databases that are easily retrievable) and unstructured form (eg, images, training courses that are not referenced for retrieval).

Knowledge, based on both experience and thinking in action, is not just about understanding the application of techniques, methods or tools, but about a user's ability to engage with them, adapt (or reject) them, justify their use in particular ways, and have confidence in the appropriateness of their use. Knowledge is 'person-specific', so that a learning system must start from the learners' needs. Learning activities should therefore adopt teaching practices that help the learner to question the validity of techniques, methods and tools, in different contexts and in relation to different users (Senge, 1990).

Components of knowledge management

Knowledge management can be considered as being composed of three

processes: ‘knowledge construction’; ‘knowledge representation’; and ‘knowledge transfer’:

Knowledge construction is the process by which knowledge is abstracted in the human mind and can take place ‘after the event’ (eg, after-action reviews [AARs], evaluations). It may be a painful process that exposes team, organisation, or individual, failings, and should, therefore, seek to overcome the natural defences that humans create to justify their actions (see Argyris, 1990) by incorporating appropriate mechanisms to protect the identities of participants.

Knowledge representation is the process by which knowledge is made explicit for others to learn from. It takes the ‘implicit’ or ‘tacit’ knowledge, derived from human abstraction, evaluating its usefulness for specific purposes, and making it ‘explicit’ in a variety of forms (eg, textual reports, computer programs, guide books, web pages). Representation may need to focus on appropriate pedagogy, that may not involve specific ‘facts’ derived from the abstractions, but rather help new learners to solve their own problems (Johnson, 1995; see also Freire 1972a, 1972b).

Knowledge transfer is the process by which knowledge is passed from one person or group to others. It also needs to consider suitable pedagogy and involves identifying groups, or enabling groups to identify themselves as people with common interests in specific learning areas. In the Humanitarian Sector, for instance, ‘groups’ may be identified by the fact that they undertake similar roles in action. Dixon (2000) identifies five different types of knowledge transfer (see Box 2.3).

Box 2.3 Categories of ‘Transfer of Knowledge’

- **Serial Transfer** When knowledge gained from doing a task in one context is re-used by the same team in another context.
- **Near Transfer** When explicit knowledge gained from doing a routine task is re-used by others for a similar task and context.
- **Far Transfer** When tacit knowledge gained from doing a non-routine task is made available to others doing similar work in a different context.
- **Strategic Transfer** When the collective knowledge of the organisation is needed to accomplish a strategic task that occurs infrequently but is critical to the whole organisation.
- **Expert Transfer** A team facing a technical question beyond the scope of its own knowledge seeks the expertise of others in the organisation.

Modified from Dixon 2000, p144–5

To increase their efficiency and effectiveness, the construction, representation and transfer processes should be conceptualised in design and implementation as inter-linked human activities that can be driven by managerial initiatives (Checkland, 1981; Checkland and Scholes, 1990). The selection and timing of specific activities can therefore be suitably planned – eg, ‘construction’ activities may take place before, during and after action, allowing the learner to construct, re-construct, and refine thinking for action; and, ‘representation’ activities can be designed and refined over time to increase accessibility. However, teaching methods in ‘representation’ and ‘transfer’ activities are often poorly conceptualised or even ignored.

As a result of its rapid development over the last decade, information technology (IT) plays a profound role in knowledge storage and dissemination, and the knowledge-management literature has strong links with, and is heavily influenced by IT.

As with organisational learning, the literature on knowledge management reflects a wide range of perspectives, approaches, models and definitions, but, for the purposes of this Annual Review, we will use the following definition:

Knowledge management is the systematic process of identifying, capturing, and transferring information and knowledge people can use to create ... and improve, (American Productivity and Quality Center, www.apqc.org/km).

2.2.4 A Learning System for the Humanitarian Sector

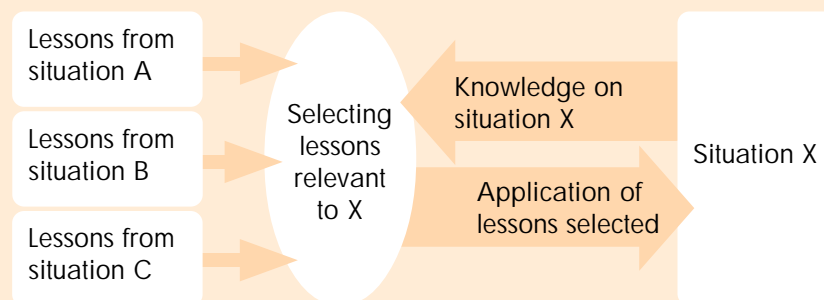
Knowledge management for learning purposes involves the design and implementation of interventions that ensure the construction of knowledge, and the best approaches to representation and transfer, where appropriate consideration has been given to teaching methods and practices. Political and social constraints must be considered, and each set of learning activities linked to appropriate measures of performance and intervention.

In identifying ‘lessons’ emerging from particular experiences (knowledge construction and representation) and in selecting and transferring appropriate lessons to a new situation (knowledge transfer) the process will need to be adaptive, dynamic and intelligent (see Box 2.4).

The Humanitarian Sector is characterised by action in dynamic circumstance where learning has to take place during and between situations that are fluid and geographically dispersed, and where the contexts and situations are often significantly (but rarely completely) different from previous ones. Where roles are well defined, learning activities can also be well defined (eg, standardised

Box 2.4

The 'Lessons-Learned' Application Process



Although situations A, B and C may generate numerous lessons related to their context, the potential for significant contextual variation in Situation X may make many of those lessons irrelevant. The process of selecting relevant lessons requires knowledge of the situations the lessons are drawn from, the situation to which the lessons might be applicable, and a significant degree of intelligent interpretation by the selector. In the selection process the knowledge being drawn on will be both tacit (of the 'expert' or 'craftsperson' type) and explicit (documented knowledge of the situations).

A good example of this process was the preparation of a document *Aid Responses to Afghanistan: Lessons from Previous Evaluations* (OECD 2001a)⁶ highlighting the key lessons for aid responses to Afghanistan from evaluations of previous aid responses in contexts such as Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor. While many of the lessons identified by the evaluative literature were not applicable to the situation in Afghanistan that differed in many important respects, a number were, and were highlighted in the hope that the lessons would be learnt and applied by the aid community in planning its response in Afghanistan. An interesting feature of the process was the extent to which 'applicable lessons' were determined by the extremely fluid situation in Afghanistan. At the time the document was prepared the situation had shifted to a rehabilitation/recovery agenda but had the document been prepared three weeks earlier, the lessons would have focused on humanitarian action in an ongoing conflict.

training courses that ‘deliver’ techniques, tools and methods). Where roles and teams are ephemeral and dynamic, and expected to deal with unknown complexities, learning processes need to display equally adaptive and dynamic characteristics (see Beer, 1967).

The conceptual literature, considered in relation to the Humanitarian Sector, leads to the following list as a desirable set of characteristics of learning systems in the Humanitarian Sector:

- it will assume that learning is about both developing capability for specific tasks and roles and liberating the user to question the self in action;
- it will be action-based, with people’s experiences in action as a central component;
- it will analyse shortfalls in the learning or experience of individuals to undertake particular tasks and roles;
- it will focus on method, techniques and tools, that at times may need to be used quite prescriptively;
- it will enable users to critique and adapt methods, techniques and tools to dynamic, sometimes complex and changeable circumstances (ie, be creative with them);
- it will require open dialogue about learning from action for knowledge-construction purposes;
- it will engender and encourage critical reflexive processes, particularly focused on the analysis of the self in action;
- it will necessitate linkages between the systems of learning and the provision of specific learning events (eg, courses) designed to develop efficiencies in learning processes;
- it will need learners to have ultimate responsibility for their own learning, because learning is assumed to be an individual human activity.

2.3 An Examination of ‘Comparable’ Sectors

No other sector is quite like the Humanitarian Sector in its particular combination of characteristics. However, other sectors do share certain of its characteristics and their experience with initiatives to improve learning and knowledge management may be of relevance and use. The following three

sectors are considered below – the US Military, the UK National Health Service (NHS), with a focus on England, and the UK Construction Industry.

2.3.1 The US Military

Since the end of the Cold War, military interventions to enforce peace, oust a particular regime or provide security for humanitarian operations and threatened populations (see Weiss, 1999) have increasingly been undertaken in areas of active conflict. While many humanitarian agencies are distinctly uneasy about working in areas where ‘western’ military forces are operating, particularly when operating outside UN structures, the relationship between the military and humanitarian groups has evolved significantly over the last decade. Though they operate in similar contexts and may, in the broadest sense, even share similar objectives, there are profound differences between the two sectors. However, from a structural perspective, the most pronounced is the ‘command and control’ ethos of the military that allows it to define processes, tasks and roles and responsibilities much more clearly than in the Humanitarian Sector. Military personnel are trained to take and act on orders, whereas the personnel of humanitarian organisations are likely to be more questioning of their supervisors and the leadership style invariably more consensual. Another distinction is that the staff base in the military is much more predictable than in most humanitarian agencies (see Section 3.2.2) so that learning and knowledge-management initiatives can be much more strongly linked to systems of operation. Because of this and the substantial resources focused on performance improvement, the military have a considerable pedigree in methods of learning in action and learning from action. (See Box 2.5 for an example of military lesson learning in the case of Bosnia).

The US Army’s after-action review (AAR) procedure has been widely adopted by other militaries and also informed practices adopted over recent years by several humanitarian agencies.

After-action reviews

The AAR process was developed in the 1970s to improve on the earlier ‘Performance Critique’⁷ method being used to provide feedback on performance during and following Army training exercises. The performance critique approach involved ‘umpires’ observing simulated exercises, providing feedback and an assessment of the ‘losses’ and ‘outcome’ of the exercise. The

Military Lesson-Learning in a Multi-National, Multi-Agency Operation: the Case of Bosnia

An insight into lesson-learning processes following a multinational peacekeeping operation, is provided in a comprehensive study by the US National Defense University (Wentz, 1998). It focuses on the lessons learnt from the NATO implementation force (IFOR) experience in Bosnia. The study states that 'a multitude' of organisations and agencies (apparently too many to list or enumerate accurately) undertook 'lessons-learned' activities in relation to the military aspects of the Bosnia experience.

The authors highlight the potentially enormous range and types of lessons that can be learned from such an operation:

'Lessons learned are multidimensional. In addition to the doctrine, policy, process, procedural and training aspects, there are also technical, system, operational, and command-structure perspectives. One can look at them from NATO and national points of view or from the civil, military and humanitarian aspects. There are mission and function cuts that can be looked at as well as the planning, deployment, sustainment and redeployment phases of an operation.' (ibid, Ch. 13 p3)

From this 'multitude' of 'lessons-learned' learning activities the study authors distinguish five broad approaches:

Structured Formal, long-term efforts employing highly structured processes with collection, analysis, dissemination and action resolution phases. Examples included the IFOR Joint Analysis Team, the Center for Army Lessons Learned, and the Joint Universal Lessons-Learned System used by the different US Army and Airforce commands in both Europe and the US.

Unifying Cross-organisational processes that attempt to draw on a wide range of sources and perspectives. Such processes were often supported by those organisations that did not have the capacity to undertake their own 'bigger picture' assessment.

Historians Staff of different military commands seeking to document their command's participation in the operation.

Ad Hoc Less structured and shorter-duration processes focused on addressing near-term problems using theatre interviews and brainstorming sessions.

Universities Longer-term strategic thinking-oriented studies undertaken by military and civilian universities. Examples include studies by George Mason

Box 2.5
contd

University, the Army War College Peacekeeping Institute, and the Pearson International Peacekeeping Centre in Canada.

One finding was that there was a natural tendency to 'avoid putting one's own command on report so this resulted in a careful documentation of external factors without a balanced recognition of internal problems'. Moreover, 'internally identified lessons learned had a tendency to focus on symptoms rather than causes.' (ibid, Ch 13 p4).

The study's principal finding in relation to the military lessons-learned processes concerned their uncoordinated nature – a conclusion that will resonate with those involved in evaluation and lesson-learning activities in the Humanitarian Sector. While it noted some positive effects of the lack of coordination, in that a broad range of perspectives were gathered, it also identified several downsides:

Overlap and redundancy – this led to excessive demands on operator time (one senior NATO officer identified nine separate occasions when he had been interviewed by US lessons-learned efforts).

Parochial agendas and results – many of the lessons-learned activities within operating organisations were limited in their scope and benefit.

Gaps and lack of systematic approach – 'no overall set of integrating issues or functions was created, so the lessons learned suffered from gaps on key issues and lacked systematic data collection efforts and sharing of lessons and insights,' (ibid Ch 13 p4).

Lack of information exchange – 'while lip service to information exchange was plentiful, many products were still held closely by their organisation,' (ibid. Ch 13 p4).

The study concludes

'All in all, the high level of activity did not translate into systematic coverage of key issues ... The most serious problem in lessons learned has been the inability to create an overarching set of issues or functions. While most lessons-learned charters were very broad, no single person or organisation had been given responsibility for setting the agenda. This resulted in gaps in coverage, particularly where the issues were potentially embarrassing or resided near organisational boundaries.' The review proposes the creation of a single capacity responsible for developing overarching sets of military lessons learned and proposed NATO as 'the logical organisation to establish such a capability', (ibid Ch 13 pp4–5).

results of these usually subjective assessments were increasingly being questioned by troops whose perspective on the exercise often differed from that of the umpires. By the early 1970s the method was seen to be counterproductive to the goal of enhancing unit performance and the US Army Research Institute for the Behavioural and Social Sciences (ARI) began leading a process that resulted in the development of the AAR. Though originally designed in relation to training simulations, the AAR process has spread to 'non-training' operational situations providing a mechanism for learning during and following combat experience.

According to US Army training guides an AAR '... is a professional discussion of an event, focused on performance standards, that enables soldiers to discover for themselves what happened, why it happened, and how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses,' (CAC, 1993 quoted in Morrison and Meliza, 1999). These three questions form the basic structure for collective self-examination by the unit or level undertaking the AAR. AAR sessions are conducted immediately after a short training exercise or during logical breaks in longer exercises or during combat. AAR sessions are typically organised by echelon with platoons scheduled for about 30–45 minutes; followed by companies for about one hour; and, battalion and above for about two hours (CAC, 1993 in Morrison and Meliza, 1999). The AAR discussion leader is usually not a member of the unit being trained but the trainer who controlled and observed the exercise. In combat situations the discussion leader is more likely to be a member of the unit. Throughout the discussion the leader acts as a facilitator and not as a participant. Unit members have to make their own decisions and reach their own conclusions.

The development of the AAR drew on an oral history method 'interview after combat' first used in the Second World War, in which group interviews with soldiers were conducted immediately after combat. It also drew on a range of specific theories and techniques that Morrison and Meliza (1999) group into six categories of which the following is a summary:

Information feedback Fundamental to the AAR process is the principle that learning and performance are enhanced when appropriate feedback is provided. Feedback can be intrinsic (information that is inherent to task performance) or extrinsic (information that augments and supplements feedback inherent to task performance). Knowledge of results has been found to have a powerful influence on the acquisition and retention of knowledge

relating to tasks, so that the greater the knowledge of results, the more effective the learning, and subsequent performance.

Performance measurement Performance measurement has to be as objective as possible, measuring ‘process’ as well as ‘product’. Considerable effort has been put into generating reliable data, and where possible automated data, from Army exercises. Where objective measurement is not possible, techniques such as the Delphi method, whereby differences between participants are reduced to arrive at a shared understanding of an event or a process, are recommended as a means of providing reliable self-assessment.

Memory and cognition Memory and cognition considerations are important factors in maximising the effectiveness of the learning process, so that exercise conditions should be as much like actual combat as is possible, and indeed Army doctrine encourages leaders to ‘train as you fight’.

Because the AAR process depends heavily on memory it is important to ensure that memories are refreshed before events are discussed – hence the review starting with the question ‘what happened?’. Problem-solving methods, ranging from formal analytical models to naturalistic perception-based models, are included in the process enabling the more challenging questions ‘why did it happen?’ and ‘how can performance be improved?’ to be addressed. Effective learning also requires participants to share their mental models⁸ of task performance, an undertaking facilitated by hearing and reacting to input from other participants.

Group processes and dynamics The AAR is a social as well as a learning process, where participants work together to make collective decisions about their performance, so that the facilitating and constraining effects of group dynamics are important factors. Working as a group can engender the phenomenon of ‘social facilitation’, an enhancing of motivation and learning through the mere presence of other humans. AAR counters the phenomenon of ‘social loafing’ (decreased individual performance due to individuals letting others in the group do their work) by actively involving participants in discussions and directing questions to those not contributing. Behavioural research shows that group performance improves in relation to the extent to which members identify with and are committed to the group. The fact that AAR participants are a group of related individuals and members of a unit or a team is significant.

Findings from social psychology suggest that the following factors increase group cohesiveness:

- increasing group interactions;
- encouraging agreement on group proposals using consensus-building;
- increasing inter-group competition;
- reducing intra-group competition and discord;
- emphasising group success; and
- maintaining a pleasant and positive atmosphere.

To minimise intra-group competition in the AAR process, 'finger pointing' and allocating blame for something that did not go well is strongly discouraged.

Communication theory and techniques 'Descriptive communications' replace abstractions with specific statements, discouraging judgemental comments in favour of more specific comments on behaviour. To encourage descriptive communications four prescriptions to AAR leaders have been developed:

- be specific (*abstractions should be avoided*);
- be thorough (*avoid the inclination to make a long story short*);
- focus on behaviours; and
- refer to goals and how successfully or unsuccessfully they were met.

Open-ended questions structured to allow for many acceptable answers are encouraged and 'yes' or 'no' questions discouraged. Analysis of early AARs led to the development of a prescriptive model indicating that feedback should provide four types of information:

- **Performance versus personal characteristics** Feedback should be directed toward correctable behaviours rather than toward personal characteristics.
- **Rationale** Feedback should provide a rationale for participants' performance to explain why they did what they did.
- **Goals** Feedback information that references task goals or objectives should be provided along with specific information about performance.
- **Corrective actions** Feedback should provide strategies for continuing effective behaviours and changing ineffective ones.

Instructional science The AAR is a pedagogical process, and a number of principles from instructional science have been drawn on in its development.

Examples are: 'guided discovery learning', where the learner gains greatest insight by discovering solutions to problems through their own knowledge and experience, with little or no intervention from an instructor; 'cooperative learning', where opportunities are provided for students to learn together enhancing academic achievement; and, 'experiential learning' (see Section 2.2.1). The AAR process achieves experiential learning if repeated regularly and where each AAR is followed by opportunities to test the learning in practice.

A 1996 review of the AAR process revealed that, although originally conceived as a discrete event, it had evolved into a continuing process – 'a way of working' – enabling systems theory concepts (notably the 'plan', 'act', and 'review' cycle) to be applied in its further development. A second factor highlighted by the review was the lack of an evaluation procedure that allowed participants and third-party observers to evaluate AAR sessions using established principles and practices.

The contribution of the AAR to the US Army is summed up by General Sullivan, US Army (Retired):

For America's Army the AAR was the key to turning the corner and institutionalizing organizational learning. You probably never become a learning organization in any absolute sense; it can only be something you aspire to, always 'becoming', never truly 'being'. But in the Army, the AAR has ingrained a respect for organizational learning, fostering an expectation that decisions and consequent actions will be reviewed in a way that will benefit both the participant and the organization, no matter how painful it may be at the time. The only real failure is the failure to learn, (Quoted in Darling and Parry, 2000).

Learning processes other than the AAR

While the AAR is the principal procedure for learning from experience in the lower echelons of the US Army, learning in the higher echelons involves a range of complementary approaches including AAR, formal 'lessons-learning' and research processes covering command and doctrine as well as technical, operational and procedural areas. In these processes, the US Army includes and is supported by a comprehensive range of specialist research and learning centres among which are the Institute for Defense Analyses; the US Army Research Institute; the National Defense University; and the Army

War College. Each has well resourced facilities and faculties and comprehensive electronic libraries. Among these centres a critical role is played by the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas (<http://call.army.mil/>).

According to Dixon (2000) CALL's mission is to assemble, assimilate and leverage the knowledge that the Army learns in the field. Its approach is based on a four-step model:

- identifying learning opportunities;
- observing and collecting knowledge;
- creating 'knowledge products' (to 'represent' the knowledge collected and make it explicit and transferable); and,
- deploying expertise.

The knowledge areas CALL focuses on are determined by senior officers' perceptions of future needs and gaps in the Army's current knowledge. For instance, the 1994 peacekeeping mission in Haiti was identified as an opportunity for the Army to gain additional knowledge about peacekeeping. Twelve specially trained knowledge 'collectors', seconded from other parts of the Army, were sent in with the first troops. Their task was to look for answers to recurring problems. They collected multiple perspectives on key events using observations, interviews, digital photos and videos, and the information was analysed in real-time by the collectors and subject-matter experts at CALL. By the time the second wave of troops went in, six months later, CALL had developed twenty-six scenarios of situations encountered by the initial troops as training tools for their replacements (Dixon, 2000).

A wider variety of methods are used to disseminate and transfer the knowledge constructed and represented through the various learning processes, including communities of practice (the CALL website includes several 'Warrior Knowledge' communities of practice), training programmes and simulation exercises, newsletters and briefing material targeted at different audiences using a variety of media.

Key points for the Humanitarian Sector

- It is apparent that massive resources are put into learning in the US Army. It possesses a wealth of services and facilities to support learning, including specialist universities; electronic libraries; specialist training methodologies; dedicated and sophisticated training facilities that closely

simulate combat situations; and the encouragement and support of communities of practice. The Humanitarian Sector does not currently have access to even a fraction of such resources.

- Learning is an integral and continuous process to the Army's 'way of working', strongly supported by the leadership and those responsible for resources-allocation decisions.
- The AAR process is widely used in the lower echelons for learning from experience (involving knowledge construction and representation) and training (ie, transfer) purposes during, in and out of combat ('action situations'). It is highly structured and requires the same teams to learn together at frequent intervals.
- As a result of the highly defined structures, and clarity of objectives and responsibilities it is possible to link learning and knowledge management activities to systems of operation.
- In multinational operations the military sector deploys a wide range of methods for learning from experience. However the quality of some of these methods is open to question and the lack of a single organisation/body to coordinate lesson-learning processes appears to limit the effectiveness of the overall effort. This mirrors the experience of the (more modest) efforts by the Humanitarian Sector and supports the case for a body to coordinate lesson-learning efforts within the Humanitarian Sector.

2.3.2 The National Health Service in England

The UK National Health Service (NHS) claims to be the largest organisation in Europe. In England the NHS employs around one million people and spends over £50 billion annually.

While the scale of the NHS dwarfs that of the international Humanitarian Sector, like the Humanitarian Sector, it is made up of a complex set of autonomous and semi-autonomous organisations with a shared overarching objective (providing medical care and support to the UK population). Though a not-for-profit public service, the NHS encompasses significant elements of competition and competitive behaviour. It is government policy

to involve the private sector in financing, managing and undertaking certain services, and, under reforms introduced nearly 20 years ago, tendering procedures are followed for many support-service contracts (cleaning services, meals) often undertaken by commercial providers. In the early 1990s, 'internal-market' disciplines were also introduced to parts of the service to allow 'purchasers' (eg, general practitioners) a choice between hospitals providing the same treatment but at different rates.

In 1997, the new Labour government introduced service-delivery targets in an attempt to reduce waiting lists for operations and address other key aspects of service delivery of public concern. Although many targets were achieved, it was found (somewhat predictably) that NHS managers became so focused on meeting the targets that anything else was met with the response 'if it's not identified in my objectives, I'm not spending time, effort or money on it.' As a consequence 'secondary' or support activities, such as learning, were often highly fragmented and there was criticism of NHS manager failure to identify and address 'holistic' learning requirements⁹ (Lathlean et al, 1999; Lathlean and le May, 1999).

While the NHS has experienced chronic under-funding for much of its 54-year existence, in its second term the Labour government has embarked on a programme of substantially increased funding tied to a wide range of organisational and managerial reforms aimed at improving the quality and efficiency of service delivery. Many of these reforms were included and described in the policy document '*The NHS Plan: A Plan for Investment. A Plan for Reform*' (NHS, 2000) launched in July 2000 (www.nhs.uk/nhsplan). Within the current reforms considerable effort is being put into improving learning (at the individual, team and organisational levels). This includes better management of the knowledge that exists within the NHS but is often not shared or used across the NHS. What makes the NHS of particular interest to the Humanitarian Sector is the introduction over the last four to five years of a wide range of initiatives and innovations introducing new approaches and techniques. The following selection has been described using a variety of documentary and web-based sources.¹⁰

Regional learning networks (RLNs)

As part of the 1998 Information for Health Strategy each of the eight NHS Regions in England have established RLNs. In many cases 'communities of practice' among clinicians and other healthcare professionals (eg, nurses and

therapists in information groups) already existed at the regional level. However the RLNs have built on and complemented these groups by establishing Regional Learning Forums and smaller, more numerous Local Learning Groups (LLGs). The latter consist of small groups (around ten persons) using an action-learning approach to address problems 'owned' by members of the group, by their organisation or identified by the Regional Learning Forums and Local Implementation Strategy Groups. Support in the set up of Local Learning Groups is provided by trained facilitators who assist with the first three meetings. Groups are required to feed back any 'learning' electronically to the Regional Learning Forum for collation, analysis and further dissemination.

Specialist learning centres

These are centres that have established innovative schemes for learning and sharing learning, either within their local area/sector or more widely. One example is a joint venture between the University of Salford and the local city hospital, bringing together academic research and practical experience in such a way that new practices are based on research and new research is tested in practice. The project provides:

- forums of professionals from different disciplines to share information, experience, expertise and ideas;
- opportunities to gain experience through site visits and networking;
- an educational programme awarding certificates, diplomas etc, in collaboration with the University's Centre for Action Learning.

Beacons Programme

A centrally supported scheme to identify particularly innovative services and units (Beacons) and encourage and support the sharing and transfer of the knowledge and expertise of the Beacons across the NHS. A Beacon might for example be a clinic using an improved system of handling appointments that minimises the number of missed appointments, or a hospital breast cancer unit that has successfully dismantled boundaries between administrative, clinical, nursing and radiography staff. Currently, over 200 Beacons have been identified. The central scheme provides learning-advisers to individuals and teams wanting to learn from the experiences of a particular Beacon, supporting a variety of approaches, including: workshops, conferences, visits, mentoring and secondments. For those unable to take time away from their offices, information packs, websites and CD-ROMs are also available.

National electronic library for health (NeHL)

As part of the 1998 Information for Health Strategy, a national electronic library for health will become fully operational in March 2002. (The pilot site is at www.nelh.nhs.uk). It will integrate existing NHS libraries in digital form to provide healthcare professionals and the public with knowledge and know-how to support healthcare-related decisions. It will be organised into 'Know How', 'Knowledge' and 'Resource' sections leading to a wide range of professional and specialist portals and networks.

NHS awards

Previous award schemes have recently been integrated into the annual Health and Social Care Awards scheme, which makes awards in 14 categories. The judging process involves health and social care professionals, patients, and carers from across the country. Winners receive £10,000 to further the development of their project or service, or disseminate it. Those awarded commendations receive £2,000.

Occupational standards, competencies and staff development

The development of staff competencies are viewed as integral to efforts to improve performance within the NHS by enabling the targeting and tailoring of learning and training programmes and encouraging staff to develop their skills and competencies. Induction programmes are complemented by numerous schemes targeting specific groups (managers, doctors, chairs of trusts, etc). Because of the current strong culture of change/modernisation agenda, leadership training is emphasised, and a mentoring scheme provided to support chief executives, managers and others playing a key role in the delivery of the major organisational and cultural changes described in the NHS Plan.

Identifying and setting the competencies and qualifications required for the different positions and levels within the NHS has taken a major effort, and central government's efforts to improve vocational qualifications and training across the UK economy have provided an important impetus. These national efforts began in the 1980s and resulted in the development of a wide range of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) for different trades and skills throughout the UK. A review in the early 1990s led to a comprehensive programme to develop National Occupational Standards (statements of competence written to measure performance outcomes) in all sectors of the UK economy, coordinated by 52 government-recognised National Training

Organisations (NTOs). NTOs inform decisions about the expectations and demands of employment; good practices in employment; the coverage and focus of services; and, the structure and content of education and training and related qualifications.¹¹ Healthwork UK is the NTO responsible for the health sector.

The NHS Executive highlights three key uses for occupational standards in the NHS:

- as measures of individual performance, translating these into departmental and organisational objectives;
- within business plans and the development of risk management and performance management systems; and
- for reviewing job roles and as the basis for job descriptions.

Training provision and the NHS University

The NHS spends £2 billion a year on training and education but, despite the availability of a wide range of training activities, the training needs of many members of staff aren't met. A distance-learning scheme to improve management education in the service (MESOL) was introduced in 1999, and, to encourage staff to make use of training opportunities, a Lifelong Learning Strategy for the NHS is being introduced including the provision of Individual Learning Accounts for staff. An NHS University is also being established to integrate and coordinate learning and training provision. It adapts the corporate university model developed by many large corporations and pulls on the experience of the Open University¹². A major lesson there being that, while e-learning is valuable, it needs to be complemented by face-to-face teaching and the chance to learn and practice new skills with others. The NHS University will provide a core curriculum; act as a signpost to existing training; provide a range of foundation, first-line and basic-training programmes; quality assure and accredit existing training and develop evaluation tools to make sure that additional education leads to improved patient care.

Processes encouraging reflection, analysis and improvement

Two particular processes found to be beneficial in the NHS (and elsewhere) are the 'European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model' (EFQM) and the 'Theory of Constraints' (TOC).

The 'EFQM Excellence Model' was developed at the end of the 1980s by a group of major European companies and corporations and has since been

developed for application to any organisation (www.efqm.org/). The model offers a diagnostic self-assessment tool, enabling organisations to identify strengths and weaknesses and set priorities for improvement actions. It offers a way to look holistically at an organisation's activities, addressing internal processes and the use of resources, as well as performance and outputs. Using funding grants from central government, a number of hospitals and healthcare organisations have used it, leading to examples of significant improvements in the quality of service provision.¹³

The 'Theory of Constraints' was developed by Eli Goldratt in the early 1980s and has since been used extensively in industry to analyse multiphase processes (Goldratt and Cox, 1993; Dettmer, 1996; Goldratt, 1999). The theory shares much in common with Critical Path Analysis in that it identifies the slowest step in a process (the constraint) and then uses cause and effect logic to find ways of improving it, thereby speeding up the whole process. The approach has been used in a number of health trusts and resulted in significant improvements in service delivery (Knight, 2000).

Key points for the Humanitarian Sector

- Substantial resources and effort are allocated to learning and knowledge management in the NHS and these receive high-level political, managerial and administrative support. Learning is seen as being critical to improved service delivery.
- The identification of competencies and the development of occupational standards have played an important role in efforts to provide effective staff development and training programmes.
- Encouragement and financial, advisory and administrative support is provided to a range of learning mechanisms and activities, including: the sharing and transfer of knowledge and expertise by centres of excellence (Beacons) to other parts of the NHS; learning networks at different levels, sectors and geographical areas throughout the organisation; incentives for learning in the form of an integrated awards scheme; the National Electronic Library for Health; and the plan to establish a university for the NHS.

2.3.3 The UK Construction Industry

While it would be wrong to claim profound similarities between the UK construction industry and the Humanitarian Sector, some of the typical characteristics of the construction industry described below are not dissimilar to the characteristics of the Humanitarian Sector:

- it is organisationally complex and highly fragmented – in the UK in 1994 for instance, there were 163,000 registered construction companies, most employing fewer than eight people (Orange, Burke and Boam, 2000);
- business is invariably based on competitive tendering for contracts;
- products are frequently delivered by consortia or ‘project-based temporary multiple organisations’ (TMOs), which exist only for a single project (Cherns and Bryant, 1984);
- within a given project team different knowledge and skills are required at different times and for differing periods throughout the project, consequently only a small proportion of the project team remains in place for the duration of the project;
- where core ‘teams’ are retained throughout the life of a project the fragmentation of the industry means that they are rarely left intact to consolidate relationships on subsequent projects;
- labour turnover within the industry is high with short-term contracts being the norm;
- there is significant seasonality in labour demand and poor labour practices exist in many of the smaller companies;
- there is often a tradition of adversarial relationships between companies, with recourse to litigation and blame-passing when mistakes occur or projects are not completed satisfactorily;
- the TMO characteristic combined with adversarial relationships leads to ‘information and knowledge hiding and to major barriers to learning lessons from projects that could lead to higher quality and productivity in future projects,’ (Barlow et al, 1997).

The need to reduce fragmentation of the industry in the UK, encourage greater collaboration, and improve relations between different organisations has long been recognised (Orange, Burke and Boam, 2000). In 1994 a government-commissioned review of the sector (Latham, 1994) recommended a rationalisation of inter-organisation agreements, methods of communication, and clearer definitions of roles and contract stages. The

report recommended partnering agreements between clients and contractors as one way to encourage many of the desired improvements.

A number of organisations and initiatives currently support knowledge sharing, performance improvement and organisational learning within the UK construction industry. For instance, CIRIA, a research association concerned with improving the performance of all involved in the construction industry (www.ciria.org.uk/), and the government-funded Construction Best Practices Programme, whose main focus is 'the transformation of outmoded management practices and business cultures' (www.cbpp.org.uk/cbpp/).

As in the NHS, the development of national occupational standards has formed an important plank in efforts to improve performance and practices, identifying the competencies, expected performance and qualifications required by different skills groups and levels within the industry. The Construction Industry Training Board is the NTO responsible for the construction sector, which also benefits from a number of specialist training centres.

Of particular interest to the Humanitarian Sector, in respect of cross-organisational learning, are the results of the B-Hive project (Building a High Value [Construction] Environment), a government-funded, joint industry-academic action-research project, that ran from 1997-99. Against the background of the Latham Report's recommendations on partnering agreements, B-Hive focused on the development of models, practices, information systems and infrastructures for collaboration within the industry (Orange, Burke and Boam, 2000; Cushman, Franco and Rosenhead, 2001; www.is.lse.ac.uk/B-Hive/).

Cross-organisational learning approach (COLA)

Using a combination of methods¹⁴ within an action-research framework, B-Hive developed COLA, designed for review, learning and knowledge-construction through reflection on past actions, for application in the future. It offers a structure within which multiple participants in a construction project can:

- reflect on project processes, successes and critical incidents;
- develop agendas for the discussion of improvement opportunities;

- prioritise and commit to change; and
- disseminate and sustain initiatives for change.

To provide an information platform for the COLA process, a prototype software system, 'ColaBase', has also been developed. It supports take-up of improvements, and tracks the value of their effects (Cushman and Cornford, 2002 forthcoming). The COLA process has been adopted by several of the original B-Hive industry partners, such as the Whitbread Hotel Company in its projects to build Marriot Hotels and renovating Travel Inn hotels, as well as by non-partner members in construction projects for the Ministry of Defence and the Highways Agency.

Interestingly, the COLA process shows similarities with the AAR process discussed under Section 2.3.1.

In practical terms the key steps in the COLA Review Process are:

Review trigger This may be either programmed (ie, arranged to occur at a clear breakpoint in the life of the project such as a stage completion) or non-programmed (ie, in response to some unplanned event or set of circumstances that offer unforeseen difficulties or opportunities).

Preparation of review project profile A review project profile is prepared combining results from: a questionnaire soliciting the views of participants/project partners on aspects of the project (including a ranking of aspects such as management of time, team relations and profitability) with free text space to detail innovations, critical incidents and lessons to be learned from the project; hard project data; and project performance indicators. The review project profile is then used to construct an agenda focused on improvement decision areas.

Review workshop The objective of review workshops is to identify a package of high-value improvements that are owned and have the commitment of the participants/project partners. Typically the workshops last six hours (the maximum period most participants are believed to be willing to give to the process) and are broken into four equal stages. The methodology is derived from the 'Strategic Choice Approach' (Friend and Hickling, 1997) that builds across four modes of group decision-making: 'shaping', 'designing', 'comparing' and 'choosing'. Care is taken with room

layout to encourage open exchange and good participation (meetings in the construction industry tend to be highly structured and tightly chaired). Following a positive initial focus identifying the 'project victories', the objectives of the four stages are:

Stage 1 To agree the main decision areas and focus for the day.

Stage 2 To generate actions within the chosen decision areas and explicit criteria for choosing among the options if more than one.

Stage 3 To develop two or three plans as a portfolio of actions for each decision area and agree the one with the greatest potential for benefit.

Stage 4 To develop those plans not developed for other decision areas.

Each action decision has a timescale and responsible actor attached to it and is tracked and monitored to assess value impact in current and future projects. The products of the stages, decisions and follow-up can be recorded and tracked on the ColaBase software.

Contribution to partnership knowledge

A strategic aim of COLA is to increase the bank of knowledge by constructing, recording and sharing the knowledge generated from the agreed actions, discussions and the process of arriving at them. Formal partnership knowledge is explicit and written, and expressed in procedural agreements, benchmarks, and performance indicators, etc. Tacit partnership knowledge consists of the knowledge individual partner organisations have of each other and undocumented inter-organisational routines. Each COLA cycle makes part of this tacit knowledge explicit.

The academic members of the B-Hive team are currently working on a new project, C-SanD (Creating, Sustaining and Disseminating Knowledge for Sustainable Construction: Tools, Methods and Architecture), one aim of which is to disseminate the findings from COLA reviews further and increase their adoption (Cushman personal communication, 15/2/02).

Key points for the Humanitarian Sector

■ Learning and knowledge management in the UK construction industry are seen as a means of improving the structure and effectiveness of the sector,

and efforts to improve learning and knowledge management are supported by central government.

- The industry has put considerable effort into identifying competencies and developing occupational standards as a means of improving the quality and development of the sector's workforce.
- The industry is supported by a range of specialist institutes, libraries, resources and professional associations and networks.
- In COLA the industry appears to have developed a mechanism for improving cross-organisational learning from the experience of companies working together on time-bound projects. This looks to be a promising model for consideration by the Humanitarian Sector.

Chapter 3
Learning and
Knowledge Management:
Current Practices in
the Humanitarian Sector

3.1 Current Practices within the Humanitarian Sector

This chapter provides a picture of learning and knowledge management in the Humanitarian Sector, and has been compiled using a combination of the following sources:

- a questionnaire survey completed by respondents in 18 organisations, and generating a representative picture of the Humanitarian Sector – ie, 3 bilateral donor organisations, 5 UN agencies, 3 members of the Red Cross Movement and 7 NGOs¹;
- additional information provided verbally from telephone interviews with those responding to the questionnaire and other organisations;
- information provided by participants during the course of a workshop held in London in December 2001;
- supplementary documentation provided by some of the organisations responding to the questionnaire;
- supplementary documentation generated by the literature and web searches, and the findings of the meta-evaluation of this year's evaluation set (see Meta-Evaluation Section).

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first contained eight questions on learning and support mechanisms within the respondent's organisation – ie, sources of learning in the organisation; learning practices in the organisation; whether the organisation carried out evaluations; whether the respondent thought the organisation learnt; how they perceived the formal and informal mechanisms within the organisation; whether they saw monitoring as assisting learning; and, how they perceived the linkages between learning and training. The second, contained five questions on the role, knowledge and opinions of the respondent – ie, did they feel they had sufficient knowledge for their role; were they encouraged to learn by the organisation; their view on the best way of sharing 'best practice'; their best ways of sharing concerns in the organisation; and, their assessment of the importance of existing training provision in supporting learning.

The first section provided the primary information for a mapping of current learning and knowledge-management practices within the Humanitarian Sector. The second provided penetrating insights into the perceived strengths and weaknesses of existing mechanisms and practices, and a useful complement to the mapping information. To encourage frankness,

respondents were assured of confidentiality and opinions expressed are not linked to organisations but attributed in an aggregated form such as ‘an NGO’ or ‘a UN agency’.

While the questionnaires provide valuable texture to the picture of agencies’ policies and practices, limitations should be noted. The opinions expressed are those of individuals; responses suggested an occasional misunderstanding of the question (possibly reflecting differences in use of terminology across the Sector); and opinions sometimes implied uncritical perspectives on their own agencies.

Issues of learning across organisations and the Humanitarian Sector were not directly considered – in part as a result of the sheer complexity of adding this dimension to an already lengthy questionnaire. While the questionnaire revealed, it did not enable an assessment of inter-organisational or sector-wide learning.

The picture that emerges from the combined use of the sources is that there is already quite widespread use of mechanisms intended to facilitate learning from experience, with many humanitarian organisations consciously attempting to enhance their ability to learn at the individual, team, and organisational level. There are, however, significant gaps in approaches, practices and target groups. Practices on specific learning activities vary widely, with training in many organisations perceived to be distant from learning coupled with a significant degree of scepticism as to whether it is being ‘done right’ or exploiting the full potential for learning.

3.1.1 After-Action Reviews (AARs)

The after-action review process, also referred to as ‘post-operation review’, ‘learning review’ or ‘learning-after event’, is a widely used practice in 13 of the 18 respondents’ agencies. Although the principle of a process culminating in a meeting or workshop-type event to identify lessons is common to all, there appears to be considerable variation in approach. For some, such as the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), AARs have been a central feature of learning mechanisms for over a decade, for others they are a more recent innovation (eg, British Red Cross, WFP and World Vision International).

OFDA

The scale and timing of AARs in OFDA relates directly to the scale of the operation. In the case of 'small operations' AARs may only last a few hours and be held within a few weeks of the initial phase. In the case of a large-scale operation (such as the responses to Hurricane Mitch and the Kosovo crisis) the AAR typically lasts two days and takes place between two and four months after the initial phase, with timing determined by the relevant OFDA Regional Coordinator. Day One is for OFDA personnel, with invited representatives of partner organisations (NGO, Red Cross and UN agencies) participating in Day Two. Considerable effort is put into preparing for the larger AARs. Background documents setting out the chronology of the response and focusing on pre-identified issues are drafted and participant questionnaires completed and analysed ahead of the event.

A fundamental ground rule for the conduct of the OFDA AARs is 'No Attribution, No Retribution' (Bryant, 2002; Garbinsky, 2001 and Becker, Manager, Disaster Assistance Support Program, OFDA, interviewed June 2001).

World Vision

Under the title of 'Lessons-Learned Workshops', World Vision has adopted and adapted the AAR process on the basis of its experiences post- Hurricane Mitch and subsequent operations in East Timor and the Southern Africa. Workshops are held in the affected country or region within four to six weeks of the start of every emergency operation. This is to ensure the participation of staff involved in the immediate response, prior to their rotation out of the operation.

A critical component of the workshops is the preparation of a questionnaire for consideration by participants or for electronic completion by those unable to participate. Questionnaires may reproduce, or draw on and refine, a series of questions held in a centrally prepared masterlist 'dimensions for consideration', under 15 headings covering such areas as: communications management; funding and resource management; staffing issues; logistics; programme development; implementation and management; preparedness and rapid response strategy; response standards; and, open questions.

The recommended duration of a workshop is a day and a half. Day One focuses initially on scene-setting, followed by small groups addressing sector-

specific questions, group findings are then reported back and discussed in plenary. The remaining half a day is used to hone and articulate the most important lessons and address the questions:

- How will the major lessons inform future response and preparedness for future emergencies?
- What are the issues and challenges for applying the lessons?

Documentation produced by the workshop is shared with regional and national offices before being disseminated more widely, possibly in a shorter executive summary format (Janz and Belle, 2000).

Tearfund

'Learning reviews' were introduced in 1999 as part of a programme based on the 'Learning before, during and after' (LBDA) model. The changes were part of a fundamental attempt to integrate knowledge-management methods into Tearfund's 'way of doing business' (Whiffen, 2001). The LBDA model was developed in large oil corporations such as BP, building on the US Army's after-action review model (Dixon, 2000; Collison and Parcell, 2001). Each significant event (whether a disaster response, the start of a new development project or the introduction of structural or procedural change in the organisation) is seen as an opportunity for using the LBDA model.

'Learning before' involves taking the time to learn from others prior to starting a process or intervention. It may draw on learning from previous events and 'peer assists' (inputs from specialists outside the team managing the intervention).

'Learning during' involves short-term knowledge capture using 'after-action reviews' – in this case, short frequent small operations-team meetings addressing the four questions:

- What was supposed to happen?
- What actually happened?
- What were the positive and negative factors?
- What have we learned?

The rules for AARs include: openness, not hiding; leaders and led on an equal footing; learning, not blame or evaluation; everyone involved takes part; no outsiders; real not insignificant issues should be addressed.

‘Learning after’ involves learning reviews and is intended to achieve longer-term knowledge capture at the end of a process or intervention. Trained facilitators are seen as being vital to the success of a learning review, which is based on the five questions/stages:

- What was the objective of the project?
- What did we achieve?
- Positive points – what went well?
- Negative points – what could have gone better and why?
- Looking back and giving it a rating out of ten.

Each learning review produces ‘specific actionable recommendations’ (SARs). Learning reviews of eight different disaster responses have generated no fewer than 300 SARs. Responsibility for ensuring SARs are acted on is assigned to specific individuals (Whiffen, 2001).

Follow-up to AAR-type learning events

With regard to follow-up, it would seem that ‘after-action reviews’, ‘lesson-learned workshops’ and ‘learning reviews’ face similar difficulties to those experienced by evaluations, and described in Chapter 1.

Although the involvement of at least the key personnel from the intervention can support and affirm the learning of those individuals, for application in subsequent operations, the transfer of those lessons and recommendations to colleagues and teams elsewhere in the organisation requires effective follow-up mechanisms. Several of the questionnaire respondents and interviewees expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of the follow-up within their organisation: ‘Outcomes not always applied,’ (Red Cross respondent); ‘AARs always generate the same lessons,’ (Donor respondent); ‘The extent to which [lesson application] happens depends more on the personalities involved in managing it than the activities themselves,’ and ‘They [AARs] are useful up to 50%, but follow-up is not always possible and we do not have enough time or funding to do them well,’ (NGO respondents). Weaknesses in follow-up are clearly of sectorwide concern.

3.1.2 Evaluation

Evaluation – a mechanism that combines learning and accountability – is widely used in the Sector, and, as would be expected, all respondents

indicated some degree of use of evaluation as a learning mechanism. However, several expressed scepticism about the value of evaluation as a tool for learning – ‘Evaluation is not properly linked to learning or training ... Our senior managers don’t make proper use of evaluations’; and, ‘The link between evaluation and learning is weak and the link between evaluation and training is non-existent’. Several also indicated a preference for internal or participatory evaluative exercises over independent evaluations. ‘We get more learning from internal evaluations’ was the comment of one.

Such questioning of the effectiveness of evaluation (particularly independent/external evaluations) in promoting or facilitating learning is by no means unexpected. As Chapter 1 indicates, the role of evaluation in learning is being actively debated within both the development cooperation (OECD, 2001) and humanitarian worlds. Yet, Chapter 1 also notes examples where evaluations of humanitarian action have been instrumental in changing practice. The role of evaluation in learning is clearly complex and subtle.

In trying to develop a picture of the strengths, weaknesses and potential of evaluation as a tool for learning, it is important to emphasise the fundamental point made in the *Annual Review 2001* and repeated in this year’s Meta-Evaluation Section, that much of current evaluation practice is unsatisfactory. Last year’s review of the evaluations undertaken of Kosovo operations concluded that:

Current evaluation practice, team composition and so on is singularly ill-designed and ill-equipped to address the lesson-learning purpose that it sets, and has set for it ... unless the evaluation process recognises its role in relation to institutional learning it will lose its status, (ALNAP, 2001, p100).

It would be wrong, therefore, to draw overall conclusions about the effectiveness of evaluation as a tool for learning solely on the basis of current (unsatisfactory) practice, and identifying and correcting what is wrong with current practice will help increase the Sector’s learning return from its investment.

Two of the fundamental failings, highlighted by the quality assessment of this year’s evaluation set and discussed in full in the Meta-Evaluation Section are:

i. the lack of clarity by commissioning agencies as to the very purpose of the evaluations they commission; and ii. the lack of attention given by evaluations to the causes of success or failure of the interventions being evaluated, leading to a failure to identify lessons for future application. All too often lack of clarity of purpose leads to the selection of inappropriate evaluation approaches.

Where accountability is the priority, the traditional virtues of rigour, independence, replicability, and efficiency tend to be the primary concerns. Where learning is the priority, the emphasis is more likely to be on achieving 'buy-in' from stakeholders, focusing on the process, and creating space to make sure that experience is properly discussed and lessons drawn out. ... These two objectives are not necessarily incompatible ... but they are sufficiently different to merit separate consideration, (Background Synthesis Report, OECD, 2001).

The extensive literature on evaluation points to the adoption of approaches that focus on users' needs (utilisation-focused evaluation) and provide a high level of stakeholder participation (participatory evaluation), as the principal way to increase the potential of evaluation as a tool for learning (eg, Patton, 1997; Preskill and Torres, 1999; Valadez and Bamberger, 1994). A 1997 survey of 282 evaluators and evaluation managers also found that:

the most important strategies for facilitating use are: planning for use at the beginning of an evaluation; identifying and prioritising intended users and intended uses of the evaluation; designing the evaluation within resources limitations; involving stakeholders in the evaluation process; communicating findings to stakeholders as the evaluation progresses; developing a communication and reporting plan, (Preskill and Caracelli, 1997).

Very few of the independent evaluations undertaken in the Humanitarian Sector can, however, claim to be either utilisation-focused or participatory. An ALNAP-supported study of nine humanitarian evaluations (Wood, Apthorpe and Borton, 2001) found that current evaluation practice in the Sector has the following characteristics:

- evaluation objectives are set centrally with limited, or even no, input from personnel involved in the programme to be evaluated, partner

organisations, local authorities and representatives of the beneficiaries or the affected population;

- evaluation teams are wholly or largely made up of external consultants;
- little if any flexibility is allowed in modifying or interpreting the terms of reference once contracts have been agreed and the process commenced;
- the process is invariably undertaken under such time pressure that insufficient time is allowed to enable a full engagement and contribution by the programme personnel and other stakeholders – it is unusual for the team to present and discuss principal findings before they complete the fieldwork and leave the country;
- the results of the evaluation are often poorly disseminated and targeted in respect of different potential audiences.

In short, as noted in the Meta-Evaluation Section, the ‘typical’ evaluation of humanitarian action is one where ‘Agency documents are reviewed and interviews carried out with agency staff and, in some cases, the affected population; but where the level of participation of key stakeholders is limited.’

An analysis of such characteristics against the learning concepts summarised in Chapter 2, confirms that independent evaluation, as currently widely practiced, is not a very effective learning tool because:

- the lack of key stakeholder participation limits their learning from a retrospective analysis of their experiences during the lifetime of the programme under evaluation;
- the external nature of the independent team, the limited use of participatory techniques and the accountability-oriented approach to investigation often results in defensive behaviour by the personnel whose performance is being evaluated;
- the elapsed time between the period of action and the evaluation is commonly six to nine months, making the link between ‘action’ and ‘learning’ distant, allowing room for post-event rationalisation;
- evaluations frequently fail to adequately feed the learning that emerged from the process back to the stakeholders in a targeted and creative manner.

It is not unusual to hear complaints that ‘the people who learn most from independent evaluations are the evaluators themselves’ and it is for the above reasons that internal evaluation and self-evaluation are increasingly viewed as

more useful types of evaluation, however, their own effectiveness as learning tools may vary considerably.

Internal evaluation

Internal evaluations are those undertaken by internal personnel with varying degrees of 'independence' from the programme and programme personnel being evaluated – eg, personnel from the organisation's dedicated evaluation unit. However, where evaluation unit personnel are perceived by the programme personnel as being 'head office assessors' they may encounter the same forms of defensive behaviour and post-event rationalisation often encountered by independent evaluation teams.

While an internal evaluation might be expected to be better at involving key stakeholders and feeding learning back to them, this is by no means guaranteed. Internal evaluations have a tendency to focus on the organisation and its concerns rather than those of other stakeholders (eg, beneficiaries, affected populations, partner organisations and local authorities).

Self-evaluation

Self-evaluation, strictly speaking, is where personnel assess the processes and outcomes of the programme they are/were responsible for.

A distinct risk with self-evaluation is that difficult, potentially embarrassing issues are avoided or not dealt with as directly as they might have been by an independent evaluation, resulting in limited learning. In practice, 'self-evaluation' in the Humanitarian Sector often involves personnel from head office working with implementing personnel, but, even this combination can't guarantee difficult issues are approached directly, particularly where they relate to the performance of the head office personnel, often in more powerful positions. Another factor is that unless specialist evaluation personnel trained in evaluation methods are involved, the quality of the self-evaluation process may be limited.

If self-evaluation becomes more widely used as a tool for individual and team learning in the Humanitarian Sector, it raises issues about the sharing of such studies outside the organisations concerned. If a requirement of self-evaluation is frankness and self-critical approaches it will probably preclude the release of the outcomes of such processes, if not forever then at least for a significant period of time. It seems unlikely, therefore, that learning from

self-evaluation will be of much benefit to efforts to improve cross-organisational learning.

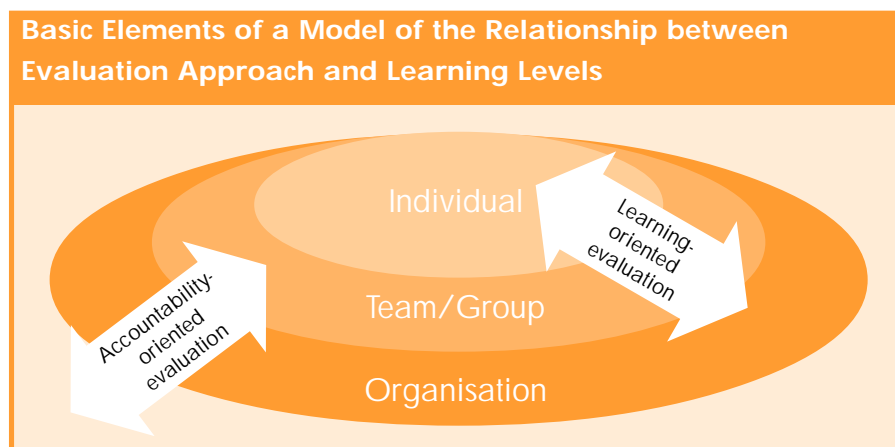
Matching evaluation type to learning level

While making learning a primary objective will most likely increase learning from the evaluation process, it should not be forgotten that changes in organisational policies, structures, practices and procedures also result from primarily accountability-focused evaluations using outcome-oriented approaches. Many of those referred to in Chapter 1 as having contributed to changed policy and practice would classify as such, and if changed policy and practice following an evaluation is taken to be ‘organisational learning’, then evidently learning does not only occur as a result of learning focus.

While this may seem to add to the complexity, what it points to is that different types of evaluation produce different types of learning at different levels within an organisation (eg, field staff, head office, operational departments, networks within the organisation) suggesting the need for a model that takes account of those different levels and the likelihood that each learns different things through different evaluation processes. Self-evaluation may be regarded as an inherently ‘better’ tool for learning at the individual and team level, whereas accountability-oriented/independent evaluations may be more effective at generating organisational learning (as evidenced by changes in organisational policy and practice), by virtue of being linked to the governance structures in some organisations and consequently wielding greater organisational ‘clout’.

The beginning of a model that differentiates level of learning and type of evaluation is shown in Figure 3.1. In its current form it does little more

Fig 3.1 Basic Elements of a Model of the Relationship between Evaluation Approach and Learning Levels



than reflect that accountability-oriented evaluations often fail to reach down and benefit learning at the team and individual levels, while learning-oriented evaluations are probably more effective at the team and individual level, even though they may fail to produce learning at the organisational level (as evidenced by changes in organisational policy and practice). It would be desirable for this model to be developed through empirical investigation to show the routes and mechanisms by which learning and changed practice are achieved within humanitarian organisations.

Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC)

Something very similar to this conceptualisation is already practiced by SDC, which makes a clear distinction between independent evaluation and self-evaluation, but views them as highly complementary. Although independent evaluation is recognised to provoke 'uncertainty' among programme personnel, its strength lies in its distance from the programme, and SDC see it as the only form of evaluation for cross-sectoral analysis. By contrast, self-evaluations are undertaken from an internal standpoint by the programme personnel, and while they lack distance, their strength is that they engender a higher level of participation and a reduced likelihood of defensive behaviour and blame allocation. 'It promises to be successful if those involved are sufficiently self-critical, and generally leads to stronger team-building and co-operation' (SDC, 2000). SDC undertakes around 10 external evaluations (often comparing performance across different programmes and sectors) and 50 self-evaluations each year (C. Hilfiker, Controller, Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief, SDC – personal communication, 2001).

Thus, in assessing the effectiveness of evaluation as a tool for learning, it is necessary to consider the level of learning, the type of evaluation and the ways in which organisations learn and change their practices. Given that learning is enhanced the nearer the learning process is to the action (see Chapter 2), a learning-oriented self-evaluation conducted either as part of an ongoing operation or immediately after the operation would appear to be the combination most conducive to learning at the individual and team levels. Interestingly this takes evaluation into the same territory as AARs and introduces the prospect of it becoming difficult to differentiate between AARs and self-evaluation processes.

Real-time evaluation

The extent to which real-time self-evaluation processes contribute to individual, team and perhaps even organisational learning, needs to be studied further. Analysis of UNHCR's learning from the real-time internal evaluations it has conducted (particularly the process that was ongoing at the time of writing in relation to operations in and around Afghanistan) will be of value to other humanitarian organisations.

3.1.3 Brainstorming Meetings

Meetings or workshops intended to generate new ideas or policies, possibly ahead of a new type of operation, appear to be widely used – 12 of the 18 respondents reported their use. The term encompasses a wide variety of meetings and purposes. In some cases it resembled the 'learning before' or 'peer-assist' meetings adopted by Tearfund, while for others it means bringing in an outside expert to offer another perspective and 'stimulate our own thinking' – possibly in an informal 'brown-bag lunch' setting.

Given the lack of precision on the mechanism, assessments of its effectiveness by the respondents varied. The usefulness of the mechanism is clearly highly dependent on factors such as the context, the force and attractiveness of the idea under discussion, the effectiveness of its presentation, the contribution and creativity of participants, etc.

3.1.4 Debriefings

Post-operation debriefing of staff is less widely practised – seven of the eighteen respondents reported use of this technique. In some organisations the debriefing process appeared to be primarily about offering counselling or 'space to be heard' to staff returning to or passing through head office after an operation rather than an attempt for the organisation or a department to learn from the experience of the individuals concerned. Some respondents reported that the debriefing process was seen as useful to, and appreciated by, the individuals being debriefed, but was not seen as being useful to the organisation, as a result of unclear procedures for follow-up or aggregation of the outcomes of individual debriefs.

Knowledge Sharing in the World Bank

Over the last few years the World Bank has invested considerable resources in the development of a range of knowledge-sharing mechanisms and activities for Bank staff and on behalf of the wider development community (clients, partner organisations, governments, research organisations, NGOs, civil society groups, etc). The mechanisms and activities for knowledge sharing fall into five broad categories:

Thematic groups/communities of practice to facilitate the sharing of experiences across internal and external boundaries are mostly composed of front-line staff working in regions and networks, and generally involve a core leadership/facilitation team of 3–5 co-leaders. Leadership and membership is voluntary and open to all staff in the Bank Group.

Advisory services in the form of a help desk, maintained by the operations evaluation department, to provide quick and easy access to information, knowledge and solutions (covering subjects such as Aids, anti-corruption; debt relief; human development; and evaluation).

Regional and country-level programmes to provide customised information and knowledge services and products.

Programmes to develop the knowledge creation, sharing and application skills of client countries.

Facilities to bring together the leading development practitioners to exchange experiences and innovations, on-line and face to face – eg, Global Development Gateway, Global Development Learning Network, the Development Forum, the Global Knowledge Partnership.

These activities are coordinated in the Bank by knowledge managers, coordinators and advisors from each vice-presidential unit, with a small core group located in the World Bank Institute. It meets at least monthly to ensure that strategy is carried forward and that 'programmes, systems and human resources are aligned to create an environment conducive to knowledge sharing and learning'.

Source: Knowledge-Sharing section of the World Bank website (www.worldbank.org/ks/about.html)

Box 3.2**Examples of Learning Networks in the UK Department for International Development (DFID)**

Livelihoods Connect An open Internet site, managed and hosted by the Institute of Development Studies to provide a 'learning platform' for information dissemination, discussion forums, question and answer facilities, promote dialogue, synthesise reports and organise new thinking in the area of sustainable livelihoods.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Group A cross-cutting group formed around an issue/system in which a wide range of staff have an interest and that senior managers are clearly committed to. It is 'owned' by its members rather than a single advisory or regional group and meets every six months. It maintains active email communication, facilitating the participation of staff based outside the UK.

The 'Lean and Mean' Group A group formed expressly to ensure that information generated by the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC)/Poverty Reduction Strategy papers (PRSP) process is being effectively disseminated around DFID; that lesson learning is happening; and, that key policy issues are being properly tackled. It is coordinated by the department responsible for international financial institutions and its members include advisors and staff from regional and policy departments, and a representative from the Treasury – each responsible for disseminating information widely within their own networks.

Resource Centres Capacities established with DFID funding but generally managed under contract by a university department or specialist management consultancy. The objective of Resource Centres is to support knowledge sharing and the development of better policies and practices in relation to a specified subject area eg, forestry, governance, performance assessment/evaluation.

Source: 'Doing the Knowledge: How DFID Compares with Best Practice in Knowledge Management', (final draft) August 2000, London:DFID.

3.1.5 Communities of Practice and Formal Learning Networks

Only limited reference was made to 'communities of practice' (ie, groups of individuals sharing a common working practice even though not part of a formally constituted work team), or formal learning networks. Two NGO respondents mentioned communities of practice, one indicating their

imminent introduction as an explicit aid to learning, and the other that they were under consideration.

Formal (or managed) learning networks do exist in many of the larger organisations, and the lack of mention is most likely because the question was answered in relation to the humanitarian section rather than the organisation as a whole. Both the World Bank (see Box 3.1) and DFID (see Box 3.2) have managed learning networks and communities of practice, but without an explicit humanitarian focus.

Another reason for the omission may be the considerable uncertainty over what is meant by a 'learning network'. A formal or managed network is usually identifiable by a convenor or secretariat; a newsletter or listserv or website; and an identity (title, membership list, etc). Whereas, at the less formal end of the spectrum it can be hard to discover or differentiate from say, an email exchange between three or four staff on a particular issue or experience.

3.1.6 Informal Networks and Opportunities

Almost all respondents mentioned informal networks and encounters as being active and important sources of learning. Discussions in corridors, over coffee, over meals, or after work in bars, while waiting at the photocopier or for planes are seen as valuable. As one respondent stated 'a lot goes on in informal meetings, hallways or stories told in scheduled meetings.' Clearly 'hallway learning' (Dixon, 1997) is alive and well in the Humanitarian Sector.

3.1.7 Aids to Learning

Websites (such as Reliefweb), shared drives, intranets, CD-ROMs, electronic 'discussion forums', newsletters, external networks (such as ALNAP), publications (such as those of the Humanitarian Practice Network), and libraries, were identified by respondents as sources aiding learning within their organisations, highlighting 'connectivity' as a major issue.

Patterns were discernible, with head offices of large organisations located in Europe, North America and Australia enjoying a wider range of sources than

those located in Africa or Asia. A country-level INGO respondent stated 'HQ has a website, but we don't at the country level,' a situation echoed by a UN HQ respondent 'The majority of country offices are not connected to the intranet.' There is a need to ensure that innovative learning mechanisms include all within the organisation. Two apparently highly effective mechanisms, are outlined below:

- A major restructuring in 2000–2001 resulted in the creation of a Knowledge Sharing division in the Geneva-based Secretariat of the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The division captures and shares information and knowledge on a variety of subjects, supported by an intranet, 'Quickplace'. It provides a repository of information on subjects of relevance to Federation activities to which Secretariat personnel (ie, those based in Geneva) can contribute information, references and comments on a particular area or activity.
- During 2001, Tearfund established a shared drive on its server with the explicit purpose of supporting learning. The shared drive is organised with a folder for each of Tearfund's 15 Departments, in which there are 5 sub-folders: 'About', 'Policy', 'Strategy', 'Learning' and 'Archive'. All activities, projects and correspondence are organised within the sub-folders and each department has an assigned Activity Administrator responsible for ensuring the folders are correctly and consistently used across departments. The separate 'Learning' sub-folder allows the results of all learning (whether from 'peer assists', 'learning afters' or 'learning reviews') to be easily located and retrieved at head office (Paul Whiffen, Knowledge Management Project Manager, Tearfund, interviewed June 2001 and February 2002). The planned introduction of an intranet will make the shared drive structure even more widely accessible. A website is currently being designed where Tearfund's overseas partners can 'meet' and exchange information.

While recent advances in information and communications technologies have dramatically increased, opportunities for accessing and sharing information, concerns expressed by respondents about 'information overload' highlight the need for conscious efforts to identify user needs and focus the mechanisms on addressing them. It also suggests that stressed members of staff are probably not operating optimally. Some respondents also expressed concern at how little 'good sources get used'. This might be a reflection of

‘overload’ but might also be due to lack of accessibility or a culture of ‘doing’ not ‘looking and reflecting’.

3.1.8 Monitoring

Fifteen of the eighteen respondents identified monitoring as assisting learning. Admittedly, two of them (based in UN) stated that monitoring assisted learning ‘at the local level’ (implying that it did not do so higher up the organisation). One NGO respondent felt that it only assisted learning sometimes, and several indicated that the potential benefit of monitoring for learning was not being exploited. Nevertheless the result is an interesting one as monitoring systems are regularly identified by evaluations as being weak in the *Annual Review 2001*.

Box 3.3

Principles and Best Practices Underlying UNHCR’s New Learning Policy and Guidelines

- The most effective learning takes place in the workplace environment and engages not only the learner but also colleagues with whom the learner interacts.
- The wide dispersal of UNHCR staff requires the use of ‘flexible’ learning including different forms of self-study and distance learning.
- Learning activities need to be designed, developed and evaluated according to accepted instructional design principles such as the ISO standards for Instructional Design.
- Learning should be made available when needed and when it can be effectively applied and practiced (applying the ‘just in time’ principle).
- Learning effectiveness needs to be measured by its impact, not in terms of participation rates and money spent.
- Learning methodologies need to be appropriate to the learning objective and as far as possible match with the preferred learning styles of the individual.
- Learning needs to be linked to staff development policies and practices that provide an appropriate combination of core and managerial competencies and development that addresses specific technical and substantive needs.

Source: UNHCR ‘Learning Policy and Guidelines’, 2001

The apparent discrepancy between this favourable view and the more critical evaluator perspective, points to the possibility that while monitoring can perform well as a short 'action-learning loop' for programme staff (in providing information to enable mid-course corrections) it can still fail to provide the necessary information to evaluate relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability/connectedness.

Respondents did not comment on the ability of monitoring to assist learning across programmes or at higher levels within the organisation.

3.1.9 Training and Learning

If done well, training is seen as an effective means for knowledge transfer, and individual and team learning. However, responses to a question about the role of training in the way their organisation learnt from its experience revealed interesting differences in approach and a significant degree of scepticism about linkages between training and learning. A picture emerges of a few 'beacons' of good practice, in a greater reality of patchy and poorly structured training provision, inadequately related to the learning needs of individuals within the Humanitarian Sector.

ICRC is one of the 'beacons' with its well-developed and structured three-layered approach to training provision: induction training; training for consolidation and broadening; and, training in a specialism.

UNHCR, following a 1999 review of staff training, has built on elements of ICRC's approach and developed an ambitious and comprehensive staff development strategy with the express objective of 'turning "Learning Organisation lip-service" into reality'. The new *Learning Policy and Guidelines*, to be presented to senior management in early 2002, envisage use of a comprehensive variety of learning methodologies and certification choices (M. Alford, Chief, Staff Development Section, UNHCR, telephone interview February 2002). (See Box 3.3 and Box 3.4).

An NGO respondent stated 'We have a dynamic training and development team that constantly reviews the training needs of the organisation and tunes the programmes offered in response to the needs.' A donor respondent stated 'We are lovers of training ... the love of learning is part of the office culture.'

This last organisation has a cooperative agreement with a university, which includes the provision of tailored courses to meet identified learning needs. A two-day training course on Afghanistan with emphasis on imparting knowledge useful for humanitarian actors was provided for the organisation in late 2001.

Box 3.4

Methodologies and Certification Available to Training Providers

Learning Type

Learning Options

Certification

Confirmation

- Assessment centres
- Analysis of benchmarks
- Texts/examinations
- Projects and coursework

Sharing

Reinforcement, validation & attitudinal change

- Workshops
- Seminars
- Networking
- Video conferencing
- Group projects and collaborative study

Application

Skills

- On-the-job training
- Task-based training
- Missions and Assignments
- Action Learning
- Team Learning

1 on 1

Skills, knowledge & attitudes

- Guided Missions and Assignments
- Cross-training and Coaching
- Shadowing
- Mentoring
- Guided/Structured Professional Reading

Self Study

Knowledge

- Reading
- Videos
- Computer-Based Training (CD-ROM, Intranet, Internet)
- Distance and Open Learning
- External study

Orientation

Awareness

- Workshop/Seminar
- Video
- CD-ROM

Source: UNHCR 'Learning Policy and Guidelines', 2001

Such plans and good practice do not, however, appear widespread. One UN agency respondent stated that no training relevant to them was provided by their organisation, another that, 'although there is an active training division ... the whole area of learning to improve performance is not emphasised,' and a third 'I don't believe there is a relationship between learning and training although there are opportunities given for both'. Another complained about the organisation providing plenty of short courses of up to one week's duration, but no provision for more in-depth training leading to an additional qualification. These views appear representative of the Sector.

3.1.10 Support for Learning

The questionnaire asked respondents if their organisation encouraged them (as individuals) to learn, and the majority responded positively. While many felt that their organisation was making efforts to support their learning, some respondents questioned the quality of those efforts. Some complained that it was often 'up to me' to initiate specific learning opportunities. Performance appraisals linked to wider staff development policies appeared to be particularly helpful in making the organisations more systematic and supportive. One respondent felt that 'recently introduced performance development reviews had helped formalise the identification of development opportunities that could be satisfied through courses, special meetings and workshops.'

Concern was expressed by one respondent at the preference for 'generalist officers', within government foreign affairs and development cooperation ministries – staff who could be moved around the organisation working on a geographical desk one year, in the humanitarian aid department the next and then on to a position in an embassy. In such organisations there are organisational and individual disincentives to undertaking the specific learning required for effective management of humanitarian assistance provision. The action-oriented, often highly pressured environment that exists within many humanitarian departments and agencies may also serve as a disincentive to learning. One respondent confessed to experiencing 'guilt' in attending seminars and workshop on issues that were not of direct relevance to immediate work priorities but which offered important insights for them in their humanitarian work.

3.1.11 Does Organisational Learning Occur?

When asked whether they felt their organisation learnt from its experiences, just over half answered 'yes' and just under half answered 'sometimes'. While it is quite feasible that UN employees are simply more realistic and circumspect than their counterparts in other types of organisation, the pattern of responses was potentially revealing (or misleading) in that the majority of 'yes' respondents worked for NGOs, Red Cross and bilateral donor organisations while the majority of the 'sometimes' respondents worked for the UN.

3.2 Strengths and Weaknesses

Drawing together the different sources: the questionnaire survey and interviews; agency documentation; the review of key points in the organisational-learning and knowledge-management literature; and the brief exploration of three other sectors, it is now possible to indicate the strengths and weaknesses of learning and knowledge-management mechanisms and practices within the Humanitarian Sector. The list is indicative rather than definitive – a definitive list would require a more comprehensive and in-depth study – nevertheless it provides the 'map' requested by ALNAP members in April 2001.

3.2.1 Strengths

Overall, there were more activities underway than was originally anticipated. After-action reviews and learning workshops are being used by a significant and increasing number of agencies; and a few have lengthy experience of their use. Many agencies operate or participate in communities of interest and some support communities of practice. The sector has good common networks and sources of learning such as ODI's Humanitarian Practice Network and Reliefweb, with clear examples of good practice, such as Tearfund's comprehensive approach to learning and knowledge management and UNHCR's new Learning Policy. The implementation of such programmes provides potential 'beacons' within

the Sector and the basis for sharing good practice experience in learning and knowledge management.

The evaluation mechanism features as both a strength and a weakness. Its increased use by humanitarian agencies over the last few years provides the Humanitarian Sector with a tool that is not available in the UK construction industry and not directly replicated in either the US Army or NHS. Though each has a range of investigative mechanisms, notably lessons-learning processes in the US Army, none has a widely used mechanism with well-established evaluative criteria. The strength of the evaluation mechanism is that it provides the Humanitarian Sector with the ability to monitor trends in performance and to identify lessons from experience.

Agencies in the Humanitarian Sector are clearly aware of the importance of learning from experience in their efforts to improve performance. Many are also actively seeking to improve current policies and practices through the introduction – or planned introduction – of new mechanisms and processes. This is encouraging and provides a necessary basis for improved performance.

3.2.2 Weaknesses

However, the preliminary ‘mapping’ and comparative work also indicate a number of areas where current mechanisms and practices were judged to be weak or to compare poorly with practices in the other sectors.

Lack of clarity and systematisation

A fundamental point made by the consultants that collaborated in this work is that the Humanitarian Sector lacks clarity in objectives, responsibilities, relationships and outcomes at the individual, team, organisational and inter-organisational levels, making the undertaking of learning much more difficult than for instance in the Military Sector. If objectives and responsibilities are at all unclear, so too are the reference points and frameworks necessary for the understanding and assessment of own performance.

Lack of critical self-reflection

Another fundamental observation by the consultants – one that confirms the earlier conclusions of Minear and Van Brabant – is that the Sector lacks a

culture of critical self-reflection and the lack of such provision in current learning activities limits their effectiveness.

It is possible that the combination of the life-saving nature of the Sector's work and dependence on public and private funding makes humanitarian organisations and their staff more sensitive and resistant to critical appraisal. Given the trend towards greater accountability in all walks of life, donor requirements for humanitarian organisations to be accountable in their use of public and private funds are likely to increase, making the implementation of the 'no-blame environment' recommendation, contained in much of the literature, particularly challenging.

Striking an appropriate balance, between accountability requirements and the need to create environments and 'space' for more effective learning within humanitarian agencies, will be neither easy nor straightforward.

Human resource issues

HR issues loomed large in the mapping work – to a much greater extent than was anticipated. Three key issues emerged: high staff turnover; lack of programmes to set and enhance staff competencies; and the possibility that certain learning style types are disproportionately represented in the Sector and learning mechanisms are not adapted accordingly.

High staff turnover

While solid Sectorwide data on the incidence of staff turnover and the lack of continuity of personnel during the life of programmes and between programmes is unavailable, it is apparent that turnover rates are very high indeed (see Box 3.5). This presents enormous problems not just for learning and the transfer of knowledge between teams involved in responding to successive operations, but also to the transfer of knowledge within the 'team' working in one operation. Indeed, so high are the apparent rates of turnover within some agencies in some operations, that the very notion of a 'team' becomes questionable and that of a 'revolving door' more apposite. Interestingly only two of the questionnaire respondents referred to high staff turnover as a constraint to learning. This suggests that either its significance is not fully appreciated or that it is accepted as a 'given' within humanitarian organisations.

Factors contributing to high turnover rates include:

- funding pressures that oblige organisations to lay staff off after large operations and re-recruit for subsequent operations;
- the practice by many agencies of offering short-term contracts – while strongly influenced by the funding constraints and uncertainties, it would appear that some agencies continue to offer short-term contracts even where funding is more assured;
- the need to regularly rotate staff and/or provide them with R&R breaks given the difficulty of working for long periods in physically and emotionally demanding conditions;
- the practice of replacing rapid-response personnel with longer-stay personnel after the first four to six weeks of a high-pressure response;
- the practice of ‘releasing’ personnel from their normal head-office posts for short-term deployments to emergency operations;
- the reliance by many agencies on technical and managerial consultants for short-term deployments to reinforce and support their own staff in an emergency operation;
- the preference of more experienced expatriate personnel for short-term deployments to limit time spent away from families;
- the limited size of the humanitarian departments within some organisations restricts opportunities for promotion and leads to those seeking promotion having to move to other parts of the same organisation or move to work for humanitarian departments in other organisations.

Lack of definition and enhancement of staff competencies

A feature of both the NHS and UK construction industry was the considerable effort put into identifying staff competencies and occupation standards for their sectors. (Presumably this would have been the same for the military had the issue been explored for that sector as well.) Practice in relation to competencies and staff development, appears to be very patchy in the Humanitarian Sector. Some of the larger organisations, such as UNHCR, set high standards but many others attach a much lower priority to HR issues – an important consideration presumably being the disincentive of high turnover to making any significant investment in personnel. Given the apparent widespread practice of individuals moving between organisations in the Humanitarian Sector the value of organisational rather than sectorwide approaches is limited as different organisations define competencies differently.

Imbalance in learning styles?

While surveys of learning-style preferences in the Humanitarian Sector have yet to be conducted, it is likely that the 'Activist' and 'Pragmatist' styles are comparatively over-represented in the Sector and the 'Reflector' and 'Theorist' styles comparatively under-represented (see Chapter 2). One implication of this is that the learning techniques preferred by many humanitarian personnel will be coaching, learning on the job and simulation exercises rather than class-based or book learning.² This may explain why a significant proportion of the questionnaire respondents reported poor linkage between training and action.

Given the likelihood of this imbalance in learning styles, the effectiveness of learning will be sub-optimal at the level of the team, organisation and Sector, making the Sector an inherently less-than-effective learner. The importance of this as a possible finding calls for a prioritisation of research to assess learning styles across a range of agencies and departments within the Sector.

Lack of Sectorwide learning support facilities

While Reliefweb provides a central and well-used facility for information sharing within the Humanitarian Sector, its library section is limited and does not currently provide the 'Sector Electronic Library' facility available to the US Army, the NHS and the UK construction industry.

Training provision in the Humanitarian Sector currently has a range of providers in an unintegrated and uncoordinated manner. The Sector certainly does not have anything like a university as enjoyed by the US Army and soon be available for UK NHS staff. The recently revamped UN System Staff College promises to provide this facility and support to the UN family (see Box 3.6). Nothing comparable is available for either the donor or NGO communities.

Training poorly linked to action

Much of the training provision in the Sector appears to be weakly linked to the action practice of humanitarian agencies. Given the points above about learning styles, it is likely that much of the current training provision within the Humanitarian Sector does not meet the learning needs of many humanitarian personnel, and coaching, learning-on-the-job and simulation exercises likely to prove the most effective type of training within the Humanitarian Sector.

Evidence of High Staff Turn-Over and Its Implications

Direct comparison of labour turnover rates (ie, the proportion of staff leaving in any one year) between the Humanitarian Sector and other sectors in a typical developed economy are unfortunately not possible due to lack of readily available data for the Humanitarian Sector. The UK national average turnover rates were estimated to be 26% but vary considerably between sector – eg, public sector at 17%, hotel, leisure and consumer sectors at 55% (CIPD, 2001). The high turnover rates in the latter sectors reflect significant use of unskilled or low-skilled seasonal labour. In contrast humanitarian agency personnel require a considerable range of knowledge and skills much of which can only be obtained on the job.

Where data exists on 'turnover' during ongoing operations, it appears to be very high in those operations and agencies that rely heavily on expatriate staff. For instance the evaluation of UNHCR's response to the Kosovo crisis included a review of UNHCR staff deployment during April and May 1999 which revealed that 21% of staff were deployed for a month, 45% were deployed for two months and only 34% were deployed for longer periods (Suhrke, 2000).

Extreme cases of poor continuity for particular posts were noted in the Great Lakes operations by the *Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda*. For instance CARE had no fewer than five coordinators for its operation in the south west of Rwanda between July and the end of December 1994 and the post of Water Coordinator within UNHCR's programme in Ngara was held by four different individuals between May and December 1994 (see *Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda*, 1996, Chapter 4, endnotes 45 and 48).

Such poor continuity during operations means that team-based learning events (after-action reviews, workshops, etc) need to locate and reassemble all the key members that worked on a programme or in a particular area during an operation if they are to be inclusive and effective (for construction activities). Conceivably low continuity may reduce the value of after-action reviews for humanitarian organisations in comparison with the military experience where 'teams' probably enjoy much higher levels of personnel continuity.

This points to a number of problematic issues in knowledge-transfer activities. For instance, where such poor continuity occurs it is vital that organisations ensure that the learning and knowledge acquired by those departing is transferred to those replacing them. Yet the limited evidence available suggests that handovers between departing and arriving personnel are often not achieved. A 1995 survey of 200 returned British aid workers (relief and development) found that 33% of those that had a predecessor did not have a handover (Macnair,

Box 3.5
contd

1995). Anecdotal reports indicate that agency policies and procedures on handovers appear to be poorly developed and often not applied in practice.

Information on the degree of continuity between operations is not readily available and so it is not possible to give typical figures for the numbers of staff with experience of previous humanitarian operations. It would appear that the 'pool' of personnel with experience of previous humanitarian operations appears to have increased in recent years. In the absence of firm data it is unclear how large or significant this 'pool' of experienced personnel has become. The development of rosters of technical and managerial specialists developed by organisations such as RedR have produced a cadre of individuals willing to serve periods of attachment to humanitarian agencies and many of the larger agencies now rely quite heavily on such 'out-sourcing' of specialist personnel recruitment and placement services. It is important that the particular opportunities and possible limitations for learning of this pool are recognised in developing organisational-learning and knowledge-management strategies within the Sector.

Insufficient prioritisation of learning

A feature of the US Army and UK NHS cases was the priority given to learning and knowledge management by the leadership and management. Even in the construction industry learning and knowledge-management activities were supported by central government, as a way of improving the effectiveness of the Sector. While many humanitarian organisations are undertaking a range of learning and learning-support activities, it appears that for most organisations the 'space' or incentives for learning are inadequate. None of the humanitarian organisations appear to reward good learning practices or 'good learners'. In some organisations the action-oriented, highly vocational culture leaves staff pursuing training courses feeling 'guilty'.

Perhaps most significantly, humanitarian organisations and their leadership are not providing sufficient encouragement and support to the process of developing a culture of learning and in particular of self-criticism within their organisations. Creating such a culture will require leadership at the very top to encourage staff through the, most probably painful, process of self-critical learning, the creation of 'no blame' spaces and opportunities for learning to take place and genuinely supporting learning and encouraging self-criticism.

Apparent weakness of 'independent' evaluation in facilitating learning by individuals and teams

For all its value as a tool for monitoring performance trends, generating lessons for improvement, and opportunities and encouragement for change within and by organisations, 'independent' evaluation³ appears to be poor at benefiting individual or team learning. Seen by operational personnel as externally motivated and often undertaken by entirely 'external' teams, few 'independent' evaluations are designed to enable those within the organisation being evaluated or the organisation itself, to learn from the experience. 'Utilisation-focused' approaches to evaluation⁴ that would increase learning are as yet not widely used in the Sector. The Meta-Evaluation Section discusses in some detail issues around current evaluation of humanitarian action practice.

Typical problems encountered have been detailed by Wood, Apthorpe and Borton (2001). These include: terms of reference that are unclear as to the primary purpose of the evaluation and that are generated with inadequate input from those involved in the area being evaluated; evaluation teams literally thrown together; widespread use of entirely 'external' teams rather than 'mixed' teams combining representatives of the organisation and programmes ('internal' members) and 'external' evaluators; lack of time and resources for the evaluation team to spend time in the field and provide adequate feedback to those working on the programme and in partner organisations; and inadequate follow-up procedures.

Another factor contributing to the weakness of evaluation in directly facilitating learning by individuals and teams is that training providers do not make adequate use of the case-study resources represented by evaluation reports in their training.

As a consequence there appears to be an increasing disaffection in the Humanitarian Sector with conventional, external, accountability-oriented evaluations (or at least those with equally prioritised accountability and learning objectives). Increasingly internal evaluation is being seen as an evaluation approach that is more likely to generate learning in humanitarian organisations.

Lack of inter-organisational and Sectorwide learning mechanisms

During the course of this work, other than ALNAP itself, the authors have

encountered surprisingly few mechanisms for encouraging inter-organisational and sectorwide learning. The Sector does have a number of cross-organisational and inter-agency groupings, networks and committees (eg, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee [IASC]; the DAC Task Force on Conflict, Peace and Development Co-operation; the ProVention Consortium). Only ALNAP however provides an all-inclusive, Sectorwide forum, and, apart from the Learning Chiefs Group within the UN family (see Box 3.6), only ALNAP appears to be actively and directly addressing the learning needs of its members and as such, the Sector as a whole.

Problems with the AAR processes

The increased use of the AAR, and AAR-like processes in the Humanitarian Sector, is a positive development. However, it would appear that the way humanitarian agencies have adapted the AAR mechanism does not conform

Box 3.6

Learning Initiatives within the UN Family

Learning Chiefs Group A loosely constituted group of staff development and learning managers within the UN family and other international organisations that meets regularly and commissions work of common benefit. One of its current projects is the development of organisational-learning standards that will provide a set of standards, indicators and formats intended to improve the quality and depth of learning within the UN family.

UN System Staff College At the beginning of 2002 the former UN Staff College based in Turin was renamed the United Nations System Staff College and granted its own legal status and statute, becoming the newest member of the UN family. The five 'key programme areas' that it will focus on are: economic and social development; peace and security; management and leadership development; knowledge management; development of a learning culture. Activities under the latter will include the creation of a unified and coherent approach to learning, becoming an effective clearing house for learning events, the identification and application of contemporary developments in learning theory, and best practice and technologies from inside and outside the UN.

Sources: Mike Alford, Chief, Staff Development Section, UNHCR, telephone interview February 2002; 'The Ultimate Global Learning Institution' WorldLink 11.4 October 2001; (www.wfpma.com/PDFs/wlv11n4.pdf); and, UNSSC (www.itcilo.it/unscp/)

to the tight design rules established by the US Army where key elements of its use are:

- it is the same team that worked together through the action situation that go through the AAR process;
- it is repeated at frequent intervals;
- it is facilitated by someone external to the team;
- it has a strict 'no blame' rule.

The lack of conformity is particularly evident in relation to the 'team' and the 'frequency of the exercise' where holding one 'AAR' at the end of an operation will inevitably reduce effective learning.

Another concern is that of the effectiveness of the AAR follow-up procedures. In some organisations the AAR process is not highly regarded because 'they keep generating the same lessons'. Lesson-learning processes of whatever type need to be followed up effectively, with lessons translated into changed practice if they are to be taken seriously.

Chapter 4

Synthesis of Findings of 2000–2001 Evaluation Reports

4.1 Overview

4.1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the performance of the humanitarian system through a synthesis of the main findings, conclusions and recommendations of the forty-six evaluation reports and nine synthesis reports completed and received by the ALNAP Evaluative Reports Database (ERD) in 2001. This section introduces the sample and summarises the main synthesis findings, followed by a detailed elaboration in Sections 4.2 and 4.3.

On the face of it, the evaluation reports tell a story of a job well done. While there is some sectoral variation, the majority of interventions achieved their short-term objectives with affected populations fed, sheltered and provided with water, sanitation and basic healthcare. This apparent good-news story is, however, tempered by continued generic weaknesses within the system and shortcomings in the evaluation process itself, as discussed below and in the Meta-Evaluation Section.

Both the overview and elaboration sections are organised by the main sectors covered in the evaluation reports: 'food aid and emergency agriculture', 'water and sanitation', 'health', and 'shelter and housing'; and the cross-cutting themes including: institutional factors, preparedness, coordination, participation, capacity building, coping strategies, gender equality, targeting and results-based planning.

Each sectoral area is addressed in light of the DAC evaluation criteria around which the evaluation reports are themselves constructed, with particular focus on impact, effectiveness, relevance, coverage, efficiency and connectedness.

Specific consideration is also given to non-food relief items, repatriation and rehabilitation of refugees and preparedness. Other important areas, such as mine awareness, conflict management and peace building are integrated into the analysis as appropriate. The sectoral organisation is intended to facilitate comparative analysis and reflects the way humanitarian action tends to be organised.

This chapter also introduces a dedicated Hurricane Mitch box, to provide a focus on the issues raised in relation to a particular context that has been the focus of extensive evaluation activity. The synthesis covers all the evaluation reports of Hurricane Mitch interventions made available to the ALNAP ERD over the period 1999–2001.

To promote lesson-learning, good practice has been highlighted wherever possible. Reference has also been made to findings from the *Annual Review 2001*, enabling, where appropriate, year on year comparison.

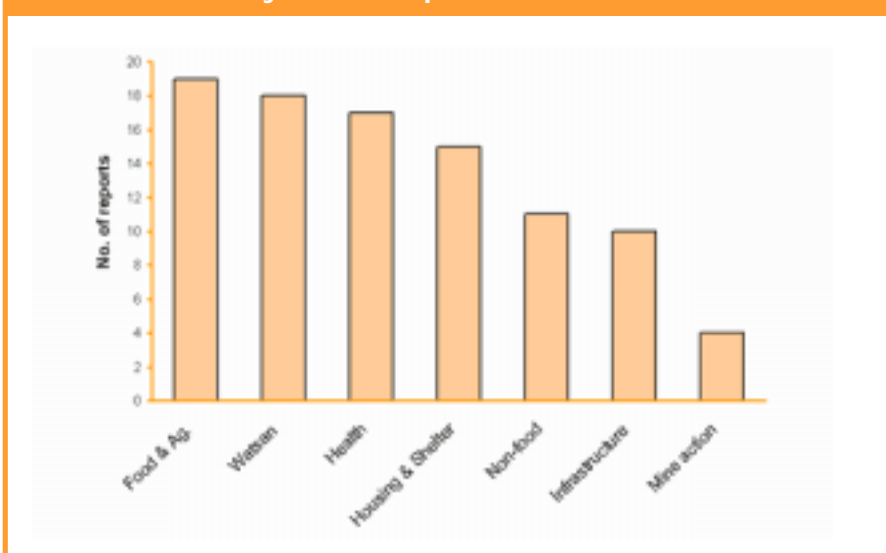
4.1.2 The Synthesis Sample

This chapter draws on the ‘core sample’ for the main synthesis and additional samples for the Mitch and Preparedness boxes (Box 4.3 and 4.8 respectively).

Core sample

The core sample is made up of forty-six individual evaluation reports and nine evaluation syntheses completed in 2000 or 2001 and made available to ALNAP in 2001 (see Annex 3 for summaries of the data set).

Fig 4.1 Sectors Covered by Core Sample



Commissioning organisations

37 per cent ECHO, 27 per cent UN, 16 per cent bilateral donors, 13 per cent NGOs and 7 per cent the Red Cross movement.

Main sectors covered

Food and emergency agriculture; water and sanitation; health; and, shelter and housing. A fuller breakdown by sector is given in Figure 4.1.

Countries and regions covered

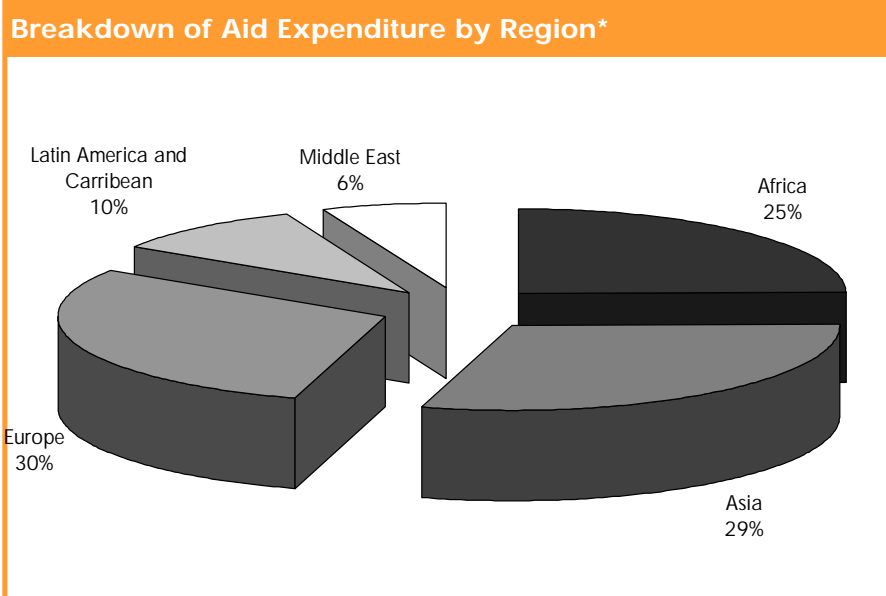
Fifteen countries or regions within countries are covered: Mozambique, Liberia, Somalia, Angola, Kenya, Sudan, Bangladesh, India, East Timor, Indonesia, Cambodia, Kosovo, Belarus, Russia, and Venezuela; and two regions, the Middle East and Central America.

While Figure 4.2 shows that the core sample can be considered broadly representative, there are inevitable absences and biases due to availability – a considerable number of reports are never placed in the public domain – and language.

Additional Mitch sample

Four pre-2000 reports, (CIDA, May 1999; Oxfam, September 1999; OCHA et al, February 1999; WFP, December 1999) and two reports from the *Annual*

Fig 4.2



**this draws on only 73% of the core sample where data was available*

Review 2001 core sample (USAID, July 2000; DEC, March 2000), in addition to the Mitch evaluations included in the core sample.

Preparedness sample

Three reports not classified as evaluations of humanitarian action but dealing specifically with preparedness (BRCS/IFRC, March 2000, ECHO, July 2001 and SDC, July 2001).

Shortcomings of the sample

As noted in the *Annual Review 2001*, evaluation findings must be read in the light of some significant shortcomings in the evaluation process:

- methods used, and the outlining of those methods, is poor, particularly in the area of consultation with the affected population, and triangulation;
- agencies did not collect adequate monitoring information during implementation, making the drawing of firm conclusions difficult;
- interventions are frequently judged on short-term objectives such as 'relief of human suffering', even where emphasis was clearly on rehabilitation and reconstruction, and assessment against longer-term objectives would have been more appropriate;
- areas such as the promotion of gender equality, support to indigenous coping strategies and capacity building are poorly covered by the reports, whereas greater attention to these known weaknesses in the humanitarian system might have led to interventions being deemed less successful;
- the majority of reports do not adequately establish the basis on which conclusions were drawn; and,
- reports focus primarily on what happened rather than why it happened, and until they address the reasons why interventions succeed or fail, the benefits of evaluation to learning within the system will be limited.

These shortcomings, discussed later in the Meta-Evaluation Section, call into question the ability of evaluators to perform fully credible/rigorous evaluations and, as a result, some of the evaluation conclusions.

4.1.3 Overview of Sectoral Findings

Across the four main sectors covered, water and sanitation and health interventions were assessed as generally more effective than food aid and

emergency agriculture, with housing and shelter judged to be the least effective. Why some sectors perform better than others is not, however, made clear in the reports.

Food aid and emergency agriculture

Food aid interventions generally met their short-term objective of 'feeding mouths', were considered generally relevant and were seen as a major priority of the affected population. Both geographical coverage and coverage of the vulnerable was considered adequate, although reports noted the need to pay greater attention to disadvantaged groups such as women and children.

Conclusions as to impact were usually qualified. Problematic areas included inadequate ration levels and the need for greater disaggregation and understanding of recipient groups, given that food aid focuses largely on the delivery of physical inputs and agricultural outputs. Connectedness was a problem for both food aid and emergency agriculture, because of the lack of a strong counterpart in the host government, or the lack of an appropriate policy framework, or the lack of resource mobilisation mechanisms, allowing insufficient time for the LRRD transition.

Whether WFP's food aid objective is to maintain current nutritional levels, or to promote higher levels is unclear, and requires greater attention from WFP planners and evaluators.

Water and sanitation

The reports were unanimous in finding water and sanitation interventions successful in meeting their short-term objectives. In all cases, decisions to intervene were seen as appropriate in terms of immediate support to displaced populations, longer-term rehabilitation programmes and capacity development. Geographical targeting as well as the targeting of vulnerable communities and individuals was considered adequate, although reports covering this sector are particularly prone to poor levels of discussion on coverage.

Connectedness is a major problem, as demonstrated by the failure to establish sustainable, user-managed water systems. Unrealistic objectives are set in the planning of sustainability. Establishing user groups is considered essential to operation and maintenance in development, yet it is not achievable given the short timeframes in which many humanitarian agencies respond.

While technology was considered generally appropriate, a number of technical recommendations would suggest that agencies are not learning from recognised good practice.

Among the key non-technical issues is the need to pay greater attention to vulnerable groups – for example pregnant and lactating women, and the disabled.

Health

Despite a lack of preparedness, the effectiveness and impact of interventions in the health sector was found to be positive in all cases. Examples of good practice are highlighted in the case of the DEC NGOs and UNICEF interventions in Mozambique. The keys to success in the health sector appear to be part of generic good practice, for example good needs assessment and the ability of INGOs to work with well-established development partners. Interventions were assessed as highly relevant, although evaluations need to do more to determine how needs are defined and whose needs are met. The particular health needs of women and children were not met in some cases.

Reports dealing specifically with health issues fail for the most part to deal with coverage, primarily because of a general lack of disaggregation by sex, age, socio-economic and ethnic group, which makes it difficult to determine if coverage was equitable. Coherence is also a problem, in part due to the lack of infrastructure and devoted healthcare resources.

Shelter and housing

Shelter and housing (in particular housing) was the least successful sectoral intervention, despite apparent agreement on principles for planning and implementing, as demonstrated by the concurrence of report recommendations. Shelter and housing interventions are not however without impact, but criticism is more common and extensive in relation to this sector.

Problems include: uncoordinated agency planning, leading to a large number of different and often inappropriate designs; different and often inappropriate approaches to construction; poor coverage because of the uniquely 'lumpy' nature of the resource; and inadequate resettlement planning, frequently leading to rehousing far from work or away from basic amenities such as water.

Causes of weakness in this sector include pressure to disburse funds and the fact that housing squarely straddles the relief and rehabilitation divide, leading to confusion as to objectives and responsibility. Agencies mainly concerned with humanitarian action should review support to housing as an 'emergency' intervention. Other approaches, such as food or cash for work, would allow affected households to allocate resources to housing of their choice. Direct support to housing may be better left to rehabilitation and development agencies.

4.1.4 Overview of Cross-cutting Findings

Financial disbursement

The pattern revealed is one of NGOs implementing bilateral or multilateral donor-funded interventions: 75 per cent of activities were implemented by INGOs, 6 per cent by local NGOs, 12 per cent by the Red Cross and 7 per cent by the UN system (only 58 per cent of the reports provided data to draw on). Large-scale implementation by NGOs may be one of the reasons for the relative success of humanitarian action.

Regional distribution

Figure 4.2 shows that regional distribution was biased toward Europe (30 per cent) and away from Africa (25 per cent), despite the significantly greater need in Africa. As found in the *Annual Review 2001*, geo-politics rather than humanitarian need continues to dominate funding decisions. This highlights the lack of attention given to chronic emergencies such as Somalia, Sudan and Algeria. Agencies should be commended for commissioning evaluations that draw attention to these 'forgotten emergencies' (Danida/DRC, May 2000; WFP/UNHCR, September 2001; ECHO, April 2001; ECHO, April 2001a).

Distribution by stage of emergency

The percentage of reports covering preparedness, relief and rehabilitation is shown in Figure 4.3. The *Annual Review 2001* noted that between 30 and 50 per cent of funds disbursed for humanitarian action was used for rehabilitation purposes, and this year's more detailed analysis shows that these figures were probably accurate. However, as Figure 4.3 is based on coverage by number of reports rather than actual disbursement, it should be taken as indicative. The implications of this pattern for the evaluation of humanitarian action are discussed more fully below and in the Meta-Evaluation Section,

but include the risk of faulty assessment of longer-term rehabilitation activities when using measures more appropriate for relief activities.

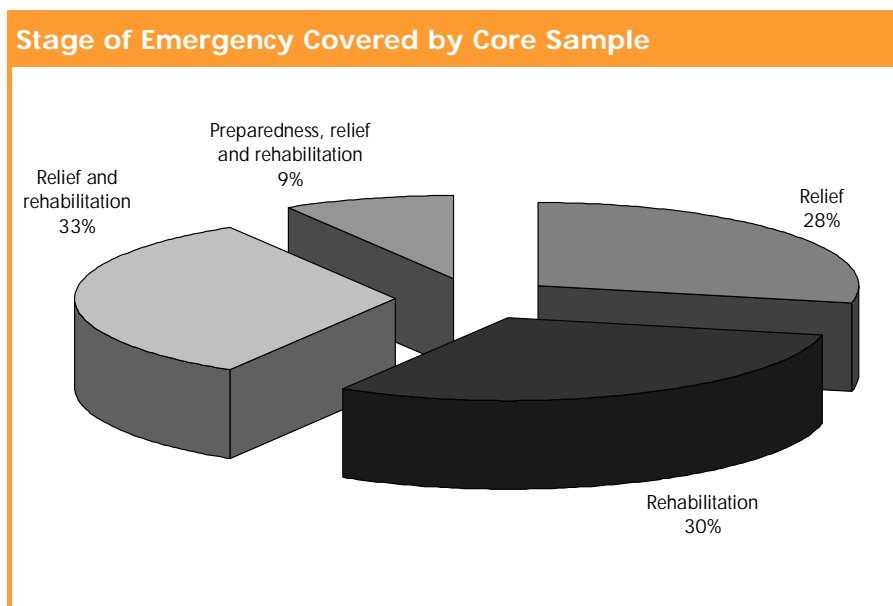
Human resources

Dedicated field staff, often working to the limits of their abilities, are central to the success of humanitarian action, but their work is often hindered by agency institutional systems. Without dedicated staff the humanitarian system would be floundering, but the lack of explanation of success stories in the reports limits the ability to promote replication of good practice.

The reports highlight as problematic: issues of poor staffing, high levels of staff turnover, inappropriate use of short-term expatriate consultants, poor administrative practices, ineffective staff capacity building and training, and poor communication.

Decentralisation is seen by several as the way to improve administrative practices and bring HQ closer to field realities. The need to streamline project approval and fund disbursement practices is also highlighted, as is the demoralising role of politically determined fund allocation. Allocation practices could be improved by reducing the political pressure to disburse disproportionately large amounts of funding to high-profile emergencies such as Kosovo, which leads to what one report referred to as staff 'hyperextension' (OFDA, June 2001, p7).

Fig 4.3



Preparedness

Despite consensus on the importance of preparedness in reducing vulnerability, the evaluation set reveals a general disregard among governments and agencies for preparedness activities, which, irresponsibly, puts the lives of millions of vulnerable people at greater risk. Although ECHO is by no means unique, the total DIPECHO budget in 2000 was less than 2 per cent of ECHO's total budget, and the evaluation reports covering ECHO interventions demonstrate little preparedness activity outside DIPECHO.

Coordination

Coordination is revealed as a relatively low-cost activity that yields significant returns and yet poor coordination continues to be the reality within the system.

Although this year's evaluation set points to a number of examples of good practice at the local and national level, coordination at national level is less successful, either because government capacity is overwhelmed by the crisis, or because individual donor country or departmental interests take precedence over effective coordination.

The IFRC interventions in Turkey and Central America come under particular criticism for lack of coordination (IFRC, August 2000; IFRC, November 2000), as does the unsuccessful OCHA attempt at coordination in the wake of the Gujarat earthquake (OCHA, May 2001).

Two positive examples are provided by WHO (WHO, May 2001a), and FAO (FAO, July 2001) whose coordination costs in Kosovo amounted respectively to 2 per cent of an approximately \$US one million budget and 6 per cent of total budget.

Participation and capacity building

Facilitating community participation in decision-making and planning, as opposed to implementation, continues to be problematic.

As the ActionAid summary report makes clear (2001, p2): '...participation of those affected by the emergency is highlighted by several country studies as a crucially important factor in increasing positive impact.' However, there are no examples of systematic good practice in this year's reports, even in the

interventions assessed as successful overall, illustrating the extent of the problem and an urgent need to improve practice in this area.

Differentiated rights

Awareness of differentiated rights and needs is identified as weak. This comes out most clearly in relation to gender equality and targeting. The reports covering gender equality (and most did not) find a lack of gender analysis, but offer few suggestions as to why gender perspectives are systematically ignored. The exception is the UNHCR (June 2001) report on support to refugees in Kenya, which provides an in-depth analysis of structural barriers to gender equality, such as cultural norms and practices.

Indigenous coping strategies

Despite recognition of the key role indigenous coping strategies play in responding to crises, the question of how to build on them is largely unexplored. Quite exceptionally, the WFP (April, 2000) report bases some of its recommendations on an analysis of coping strategies.

Targeting

Agencies need to be more responsive to different cultural practices. Seven reports note that targeting may be at odds with community expectations. What was once seen as sacrosanct – ie, targeting the most needy first – appears to be increasingly questioned in reports on ethical and practical grounds.

Results-based planning

All aspects of results-based planning need to be improved, and, in particular, the setting of objectives and monitoring. The lack of, or perhaps resistance to, clear statements of objective has made evaluation difficult and led to recommendations for the introduction of logical frameworks. There has been a general failure, among agencies and subsequently evaluators, to use standard indicators such as morbidity, mortality and rates of disease. While there is some good practice in monitoring, about one third of the reports note a general weakness. Mandatory beneficiary satisfaction surveys as part of intervention planning would help monitoring and make agencies more responsive to the situations of affected populations.

Rights-based approach and protection

The perceived shift in recent years towards a rights-based approach is not

reflected in the evaluation reports, and focus remains on needs. The general lack of attention to protection, for example in the reports covering East Timor and Kosovo, reveals that many actors continue to act in traditional 'delivery' mode.

Linking relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD)

As found in the *Annual Review 2001* and many other publications, LRRD comes across as a persistent problem. Discussion of LRRD is integrated into the sectoral discussion under 'Connectedness'.

4.2 Elaboration of main findings by sector

This section elaborates on the key sectoral findings summarised above, with discussion organised, where possible, around the DAC evaluation criteria. Section 4.3 addresses those themes that cut across the reports and sectors.

4.2.1 Food Aid and Emergency Agriculture

This section is based on 11 of the individual reports and the FAO/Sida synthesis report (July 2001). The individual reports cover eight countries and regions – Bangladesh, Mozambique and Indonesia (natural disasters) and Sudan, Kosovo, Somalia, East Timor and Cambodia (complex emergencies). Central to the food aid discussion are the evaluations of WFP interventions in Cambodia, Indonesia, East Timor, Sudan and Bangladesh (respectively WFP, April 2000, September 2000, September 2001, WFP/UNHCR, September 2001, DFID, June 2001). These reports focus almost exclusively on food aid and food for work, and provide overall findings on the performance of the largest food aid provider. Four other individual reports cover food aid as part of an overall assessment, two with a focus on the Mozambique floods (DEC, July 2001 and UNICEF, July 2001), one on Bangladesh (DFID-B, August 2001), and one on Somalia (Danida/DRC, May 2000). Two reports cover Kosovo, one the assessment of the OFDA supported intervention (OFDA, June 2001) and one focusing on FAO and emergency agriculture (FAO, July 2001).

What was the impact of food aid?

In terms of meeting short-term objectives, which was the main means of assessment used in the evaluation reports, effectiveness and impact in the food aid and emergency agriculture sector appear adequate. At the level of 'mouths fed', food aid globally has made a difference to the affected populations, as was found in the *Annual Review 2001*. For example, the FAO/Sida synthesis (July 2001) concluded that projects designed to increase food supplies rapidly achieved their objectives of alleviating food shortages and improving nutritional standards. Supplementary feeding was to a large extent successful in supporting vulnerable populations, for example in Mozambique (eg, UNICEF, July 2001). Among the reservations expressed concerning food aid was provision of inadequate rations (WFP/UNHCR, September 2001; ECHO, April 2001; DFID, June 2001), although the ECHO synthesis report on Tajikistan (March 2000b) comments that the number of rations per household was sometimes too high, as was the number of distributions per year.

But, while food aid had a positive impact on the nutritional status of affected populations, comments concerning this are usually qualified. Representative is WFP's report on East Timor (September 2001, p8):

Despite some shortcomings the mission concludes that WFP and its implementing partners responded quickly and adequately to the crisis, significantly supplementing the short-term food needs of a large proportion of the population. In some, perhaps many cases, WFP saved lives, although this should not be overstated ...WFP and its partners certainly helped to maintain the health and nutritional status of much of the population....

(See also UNICEF, July 2001; DEC, July 2001; WFP, April 2000). However, food aid interventions should presumably be seeking to 'improve', rather than merely to 'maintain' nutritional status in undernourished populations. This is not always made clear; for example WFP/UNHCR (2001 September, p2) notes in its introduction: 'WFP's main objective under PRO 4168.05 was a) to maintain *and* improve nutritional status among camp-based refugees.' Later in the report it notes (ibid, p16): 'One of the objectives of the PRO and PRRO under evaluation is to maintain *or* improve health and nutritional status of the beneficiaries....' and at another (ibid, p23): 'Under PRO 4168.05 the health and nutritional status of refugees in camps could in fact be

maintained (first objective),’ (ibid, p2). Vague objective statements related to ‘maintaining nutrition’ can also be found in WFP (September 2001), WFP (April 2000), and DFID (June 2001). This suggests that evaluators need to pay closer attention to the wording of objectives, and assess both the wider relevance of these objectives and whether they have been achieved as stated; and, that programme planners in WFP need to pay closer attention to the phrasing of objective statements.

The interaction of food aid interventions and power relations is covered adequately in only two of the reports. DFID-B (August 2001, p18) comments in the case of the 2000 floods in Bangladesh: ‘Food assistance on a large scale, operating through existing government systems and local political structures, such as in the case of the WFP programme, generally acted to reinforce existing power relations and further disenfranchise the poor and vulnerable, especially in the post-emergency period.’ DEC (July 2001) notes that local culture allows significant benefits to those in power, so that what external agencies may view as abuse of power may be accepted locally.

Were interventions relevant?

The evaluation reports and FAO/Sida synthesis found food aid to be generally relevant, with the exception of the WFP intervention in Bangladesh where a delayed response was seen to lead to inappropriate provision of food aid (DFID-B, August 2001, DFID, June 2001). Consultations with beneficiaries in the report on DEC supported interventions in Mozambique (one of the few reports where evaluators both noted the method used to consult beneficiaries, and reported adequately on their views) support this finding (DEC, July 2001, p23): ‘When ActionAid asked beneficiaries to rank the assistance they received, the majority of beneficiaries ranked food as the most important. The same pattern was seen in beneficiary interviews carried out by the evaluation team.’ However, because of insufficient attention to this by evaluators, no conclusions can be drawn as to whether the food-aid package components were relevant.

Was coverage adequate?

The reports concur that coverage of the most needy was within acceptable margins. DFID (June, 2001) found that although inclusion of the non-targeted was unacceptably high, the vast majority of food aid was given to needy households, and beneficiaries as a group were considerably more

vulnerable than non-beneficiaries as a group (for similar comments see DFID-B, August 2001 and WFP/UNHCR, September 2001).

WFP has recently pioneered Vulnerability Assessment and Mapping (VAM) as a means of identifying the country's most vulnerable population groups. In Cambodia the development of VAM was seen as a positive step, but its implementation was too complex and demanded too much staff time. Concerns were also expressed about the adequacy and reliability of available data, as well as indicators chosen to identify priority communes (agricultural land per capita, forest coverage, women's literacy rate, dependency ratio and access to safe water sources). WFP (April 2000, Annex 2, p6) reports: 'Too much emphasis may have been placed on geographic targeting at the expense of targeting more distinct groups of food-insecure beneficiaries with specific vulnerabilities, based more on demographic criteria or livelihood strategies.' Other reports (WFP, September 2000; DFID-B, August 2001; DEC, July 2001, ECHO, March 2000b) also note the need for improved targeting.

The FAO/Sida synthesis report (July 2001b) recommends improved targeting through rapid field surveys, which identify the most needy population groups and their livelihood strategies. It recommends that (ibid, p20):

More attention needs to be given to *who are the beneficiaries of FAO emergency projects* at all stages of the projects (design, monitoring of implementation and assessment). The focus is largely on deliveries of physical inputs and on agricultural outputs. Beneficiary concerns have been well dealt with and better targeting has been achieved in the case of the Kosovo programme where a Food Security Surveillance Unit and a proper monitoring unit have been attached to the Emergency Coordination Unit. The evaluation has revealed the instrumental role of these units in ensuring better targeting, not only for FAO projects, but also for all interventions in the sector.

Geographic coverage, for those interventions with a nationwide scope, was assessed as adequate in three cases where agencies were reported as targeting the poorest and most food-insecure regions (see WFP, April 2000; DEC, July 2001; and WFP, September 2001). In the case of the WFP intervention in Indonesia (September 2000), coverage of rural areas was seen as unsatisfactory, although coverage in urban areas was assessed more positively.

Were interventions timely?

Food aid Food aid was delivered in a timely fashion in the case of East Timor (WFP, September 2001), Mozambique (DEC, July 2001), and the interventions covered in the FAO/Sida synthesis (July 2001). In Bangladesh, however, this proved problematic. Despite flooding in September 2000, food distribution did not start until February 2001, with supplemental food distribution to vulnerable groups delayed until May 2001 (DFID, June 2001). In the case of the chronic refugee emergency in the Sudan, timeliness was also a problem, but this time in terms of delays in the provision of adequate rations to the camp populations. In the case of the response to the floods in Mozambique, direct funding to NGOs supported a more timely response than funding through WFP (DEC, July 2001).

Preparedness is viewed as a key factor in the adequacy of speed of response (see Box 4.7). Almost all the DEC NGOs had internal emergency management structures that allowed them to respond quickly to the Mozambique floods (ibid). However, a lack of preparedness on the part of WFP in East Timor (WFP, September 2001) meant a delayed start, even though the agency subsequently managed a timely programme.

Emergency agriculture 'Emergency' agriculture (immediate support to agriculture in a crisis situation, such as provision of seeds, tools and agricultural assets) was assessed as successful in three cases (FAO, July 2001; DFID-B, August 2001; OFDA, June 2001) and problematic in some areas in one case (DEC, July 2001). The most detailed report on emergency agriculture evaluating FAO's intervention in Kosovo noted as key factors for success (FAO, July 2001, v):

- early engagement in discussion of emergency agricultural needs within a UN humanitarian assistance effort;
- careful selection of key technical and management personnel devoted to the Kosovo emergency agricultural operation in Kosovo and at Headquarters;
- ability to hold together a core team of consultants where other agencies saw significant staff turnover or rotation;
- establishment of an agricultural coordination platform and information system, chaired by FAO-Emergency Coordination Unit, which included donors, leading NGOs and local government officials;

- clear system for identifying and targeting beneficiaries; and
- an effective monitoring system.

While this report goes further than many in detailing success factors, it unfortunately does not provide specific information on key issues such as how FAO ensured there were no significant changes in staff and how it supported coordination.

Other successful examples come from DFID-B (August 2001), where the provision of agricultural inputs was considered appropriate to the livelihood needs of the moderately poor and was particularly timely for the planting of the spring crop, although agricultural inputs tended to favour the moderately, rather than the very, poor; and, WFP (September 2001) with regard to the exchange of relief rice for rice seed in East Timor. In the case of the Mozambique floods, agricultural programmes were considered to have met with a number of problems, including extensive delays faced by some agencies in the delivery of seeds by suppliers, unseasonable rainfall and waterlogged soils, and disease and infestation (DEC, July 2001).

Connectedness in food aid and emergency agriculture

Connectedness was a problem for both food aid and emergency agriculture. In the case of longstanding refugee camps in the South Sudan, attempts to promote sustainable agricultural solutions to chronic problems lasting over 30 years have proven largely unsuccessful. Efforts to provide refugees with land to produce their own food were thwarted by the Government of Sudan's policy of refusing integration, and lack of appropriate land for farming (WFP/UNHCR, September 2001). In the case of the WFP intervention in East Timor (WFP, September 2001), the report found that WFP remained in 'emergency mode' well beyond the time it should have shifted to 'recovery mode'. It thus missed opportunities to contribute to longer-term recovery and engendered a lack of participation on the part of the affected population.

In Kosovo the absence of a strong counterpart in local government made the development of an exit strategy more difficult. However, FAO is seen to have compounded this problem by not having a policy that laid out a strategy for transition (FAO, July 2001). The FAO/Sida synthesis (July 2001) notes the following as constraints to connectedness in relation to emergency agriculture: security problems; political problems – ie, donors being reluctant

to invest in long-term development assistance for political reasons; the lack of an appropriate policy framework; institutional constraints within FAO which separate emergency and recovery interventions; and, resource mobilisation mechanisms which do not allow adequate time for the LRRD transition. All these constraints, except possibly the development of policy frameworks, are generic across the sectors and stubbornly resistant to solutions.

4.2.2 Water and Sanitation

This section is based on eight individual reports covering Turkey, Bangladesh, Mozambique, Central America (natural disasters), and Angola, Kosovo and East Timor (complex emergencies). The main types of intervention were provision of emergency drinking water and sanitation to camps; repair of drinking water and sanitation facilities; and, capacity building for operation and maintenance. Four reports focused specifically on the water sector, two in Angola (SDC, November 2000 and ECHO, January 2001a), one in Central America (ECHO, May 2001b) and one in East Timor (ECHO, May 2001c). The four remaining reports focused on assessment of water-sector interventions as part of an overall programme analysis (IFRC, August 2000; DFID-B, August 2001; DEC, July 2001; OFDA, June 2001).

How well did the sector perform?

In all cases interventions were seen to be successful in meeting their short-term objectives. Unanimity in this finding suggests that water and sanitation interventions are broadly effective over the short term, and that the sector performed well in comparison with other sectors, at least for the period under review. The following quote is representative (ECHO, May 2001b, p3):

The individual projects in the field of water and sanitation had a significant impact in the reduction of human suffering. The various respondents to field interviews all attested to the positive nature of the installation of water and sanitation systems. The potential of the installation of potable water and sanitation systems to contribute to a reduction in water-borne diseases demonstrates the value of the assistance.

Given that reports tend neither to make comparisons between sectors, nor to try to determine why one might be more successful than others, it is difficult

to identify the reasons for the relative success of short-term water interventions.

Were interventions relevant?

In all cases decisions to intervene in the water and sanitation sector were seen as appropriate in terms of both immediate support to displaced populations, and longer-term rehabilitation programmes and capacity development. ECHO (2001b, p4) offers some insight into the perspective of the affected population on relevance: 'It was evident that stakeholders considered the aid in the water and sanitation sector in a positive light. In numerous interviews, the provision of water services was very much appreciated and the installation of latrines was seen in the same vein, due to both economic and social factors.'

Was coverage adequate?

Water-sector reports seem particularly prone to poor reporting on coverage, and there is a clear need for improved reporting, for example through user surveys. Half of the reports provide the overall number of beneficiaries, but do not detail why a particular location was chosen, or the percentage of the total population that benefited, nor do they disaggregate beneficiaries. In the reports that did include discussion of geographical targeting and percentages of the population covered, both areas were thought to be adequate. DEC (July 2001) noted the wide reach of NGOs after the floods in Mozambique and was exceptional in also discussing questions of access and vulnerability, for example (p56): 'The latrines seen in the camps were small and awkward to use. Unlike in the Balkans emergency, where Oxfam made a proportion of latrines accessible to the disabled (a Sphere Standards requirement), there was no reference to such latrines in their reports from Mozambique.' ECHO (January 2001a) notes that both geographical coverage and the percentage of the total affected population covered were adequate. This report also notes an absence of data on water-borne diseases, which would be closer to an impact indicator than numbers accessing the water. ECHO (May 2001b), on interventions after Hurricane Mitch, also notes 'significant' coverage, although this is not quantified.

Participation and connectedness

Interventions failed in attempts to set up sustainable, user-managed water systems, as can be seen in Box 4.1.

Lack of Connectedness in the Water Sector

Reports were unanimous in their concern about the potential sustainability of interventions and difficulties linking relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD), as shown by the examples below that cover a chronic complex emergency in Angola and natural disasters in Mozambique and Central America. They point to the failure to establish effective operation and maintenance at local level as a central problem.

‘A lasting impact on the water supply is not guaranteed, since the project did not develop a long-term pump maintenance strategy ... it is unrealistic to expect that newly introduced hand pumps within the framework of an emergency project will survive long after the end of the project, even when training is given and spare parts have been supplied,’ (ECHO, January 2001a, p13).

‘While involvement of the DEC agencies in water supply was appropriate, this did result in a huge increase in the fitting of hand pumps without any proportionate increase in the institutional capacity to maintain them,’ (DEC, July 2001, p28).

‘The design of the drinking-water systems was the result of work of the partner NGO technical team without effective participation from the village, in 10 out of 16 communities visited ... the location of water taps was often decided by the NGO technical team and presented as a fait accompli to the village ... The training of water committee members, organisation of O&M committees and essential follow-up requires a longer presence than that which ECHO currently assigns to project implementation,’ (ECHO, May 2001b, p12).

This failure to ensure transition from relief to rehabilitation is perhaps unsurprising given two factors: the difficulties faced by initiatives to promote sustainable operation and maintenance in the development sphere (eg, Baland and Platteau, 1996); and the often short funding periods of relief operations which do not allow for adequate community participation – key to ensuring durability of water systems. Development of adequate operation and maintenance for example can take several years. While the quotes above deal with connectedness at community level, efforts to support capacity building in local government institutions are not covered in the reports.

Report findings suggest that project planning concerning LRRD in the water sector needs to be more realistic about what can be accomplished in the relief phase, and what steps need to be taken to ensure a satisfactory transition. This in turn will have implications as to how the relief phase is planned. Interventions are unlikely to be sustainable unless the intervening agency has or is planning an ongoing development programme in the locality, or there is the potential to support local government capacity.

Were water-sector interventions cost-effective?

Only the two Angola reports discuss cost-effectiveness. SDC (November 2000) suggests, through use of international comparisons, that SDC-supported interventions were relatively cost-effective. ECHO (January 2001a, p12) notes that while costs were reasonable, more cost-effective strategies could have been chosen, for example:

The Oxfam programme in Malanje drilled 11 boreholes at rather high costs (machinery, technical expertise, consumable etc.), while neglecting the much cheaper options of constructing new or improving existing hand-dug wells and springs. Besides, local labour could have benefited from this approach. Certainly, construction of hand-dug wells or spring rehabilitation is not always a realistic option, but in this case, the use of the drilling equipment made the costs higher than necessary. Even so, the costs/water point in the Malanje project are, in comparison with other NGOs, not extremely high.

This report also notes that measurement of cost-effectiveness is difficult because of non-comparable indicators used by different agencies.

Recommendations for improvement of performance

While technology chosen was considered generally appropriate, there are a number of technical recommendations made in the reports (eg, for different kinds of pumps in SDC, November 2000; ECHO, January 2001a; ECHO, May 2001b; ECHO, March 2000) that suggest better practice. Agencies are not necessarily learning from recognised good practice in this area and among the recommendations (eg, in SDC, November 2000) is the need for increased sharing of experience and knowledge. Among the key non-technical issues is the need to pay greater attention to vulnerable groups, for example pregnant and lactating women, and the disabled. Privacy, particularly for women in temporary camps, is also not adequately addressed in the planning stages.

4.2.3 Health

The following is based on twelve individual reports covering Turkey, Bangladesh, Mozambique, and Central America (natural disasters) and Angola, Kosovo, and East Timor (complex emergencies). Four reports focus

specifically on health interventions at the field level, in Angola (ECHO, January 2001), Central America (ECHO, May 2001), East Timor (ECHO, May 2001d), and globally with respect to ICRC-supported orthopaedic programmes (March 2001). Six reports evaluate health interventions as part of an overall assessment, in Turkey (IFRC, August 2000), Angola (UNHCR/Danida, May 2001), Bangladesh (DFID-B, August 2001), Mozambique (DEC, July 2001; UNICEF, July 2001) and Kosovo (OFDA, June 2001). The final two reports examine WHO's policy and coordination role in Kosovo and East Timor (May 2001a and May 2001).

What was the impact on health?

As in the water sector, the effectiveness and impact of interventions was found to be positive in all cases, despite in most cases a lack of preparedness. Interventions were seen to have reduced the risk of outbreak of diseases and to have substantially improved the health of vulnerable populations (eg, DFID-B, August 2001; DEC, July 2001; WHO, May 2001a; OFDA, June 2001; WHO, May 2001; ECHO, March 2000). The following is representative of report conclusions (ECHO, May 2001a, p10, italics in original) 'ECHO's contribution to the reduction of human suffering by providing emergency health services throughout the East Timor crisis has been significant with numerous deaths prevented, and reduced suffering from disease ... *The ECHO intervention in East Timor is likely to have been one of the more successful ones in comparison with other ECHO interventions.*' Further good practice is illustrated in Box 4.2.

Keys to success in the health sector, such as good needs assessment, and the ability of INGOs to work with well-established partners who had already carried out development work, appear to be part of generic good practice. These were identified as being central in DEC (July 2001) and ECHO (May 2001), for example (ibid, piii): 'Most INGOs were solid and experienced health-related organisations, with long-time presence in Central America and with proven and effective strategies in place. Not surprisingly, they were able to set up very good systems of epidemiological surveillance and vector control.' A limited amount of data on reduction in morbidity and mortality is presented in two of the reports that deal specifically with health (ECHO, January 2000 and ECHO, May 2001d), although not in a systematic fashion.

There is no clear evidence from the reports as to the cost-effectiveness of interventions. The ECHO interventions in Central America (May 2001),

Good Practice: Health in Mozambique After the Floods

The reports on DEC agencies (July 2001) and UNICEF (July 2001) activities in Mozambique comment on the overall success of health interventions:

'Equally important as the physical signs of DEC agency interventions was the reported impact of DEC agency activities on mortality and morbidity during the worst moments of the emergency. The low level of mortality reported after the floods was due, in part, to the large amount of assistance that DEC and other agencies brought to those in need [which appeared to have covered much of the population in need]. Despite cholera being endemic, and hundreds of thousands of people crowded into TACs, there were no major outbreaks in areas where DEC agencies were providing sanitation. Where there were cholera outbreaks, DEC agencies responded quickly with environmental sanitation and medical responses,' (DEC, July 2001, p49).

- Measles and cholera epidemics or large outbreaks were avoided (37,000 under five were protected);
- Other vaccine-preventable diseases were controlled: more than 60,000 were vaccinated against meningitis (including adults);
- Malaria epidemics were prevented through spraying of tents, buildings, schools and other structures, as well as blankets and provision of nets. Improved case treatment was effected through provision of drug supplies, health-worker training and change of first line treatment. At the same time opportunities were used to promote education on malaria prevention, treatment and referral. In all over 100,000 people were protected against malaria by spraying in the IDP settlements (UNICEF, July 2001, p16).

East Timor (May 2001d), and Mali and Niger (April 2000b), are reported as performing poorly in terms of cost-effectiveness, while the report on the ECHO intervention in Tajikistan (March 2000) notes that cost-effectiveness was acceptable. This issue should be examined in more detail to ensure that the costs involved in the general effectiveness of health programmes are not excessive.

Were interventions relevant?

Given the significant health needs in all cases, interventions were assessed as highly relevant. The conclusion in the ECHO report on health and nutrition in Angola is representative (ECHO, January 2001, p3): 'Most projects were highly relevant and addressed important basic needs in particular in the field of nutrition and Primary Health Care.' The logic behind the discussion in

many reports appears to be that in complex emergencies and natural disasters there is a large vulnerable population, usually already in poor health and whose health needs are exacerbated by the crisis, so that health interventions are necessarily relevant.

Evaluation reports need to do more to determine how needs are defined as well as whose needs are met. DFID-B (August 2001) notes that the particular health needs of women and children, including women's reproductive health, were not met in the intervention following the 2000 floods in Bangladesh. Evaluators working in the health sector should integrate findings on the differential impact of disease (eg, in the case of differentiated gender impacts of tuberculosis, Diwan, Thorson and Winkvist, 1998; Uplekar et al 2000). A failure to understand intra-household dynamics in Mozambique for example led to inappropriate distribution of anti-malaria nets (DEC, July 2001).

Was coverage adequate?

Reports dealing specifically with health issues (ECHO, January 2001; ECHO, May 2001; ECHO, May 2001d) do not for the most part include discussion of coverage issues, an exception being ECHO (April 2000), which assesses its intervention in Mali and Niger, and includes geographical and beneficiary coverage, assessed as good. The main reason for this appears to be that these reports were commissioned by ECHO, and the generic ECHO terms of reference do not include a requirement to focus on coverage, an omission which should be corrected, as disaggregated analysis of coverage should be central to a rigorous evaluation.

From the reports that include assessment of health interventions as part of the evaluation of a wider programme (IFRC, August 2000; UNHCR/Danida, May 2001; DFID-B, August 2001; DEC, July 2001; UNICEF, July 2001; OFDA, June 2001) it can be extrapolated that coverage was widespread and not geographically biased. A general lack of disaggregation by gender, age, socio-economic and ethnic group again makes it difficult to determine if coverage was equitable in these areas. It seems quite remarkable for example that UNICEF, given its very extensive promotion of gender equality, should publish an evaluation report where details of coverage of children are not sex-disaggregated (UNICEF, July 2001).

Were interventions sustainable?

Connectedness is problematic in the health sector, partly because of a lack of

qualified indigenous professionals, including doctors, to run the health service (eg, OFDA, June 2001). Despite these constraints, the evaluation reports tend to promote the development of a western-style medical system and to assess interventions against their ability to help support the development of such systems, without considering whether alternatives might be more appropriate in a developing country situation.

Even where attempts have been made to work with and through local authorities, a lack of infrastructure and resources devoted to healthcare mean that interventions may not be sustainable. For example, the report on ECHO's intervention in Central America (ECHO, May 2001) notes that ECHO's partners did an excellent job in working with municipal and regional health authorities, but that all health programmes financed by ECHO would collapse after withdrawal of the NGOs implementing the programmes. A similar pattern can be found in East Timor (ECHO, May 2001d), where ECHO was seen to promote planning for transition from the emergency period to rehabilitation, but where the local bureaucracy was deemed unlikely to be able to support an effective health system independently. Agencies working in this area, as in the water sector, need to develop realistic objectives as to what can be accomplished in terms of sustainability.

As to the coherence of interventions, two contrasting examples are provided by WHO's support to policy formation in Kosovo and East Timor in Box 4.4.

4.2.4 Shelter and Housing

The following is based on ten individual reports covering Bangladesh, Turkey and Central America (natural disasters) and Mozambique, Somalia, Burundi and Kosovo (complex emergencies). Two ECHO reports focus almost exclusively on housing in Central America (May 2001a) and East Timor (May 2001e), and the other reports on shelter and housing as part of an overall programme in Turkey (IFRC, August 2000), Bangladesh (DFID-B, August 2001), Mozambique (DEC, July 2001), Somalia (Danida/DRC, May 2000), Burundi (SDC, April 2000), Central America (Tearfund, August 2000 and January 2001) and Kosovo (OFDA, June 2001). The reports cover a wide range of countries and interventions, so that conclusions drawn below can be considered representative of the sector.

Response to Hurricane Mitch

Context In October 1998, Hurricane Mitch caused phenomenal damage throughout Central America, and has been termed the first regional disaster in modern Central American history. Winds, flooding and landslides killed 9,000 people, seriously injured 13,000 more, affected six million people and left some 2.5 million people homeless. Damage to Central America's infrastructure amounted to billions of dollars. Hurricane Mitch affected most of the population of Honduras and Nicaragua, and large parts of Guatemala and El Salvador. The subsequent agency response is captured in 12 evaluations and two synthesis reports, which form the basis of this context specific synthesis¹. The reports cover the humanitarian system in terms of coordination and direct intervention; a range of UN and other agencies, including IFRC, the larger donors (USAID, ECHO and CIDA) and NGOs (in particular British NGOs); and, all major sectors. Implementation covered was mainly carried out by local NGOs, INGOs and the Red Cross. The reports focus on both relief and rehabilitation.

Preparedness All reports note that agency institutional systems were overwhelmed by the crisis: 'this event is unparalleled by any in recorded history in terms of the magnitude and scope of the devastation,' (USAID, July 2000, p6). However, it is clear from the reports that two factors exacerbated the effects of Mitch:

- **Existing vulnerability and structural inequality** Vulnerability to disaster is conceptualised as embedded in structural inequality in reports commissioned by both donors and NGOs. This deeper analysis did not significantly influence the relief phase, in most cases responses were traditional and top-down, with limited affected population participation, and were needs – rather than rights – focused.

- **Poor levels of preparedness by all** Reports suggest constraints in early-warning systems, information gathering, processing and dissemination at all levels. No permanent national disaster-management training capacities existed in any of the four countries worst affected. Responses were therefore reactive.

It is unclear from this set of reports how far reconstruction efforts include a commitment to mitigation and preparedness. For example, a large number of people appear to be rebuilding houses at their original vulnerable sites. National governments and some donors do not currently appear willing to make a significant commitment to mitigation activities.

Results of the response Despite the lack of preparedness, reports were unanimous about the positive impact of the relief response across sectors, with the exception of resettlement and housing. Strengths and weaknesses were largely generic, suggesting that it is agencies' operational and organisational systems rather than the nature of the crisis that is likely to have most impact.

Box 4.3
contd

Strengths of the interventions were that they were:

- based on sound needs assessments and relevant to the needs of the affected population;
- well targeted at the most vulnerable and needy, including women;
- well targeted geographically to the worst-hit areas, taking into account the inaccessibility of many of these areas;
- well implemented, in particular by local NGOs; and
- coordinated with the local administration and civil society groups.

Common weaknesses found by the reports were:

- lack of beneficiary participation outside of implementation, so that beneficiaries were seen as passive recipients of aid;
- inadequate attention to issues of sustainability and how relief efforts would support longer-term development;
- poor resettlement and housing practices, namely failing to support secure titles to land, siting too far from potential places of work or former agricultural fields, provision of shelter or housing without supporting services such as water, and provision of housing through different modes, at different cost, with different designs;
- poor management practice related to lack of coordination and strategic planning; and
- poor coordination among donors.

A transformative agenda? The aftermath of Mitch has also seen a coordinated attempt to link response to the disaster to longer-term development and political issues. Linked to the analysis of vulnerability as embedded in structural inequality, the prevailing view following Mitch is that reconstruction should have a transformative element, to address root causes of vulnerability rather than to return to the status quo. The need for sustainable development, political transparency and lack of corruption in reconstruction has been raised by the Consultative Group for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America.

The 1999 Stockholm Declaration, stemming from this Consultative Group, listed six principles aimed at guiding long-term partnership between the governments of Central America and international donors. These include a focus on transparency and good governance; consolidation of democracy through decentralisation and participation of civil society; and, promotion of respect for human rights, with a focus on gender equality, the rights of the child, ethnic groups and other minorities. Initial assessments suggest some improvement in donor coordination and civil society participation, however, reconstruction (eg, of infrastructure) is currently taking front stage and transformation has carried less weight.

What was the impact of housing interventions?

As found in the *Annual Review 2001*, shelter and housing in particular was the least successful sectoral intervention. Giving the example of Bangladesh, it was noted in Chapter 1 that key lessons have not been learnt in the housing sector over a period of 13 years, a finding that may be common to other countries, despite principles for planning and implementing successful shelter and housing being agreed, as seen in the concurrence of report recommendations and other recent studies (Gilbert, 2001; IFRC, 2001). For example, reports consistently recommend that communities should be involved in housing design, but this appears remarkably difficult to achieve. This is not to suggest that shelter and housing interventions fail on the whole to meet objectives and have little or no impact. On the contrary, the

Box 4.4

Health Sector Policy Formation in Kosovo and East Timor

The emergencies in Kosovo and East Timor provide two examples of attempts by WHO to provide direction to the health sector at the national level (WHO, May 2001a; May 2001). In the Kosovo case lessons appear to have been learned from other post-conflict situations which established the need for the development of a health policy framework to guide the rehabilitation and development process. As the report notes (WHO May 2001a, p6): 'A very visible, key role played by WHO in Kosovo has been the formulation and promotion of a new health policy. Most interviewees highly praised WHO's achievement in this regard. Very soon after the initial weeks of settling back in, WHO embarked on this policy formulation process ...' WHO appears to have worked in a participatory fashion, promoting participation by all ethnic groups, although the reports note concerns about adequate follow-up to the policy.

In East Timor, WHO's role in the first three months of the crisis was judged crucial in the areas of coordination and technical advice, but assessed as unable to develop an adequate health policy (WHO, May 2001, p 16): 'These [selected priority] activities concern mainly health services components and not broader policy issues where WHO plays a major role globally. Issues like the Sector Wide Approach (SWAP) and health financing, both high on the policy agenda in East Timor, were not addressed by the WHO Dili office.' One of the reasons for this gap was perceived to be administrative arrangements. A WHO staff member was seconded to the most senior health position in the transitional UN government's (UNTAET) Interim Health Authority/Division of Health Services, resulting in two separate WHO interventions, one through its office in Dili and one within UNTAET. The latter focused on policy issues to the exclusion of the former and the result, as the report notes (p21): 'WHO's potential in post-crisis situations has not been fully utilised.'

reports cover a number of interventions that have in part successfully sheltered many thousands, and provide examples of good practice. But criticisms are more common and extensive than in other sectors.

Several reports note a similar pattern in providing shelter – an initial period of confusion, particularly in relation to needs assessment, and an unplanned rush to deliver shelter and housing (eg, OFDA, June 2001; WFP, September 2001). The IFRC intervention after the Turkey earthquake reports on one of the less effective interventions (IFRC, August 2000, p5):

Almost all of the tents distributed so quickly by the [Turkish Red Cross Society] TRCS were shown to be inadequate. Based on traditional designs, some little altered for a century, the tents lacked proper waterproofing or rain flysheets, ground sheeting or flooring and heating compatibility. In addition, local Government structures – with regionalised Crisis Management Centres (CMC) now establishing themselves – allocated campsites with little preparation or design, swiftly leading to flooding and drainage problems.

The IFRC report notes that after a few months mistakes were corrected: 'Both prefab and tent camps now provide excellent medium-term shelter arrangements, including medical services, electricity, communal showers and toilets, phone lines, shops, and some welfare services,' (ibid, p17; and see eg, OFDA, June 2001). In other words, agencies eventually met objectives, but in the meantime the affected population suffered considerably.

Three reports (DFID-B, August 2001; DEC, July 2001; ECHO, May 2001a) found that recipients were satisfied with the housing received in Bangladesh, Mozambique and Central America as opposed to general dissatisfaction in the case of OFDA in Kosovo (June 2001). Unfortunately evaluation reports do not for the most part identify the causal factors in the successful provision of shelter and housing, factors subsumed under general discussion of good practice – eg, in relation to consulting the affected population. Evaluation reports could do more to identify and analyse the factors that led certain interventions to achieving greater success.

Were interventions relevant?

Reports concur that in situations where there is widespread loss of, and damage to, shelter or housing, working in this sector is appropriate.

Recipients of housing also appear to agree (DFID-B, August 2001; DEC, July 2001). But given the problematic nature of providing housing; the fact that coverage is often low; design inappropriate; and, sustainability in question, other forms of relief may be more effective.

Design and construction

Uncoordinated agency planning led to a large number of different designs being used, even within the same locality, accompanied by a general lack of participation by the affected population in the design process, or in respect of the materials to be used (DFID-B, August 2001; DEC, July 2001; ECHO, May 2001a; ECHO, November 2000). The result was a number of problematic design features ranging from lack of adequate overhangs to reed that was not treated or termite resistant, limiting its life to a few years (DEC, July 2001); and, to beneficiaries having to build themselves outdoor kitchens where planners had assumed cooking would take place indoors (Tearfund, August 2000). An exception to this rule is the case of Oxfam in Mozambique (DEC, July 2001, p18): 'One positive example of beneficiary consultation was when Oxfam consulted communities about their shelter programme. The communities prioritised concrete floors and house size over provision of doors. As a result Oxfam houses were larger than the norm and had concrete floors, with the communities agreeing to provide doors themselves.'

Three main approaches to construction were promoted by agencies: self-construction, construction by contractors, or a combination. Several reports note that agencies were unable to select the right construction mode. In one case (DEC, July 2001) self-construction was chosen, adding considerably to women's work. In another (OFDA, June 2001), it was assumed the affected population had the skills to construct houses themselves – not always the case. In a third the implementing agency could not agree internally on the most appropriate approach to construction (contractor or beneficiaries) resulting in two of its offices in close proximity using different methods (ECHO, November 2000). Reports also make the point that house construction could be, but was often not, used to promote local employment.

Because of the wide range of housing designs, the cost per unit varied greatly. As Tearfund (August 2000, p5) points out: 'We also question the rationale of Tearfund having funded housing projects with unit prices varying up to 400% between different partners.' Housing cost seemed to vary by a factor of three in most situations, meaning that common and equitable standards are

not being enforced. In the case of ECHO in East Timor (ECHO, May 2001e), the problem was only corrected when housing recipients protested about inequitable distribution.

Was coverage adequate?

Given the often massive scale (for example 800,000 houses damaged or lost in Kosovo with a similar number in Bangladesh), it is usually impossible for agencies to support full replacement. An important exception is Kosovo, where between them ECHO, OFDA, and UNHCR appeared to have funded the repair/reconstruction of most of the damaged/destroyed housing stock. However, Kosovo is a geo-political outlier as it is unusual for such significant resources to be devoted to humanitarian action. In most cases coverage appears to be inadequate or biased:

Limited geographical coverage is also the price paid for the policy of supporting projects that provide displaced persons with high-quality houses. One can support a few projects building very high quality housing or spread the support thinly by bringing relatively lower quality, but still safe and functional houses, to more beneficiaries. This issue presents a dilemma to partners, and it is not an easy question to answer. ... it was clear that there were still significant problems with targeting and beneficiary selection in the housing programme (in common with other forms of assistance), such as the tendency for NGOs to focus resources on their own client group (Tearfund, January 2001, p5; see also DFID-B, August 2001; SDC, April 2000).

An exception was the ECHO-funded housing programme in East Timor (ECHO, May 2001e, p13): 'The effectiveness of the ECHO support to shelter/rehabilitation and repatriation and protection activities has been high. This has been the result of an appropriate programming strategy, the activities of ECHO partners and the strict application of vulnerability criteria when targeting beneficiaries.' The report does not go on to analyse the reason for success except in general terms (ibid: p18): 'All shelter projects have involved local structures in the selection of beneficiaries, implementation and monitoring of the projects.'

Resettlement

In the evaluation of DEC agency interventions in Mozambique (DEC, July 2001) shelter was considered broadly appropriate, but, criticised because of

the resettlement pattern. The majority affected by flooding lived on the river flood systems, but Government policy was to resettle away from flood risk areas. Selection of resettlement sites by the Government seems to have been somewhat arbitrary and often away from households' farmlands. In addition, rural communities had previously lived in a variety of settlement patterns whereas all rural resettlement sites seen by the evaluators were of a village type. Similarly in Central America, post Hurricane Mitch, the affected population was often resettled in locations that made it difficult to access work, or without provision for other facilities such as piped water. Housing projects were also hindered by a lack of land or unclear titling. The reports note that it is likely that resettlement sites will be abandoned because of the inappropriateness of the setting and lack of land titling (see ECHO, May 2001a; Tearfund, August 2000 and Box 4.3).

Why is shelter problematic?

Some of the problems with housing, as noted in the *Annual Review 2001*, are generic to humanitarian action, for example:

- inability to engage with the affected population around planning;
- inability to understand issues related to social process;
- poor levels of preparedness;
- poor management, including slow disbursement of funds from HQ to the field; and
- housing squarely straddles the relief and rehabilitation divide, with a subsequent lack of allocation of responsibility and development of expertise.

Similar findings on housing were reported from a synthesis of evaluations of reconstruction after major natural disasters (ProVention Consortium, 2002).

Other factors seem to affect the shelter sector in particular. The pressure to allocate resources in a visible fashion to meet political demands (see IFRC, August 2000; ECHO, 2001a; Tearfund, August 2000; OFDA, June 2001) seems to impact on housing, because carrying out relatively high-cost housing projects appears to be an easy way to allocate a large portion of a budget. As the report on the OFDA intervention in Kosovo notes:

The impact of politicization and the resource-driven environment that politicization created is hard to overestimate. The engagement of US political leaders at the highest levels and across government sectors

would generate pressure on OFDA headquarters and Field staff to operate at a level and pace that led to engagement characterised by one OFDA staff member as ‘hyperextension, (OFDA, June 2001, p7).

Issues related to the ‘lumpiness’ of support to housing, and land titling, compound the difficulties faced. It is very unusual in the relief field for individual members of the affected population to receive such a large contribution to their asset base, as so much else of what is received is consumables. In many situations, such as that in Central America (see Tearfund, August 2000) land titles are not clear and housing programmes may intensify conflict over land, as well as gender inequality where titles are provided to men rather than men and women.

There is substantial confusion as to whether supporting ‘emergency’ housing is relief or rehabilitation. Should providing a roof and walls and support to repair a house count as relief or reconstruction? Agencies do not appear to have set policies. A telling example comes from the ECHO report on East Timor (ECHO, May 2001e). The report notes that (p18): ‘ECHO’s contribution to the reduction of human suffering through the provision of funding support to shelter/rehabilitation, repatriation and protection projects has been significant.’ At the same time it comments (p20): ‘NGO partners have clearly been doing shelter in a developmental way and in this respect, the shelter intervention serves as the contact point/platform from which the NGO can launch other community-based interventions.’ The indicator ‘reduction of human suffering’, may be relevant (if disaggregated) to relief, but is clearly not relevant to a reconstruction programme that should be assessed by a wider set of indicators that might result in housing interventions being judged as less successful.

4.2.5 Other Areas

Non-food relief

As with food relief, the impact of non-food relief items was seen as successful and coverage good, with most supplies reaching the vulnerable. More problematic was the number and relevance of the items making up non-food assistance. In Mozambique a common complaint of beneficiaries was that they received only one kit of relief items per household, regardless of household size; in one case (DEC, October 2001, p18–19): ‘Oxfam consulted

partners rather than beneficiaries about the design of their resettlement kits and as a result came up with large and complex kits that were both difficult to transport and distribute.’ Similarly ECHO (January 2001b) makes recommendations about the need to improve both the quality and type of items distributed.

Consultations with the affected population did not appear to be the norm in this area. DFID-B (August 2001, p19) found that despite the intervention’s effectiveness: ‘It is apparent that there was very limited consultation with beneficiaries about the type and quantity of assistance given and in the majority of cases the supply package was predetermined.’ An exception is SCF in Mozambique, which produced an appropriate kit after an extensive survey of affected households (DEC, July 2001).

Support to refugees

Seven reports cover support to refugees and while there are some common threads in these reports, noted here, they assess quite different interventions (see Box 4.5 below), which limits the possibility of synthesising findings. Support to refugees is seen to be largely appropriate and effective, but connectedness is weak in all cases, as summarised in Box 4.1.

The seventh report dealing with refugees (UNHCR, June 2001) is an extensive review of a refugee firewood project in Kenya, aiming primarily to address issues of rape and violence against women and girls and promote environmental rehabilitation. The report found the intervention was not justified in terms of environmental rehabilitation, was only partly successful in reducing the rate of rape and violence, and did not deal with structural problems that caused gender-based violence.

4.3 Elaboration of Cross-Cutting Themes

The reports include a significant amount of detail on other factors influencing performance that cut across the different sectors. Included here are: institutional issues, preparedness, coordination, participation by the affected population, and results-based planning. Other sections have been included on gender equality, coping strategies, and protection and the rights

agenda, not because these areas are well covered by reports but to point out gaps in reports' coverage and analysis.

4.3.1 Institutional Issues

The main institutional issues (taken to mean intra-agency factors) covered in reports are: human resources; hiring practices; efficiency of administration; and, use of technology. That emphasis is reflected below.

Box 4.5

Support to Refugees

Intervention	Results
UNHCR support to IDPs in Angola (UNHCR/Danida, May 2001)	UNHCR programmes to promote self-reliance among the beneficiary population had a positive effect within a short time period, and have filled gaps in the areas of water supply and right to settlement, although overall coverage has been uneven and limited.
WFP/UNHCR support to refugees in camps in Sudan (WFP/UNHCR, September 2001)	Health and nutritional status of refugees was improved. Food aid should be tailored more carefully to recipient needs. Attempts at promoting self-sufficiency of refugees in 'land-based camps' failed.
Danida rehabilitation support to Liberian returnees (ADRA/DRC/Danida, January 2001)	Quantitative targets in terms of rehabilitated schools and agricultural inputs were reached. Interventions were relevant for returnees. The project has had a significant impact on a large proportion of returnees, but more integrated planning (eg, inclusion of provision of school supplies) is needed.
Danish Refugee Council reintegration and rehabilitation programme in Somalia (Danida/DRC, May 2000)	Rehabilitation of schools/clinics is an appropriate strategy which has been well-targeted, and impact is likely to be high.
ECHO support to Saharawi refugees, covered in two reports dealing with health and nutrition (ECHO, April 2001) and rehabilitation and non-food items (ECHO, April 2001a)	This was considered a 'forgotten emergency' where geo-politics made resolution and therefore rehabilitation and exit strategies complex. In the food and health sectors the intervention adapted well and avoided a famine situation. Rehabilitation and non-food items were also considered as relevant, efficiently delivered and effective. A general lack of coordination was found.

Human resources

A majority of reports concur that the most important factor contributing to intervention success or failure was the quality of staff. As in the *Annual Review 2001*, the reports attest to extraordinary efforts by agency staff. Some examples from the many that are found in the reports are given in Box 4.6.

As the last two quotes in Box 4.6 illustrate, field staff contributions often took place in an institutional environment that hindered rather than supported their efforts. As Tearfund (August 2000, p14) succinctly points out in the context of lack of institutional support: 'There are, however, limits; individuals can only do so much.' In a similar vein, IFRC (November 2000, p20, highlighting in original) comments on the lack of adequate institutional process: 'While the review team could only admire

Box 4.6

Staff Commitment: One Key to Success

- 'While visiting the different communities who participated in ECHO projects, the tremendous dedication of the partners became evident. This dedication was manifested in various ways such as work in isolated communities...' (ECHO, May 2001b, p11).
- 'WHO staff members, working under absolutely difficult circumstances, have shown a very high morale, perseverance and professionalism,' (WHO, May 2001, p13).
- 'Hurricane Mitch forced many partners to conduct levels of work which they never imagined possible. The way in which partners with limited resources and staff coped with the relief and rehabilitation work ... is a cause of admiration. For us, this is a reflection of the unselfish and sacrificial nature in which many staff gave of themselves to the work, a fact often passed over by donors,' (Tearfund, August 2000, p14).
- 'The level of commitment of the people deployed was noted with appreciation by the review team. Often it was their individual commitment and creativity that overcame some of the structural rigidities of current operational policies in order to make effective response a greater reality,' (IFRC, November 2000, p12).
- 'WFP staff were clearly highly motivated and worked exceptionally hard to serve the East Timorese people – even heroically. It was pointed out to the mission time and time again that WFP staff worked extremely long hours under trying circumstances, most notably in the crisis phase. The shortcoming of the operation and of WFP institutionally that are discussed in this report should not detract from this,' (WFP, September 2001, p38).

the ability of many personnel to cope with confusion through creative and innovative problem solving, *the lack of effectively designed and functioning procedures and systems* reflects not so much an organization as a collection of resourceful individuals.' Administrative confusion, rather than clarity, seems the norm.

Hiring practices and cultural issues

There are a number of cases of good hiring and staff placement. One of the good practices in staffing appears to be the appointment in East Timor of the ECHO correspondent (ECHO, 2001d), despite the correspondent's late arrival. The evaluation of the IFRC response to the Turkey earthquake notes the general experience of staff (August, 2001).

On the other hand, the deleterious effects of poor staffing decisions were noted in a number of reports. There are also numerous cases of delays in placing appropriate staff, for example, WHO's intervention in Kosovo (May 2001a, p11): 'The summer was an obstacle to getting WHO staff and consultants in quickly, and those were not always experienced in policy development in post-conflict situations.' Staff arriving late on the scene appears to be a significant issue, and one common means of overcoming this in a number of agencies (for example OCHA, WFP, UNHCR, USAID and World Vision) is to establish rosters of emergency teams that can travel at short notice, recommended in FAO (July 2001) and WHO (May 2001).

As noted in Chapter 1, high levels of turnover and inappropriate use of short-term expatriate consultants have been identified as major constraints to lesson-learning and good implementation. High turnover is noted in a number of reports (eg, UNHCR/Danida, May 2001; IFRC, November 2000; WHO, May 2001a; OFDA, June 2001; WFP, September 2001; Concern, 2001; World Vision 2001; Sida, December 2000; ECHO, March 2000; ECHO, May 2000b). An example is in the UNHCR/Danida evaluation of the intervention to support IDPs in Angola (May 2001, p5): 'these modalities have ensured very high staff turnaround, and have militated against forging of predictable relationships with government officials, NGO partners and IDP communities.' Inappropriate use of short-term expatriates and over-deployment of international staff is also referred to as a significant problem (eg, DEC, July 2001; Tearfund, October 2001; IFRC, November 2000; WHO, May 2001a; OFDA, June 2001; ECHO, May 2001d). The WHO intervention in Kosovo provides an example:

A recurrent complaint is the unsolicited arrival of short-term experts in areas considered of little relevance. The duration of the expert missions was in average too short. The advisory role of WHO may occasionally justify very short but highly specialised missions, but many of the programmes required sustained presence of experts familiar with the complexities of the Kosovo situation. High turnover, a problem common to many partners, was compounded in WHO by the inherent temporary (and unattractive) contract conditions even for 'senior' posts ... and the frustration experienced due to perceived management and leadership problems, (WHO, May 2001a, p17).

The culture of organisations was considered an important constraint to effective implementation in two reports, the IFRC in Central America and WHO in East Timor, for example:

Several respondents mentioned that as soon as SEARO [South East Asia Regional Office] took over the direct responsibility for operations in June 2000, the communication and its swiftness improved. It could not be made explicit by respondents what exactly made the difference. No specific problems or conflicts could be mentioned. Apparently the distance, not so much in kilometres, but rather psychologically and culturally was less far than that to Geneva (WHO, May 2001, p15).

Differing cultural perspectives within agencies, and their impact on interventions are not however well covered in the reports.

Clearly, findings on staffing practices are mixed, with some excellent and some poor practices. Unfortunately reports do not for the most part analyse how good staffing practices are achieved or can be replicated. This is a serious shortcoming and fits into a wider pattern of a focus on 'what happened?' and impact, rather than 'why it happened?' and process. Very little is said, even in reports with an exclusively organisational focus, as to whether particular hiring practices, capacity building or briefing sessions were effective. Because of this, many lessons on procedures for good staffing will not be learned. The implications for the evaluation process are discussed in the Meta-Evaluation Section.

An exception is the Concern summary report that includes a discussion of staff training and roles (Concern, 2001). Among the issues is the need for

clear understanding of roles, eg:

- clear terms of reference for assessment teams;
- terms of reference for assessment teams should include the possibility of the team becoming operational;
- staff deployed should always have job descriptions;
- thorough briefing and induction is critical;
- staffing structures should be adapted to meet the needs of the emergency;
- emergency teams should attempt to achieve gender balance, which may encourage more effective gender equality programming; and
- ongoing training must be provided, with a system for keeping knowledge gained from such training maintained.

Administrative issues and disbursement of funds

Four reports note that greater decentralisation would have been more appropriate or would have improved impact, for example: 'A lesson to be learned from the Kosovo experience is that grants cannot be managed from Washington, nor can they be adequately managed by short-term [Temporary Duty] or Field/program Officers who do not have the necessary OFDA and/or technical background. (The "revolving door" of shelter experts was seen as a handicap to program continuity),' (OFDA, June 2001, p10 and see WHO, May 2001a; WHO, May 2001 and WFP, September 2001).

Several reports also note poor administrative practice on the part of headquarters. The following quote from the evaluation of the WHO intervention in East Timor is representative and illustrates what field-based staff in some cases had to face (WHO, May 2001, p15; and see among others ECHO, January 2001; IFRC, November 2000; WFP, September 2001): 'Inconveniences consisted of inappropriate procedures like the requirement of three proforma invoices, in a post-crisis situation where only one supplier, if any, can be found. Geneva's insistence on procuring equipment from Geneva instead of Darwin was inappropriate and very inefficient.'

One particular area that constrained performance was funding practices. Allocation pressures have been mentioned in the case of housing and other examples come from across agencies and sectors (UNHCR, June 2001; WHO, May 2001a; WFP, September 2001; Concern, 2001). For example, the evaluation of the Danida-supported intervention for refugees and IDPs in Liberia (ADRA/DRC/Danida, January 2001, p29): 'Throughout the project period (since its inception in 1998) the project apparently has always been

under an immense pressure to implement and complete activities within a certain short time frame and budget period, not least because of the annual funding cycles.' Results-based planning, adopted throughout the UN system and by almost all bilateral donors and NGOs, and which was intended to remove some allocation pressure, has clearly been superseded by politics in a number of instances, and in Kosovo in particular. At the same time, the delays in disbursement noted in several reports, including the ECHO reports on Angola (January 2001, 2001a and 2001b), Tearfund (August 2000), and WHO (May 2001a), led to implementing partners, and in particular smaller national NGOs, working in an environment of uncertainty and to less effective responses.²

Use of technology

It might be expected that improved technology, in particular the potential for improved email and phone communication, and the use of the internet for provision of information, would improve the efficiency and administration of interventions. The recent UN report on peacekeeping operations (UN, 2000) for example notes the need for a common information technology and training strategy, and increased use of the UN intranet and GIS technology for information development and sharing.

There is some evidence that technology is improving intervention performance. The most detailed example comes from the case of SUMA, a computerised inventory and tracking system, developed by PAHO to: register and classify humanitarian assistance items at the point of entry into a disaster-stricken country; prioritise the supplies according to needs determined by disaster impact assessments; and monitor their location and final delivery. In response to the 2001 earthquakes in El Salvador, SUMA was used to register most relief supplies, but its main achievement appears to have been to promote transparency through careful registration of relief items and as a base for ongoing audits of humanitarian assistance (PAHO, July 2001 – the report concerned considers receipt, not the distribution or monitoring of supplies).

A key success factor in UNICEF's Mozambique floods intervention (UNICEF, July 2001, p10) is noted as: 'Strong telecommunications systems were also essential. Use of satellite telephones and cell-phones that made all the difference, not least because they benefited UNICEF and partners. These were given to partners in Gaza and Maputo; and to all staff involved in the emergency. This meant UNICEF and partners could be contacted

continuously.’ In terms of information exchange, OFDA (June 2001) reports on a \$500,000 grant to OCHA to establish a Humanitarian Community Information Centre (HIC) to promote information exchange among humanitarian actors in Kosovo. It included the production of maps, municipal profiles and a website through ReliefWeb, all extensively used.

Lack of appropriate communication technology is seen to have hampered effective response in WFP’s intervention in East Timor, where, apart from a borrowed satellite phone, WFP staff were without e-mail and telephone contact for the first month of operations (WFP, September 2001); in IFRC’s programme in Central America, where delegates were unable to purchase or lease essential communication tools such as telephones, fax machines and printers (IFRC, November 2000); and has been a persistent problem in Concern interventions for ten years (Concern, 2001), and an issue for World Vision over fifteen years (World Vision, 2001).

4.3.2 Partnerships and Capacity Building

Effective partnerships between external agencies – multilateral, bilateral and INGO – and organisations based in host countries are among the most important factors for success noted in the reports. A number of reports comment in similar fashion on the key role of partnerships, as can be seen in Box 4.7.

Many of the partnerships that fostered good practice must have been built up over a period of years as part of development programmes, where NGOs, often with a wide local reach and experience with working with local communities, are able to carry out effective needs assessment and targeting. This process is not documented in the reports and consequently lessons have not been learned about partnerships.

Potential negative effects of working with partners are noted as: overstretching capacity because of pressure to allocate funds and national NGOs being seen as service deliverers rather than development workers, because of some INGOs’ mode of operation (Tearfund, August 2000; Concern, 2001). The wider policy issue relates to decision-making processes in the selection of partners: Should funding concentrate on existing partners? Should ‘new’ agencies partners be discouraged and what guides such decisions?

Increasing the capacity of local partners has been a strategy in some interventions, even within the often short time period allowed for humanitarian operations. This tended to take place at the local community, national NGO and national authority level. Constraints to the former have been discussed with reference to the water sector and there are limited good practice cases of the latter, although again the DEC agencies in Mozambique stand out:

The DEC agencies repeatedly involved local agencies in their work. All of them...made a major effort to involve local structures in their work...One of Oxfam's aims in the household kit distribution was to increase the capacity of their partners. Save the Children's patient work with their contractors is increasing their capacity. ActionAid's role in Manhica probably reflects best practice in supporting a local administration. In addition to this there were numerous examples of

Box 4.7

Good Partnership Makes for Good Action

- '...the review team considered that Oxfam's operation was managed competently and that the implementing partners were relatively successful in targeting assistance in the rehabilitation phase. Oxfam has long experience of working with NGOs in flood-prone areas of the country and was able to bring very experienced staff from those agencies to the southwest during its response operations,' (DFID-B, August 2001, p14-15).
- 'It is important to acknowledge that, due to prior involvement in an area (eg, ActionAid in Manhica) or close relationships with local partners (eg, Cafod and UGC), some agencies had the great advantage of already having a good in-depth 'base-line' knowledge of the communities affected, before carrying out any assessments,' (DEC, July 2001, p15).
- 'Presence of national and international NGOs in the field and the good relationship between them and ECHO is the main cause for the successful, effective and swift response against the general human suffering ...Strong and active interest on the part of local authorities has proven to be a crucial success factor...' (ECHO, May 2001a, p32).
- 'Unlike other events in the Balkans, WHO was present prior to and right at the beginning of the emergency. This early and visible WHO presence based on prior cooperation programmes with resulting knowledge of the local conditions, former health system, and some of the new key players, proved an essential asset to play a leading role in the coming developments,' (WHO, May 2001a, p4).

DEC agencies supporting local organisations through secondments, funding and training, (DEC, July 2001, p64).

A further but more mixed example comes from WHO's intervention in East Timor (WHO, May 2001).

Capacity building and participation in East Timor has been seen as problematic by several evaluations, for example (ECHO, May 2001d; ECHO, March 2000a; March, 2000b; WFP, September 2001; UNTAET 2000); an exception appears to be ECHO's support to housing, seen to substantially support local capacity (ECHO, May 2001e).

Several other reports (WFP, April 2000; Tearfund, August 2000; Tearfund, January 2001; IFRC, November 2000; ECHO, May 2001e) recommend training and other forms of capacity building for partners. As Tearfund (January 2001, p15) comments: 'More good may be done over the long term through helping a partner attract good human resources than through funding a particular project.' The evaluation of IFRC's intervention in Central America (November 2000) notes that a large-scale disaster offers an opportunity to do capacity building with partners, even though the opportunity was not taken up in this case.

4.3.3 Coordination

In many assessments, including the *Annual Review 2001*, coordination has been highlighted as one of the weakest areas of interventions. The evaluation reports for this year point to an improved picture, although it is inadvisable to draw conclusions on a year to year basis. Good coordination practice was noted in a number of reports (eg, UNICEF, July 2001; DFID-B, August 2001; DEC, July 2001; ECHO, May 2001; ECHO, May 2001d; ECHO, March 2000a, March 2000b; FAO/Sida synthesis, July 2001).

The evaluation of FAO's intervention in Kosovo notes (July 2001, p7): 'Coordination started very early in the emergency and started well because of the high quality of FAO staff. FAO employed a knowledgeable expatriate agronomist who was available locally. He had immediate credibility among NGOs because he was known to the NGO community in Kosovo and he knew Kosovo agriculture, having worked there for an NGO prior to joining

FAO.' How this person came to be employed by FAO and whether this is in fact a case of good preparedness or sound organisation is not detailed in the report.

As was found in the *Annual Review 2001*, effective coordination appears easier to accomplish at the local rather than the national level. DFID's response to the 2000 floods in Bangladesh reports:

The review team observed that in the majority of cases all relief agencies, including NGOs, the UN and the BDRCS, respected the authority of the DCs [District Commissioner] and UNOs [Upazilla Nirbahi Officer] and were willing to be co-ordinated. The review team was also generally impressed by the MDMR [Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief] staff, which was obviously active during the response, despite working with very limited resources. District relief and rehabilitation officers had clearly made use of the Standing Orders on Disasters (an instruction manual recently developed by the Disaster Management Bureau) and reported that these had been useful in the formation of committees and for assessment, (DFID-B, August 2001, p8).

Similarly effective coordination with district and municipal authorities was found in ECHO (May 2001) and ECHO (May 2001d).

National level coordination among donors was more problematic, with each government department and donor effectively working in isolation (eg, in the Bangladesh case noted above, or in Mozambique, DEC, July 2001). Mechanisms to promote donor coordination are clearly not functioning effectively and donors remain in many cases more interested in the promotion of a national agenda. Among the weaker responses were the IFRC intervention in Central America (IFRC, November 2000), where problems with both the Secretariat and the Operational National Society were noted. Similarly the evaluation of the OCHA intervention after the 2001 Gujarat earthquake, which focuses exclusively on coordination, notes that late arrival and inadequate staffing led to an ineffective response: 'The arrival of a team with such limited scope (small, late, and with insufficient experience in the country) was tactically unwise,' (OCHA, May 2001, p26). Coordination among UN agencies in response to the earthquake was also seen as largely absent.

Various recommendations are made to overcome familiar problems of lack of coordination (for further details with reference to the UN system, see ODI, 2001). For example: development of an established policy framework to guide coordination (IFRC, November 2000; WHO, May 2001a); the need for better preparedness (eg, IFRC, August 2000); more flexible project funding (Tearfund, August 2000); and mechanisms to establish greater clarity in the roles of different actors (OCHA, May 2001). Coordination appears to be a relatively low-cost activity which can lead to significant returns. In the case of WHO's intervention in Kosovo, coordination amounted to 6 per cent of the budget (WHO, May 2001a), while FAO's budget for coordination activities in Kosovo was some 2 per cent of the total (FAO, July 2001, about \$US one million).

4.3.4 Gender Equality

Promotion of gender equality remains one of the weakest areas of humanitarian action. In the reports that adequately consider it (and most did not, see the Meta-Evaluation Section for more details) poor practice and failure to mainstream gender adequately appears to be the norm, even in the interventions that were successful overall. The FAO/Sida synthesis (July 2001, p25) neatly summarises the main issues: 'Although a key project target group, women did not receive an adequate share of benefits. Female-headed households were not selected more often than those headed by men and intra-household food distribution proved unfavourable to women.' The ActionAid summary report (2000) comments that gender issues tend to be deprioritised in emergencies and tend to be confused with initiatives targeted at women. It also notes that targeting women may result in immediate impact but does not necessarily address structural and rights issues, one objective of a gender-equality approach.

A lack of gender analysis or attention to gender perspectives is also noted in the Sida synthesis report (December 2000); DFID (June 2001); DFID-B (August 2001); DEC (July 2001); ECHO (May 2001); ECHO (May 2001b); OFDA (June 2001) and WFP (September 2001) – in other words, a cross-section of the humanitarian system. As most agencies now have gender-equality policies they are clearly not being translated into practice, and gender analysis tools and training appear to have been largely ineffective in the face of highly resistant bureaucracies.

Partial exceptions to this rule were: the joint WFP/UNHCR intervention in refugee camps in Sudan (WFP/UNHCR, September 2001) which was successful in promoting women's participation in Elder Committees; and the UNHCR (June 2001) programme in Kenyan refugee camps, evaluated as partly successful in reducing the incidence of rape, despite inadequate planning and low levels of cost-effectiveness. Reports offer few suggestions as to why gender perspectives are systematically ignored in planning and implementation. The exception is UNHCR (June 2001), where structural barriers to gender equality, such as cultural norms and practices, are analysed in depth. For the most part the reports, while themselves criticising a lack of gender analysis, do not adequately analyse how interventions might be improved. Again, the focus is on what happened, not why it happened.

4.3.5 Coping Strategies and Targeting Relief

The reports note a number of strategies used by local populations to survive over the short and long term, but, as found in the *Annual Review 2001* the implications of these are not systematically discussed. There is therefore limited attention to the ways in which external interventions might support and build on, rather than undermine, indigenous capacities. This underestimation of coping strategies is noted in two reports (IFRC, August 2000; DEC, July 2001).

ActionAid records some of the remarkable individual strategies used after the Mozambique floods, for example:

We woke up and there was water everywhere. We climbed a tree and we slept there until morning. The kids were crying because they were hungry. My husband went down from the tree to see the water level. He picked up some maize and he caught a floating bamboo, made fire with it and cooked the maize. We all ate and we were drinking rainwater. As my husband is a fisherman we used his boat to go to the accommodation center (DEC, July 2001, p1).

DEC (July 2001) notes that many of the affected population after the Mozambique floods returned home and began reconstructing their homes without agency help. WFP (September 2001) also discusses the resilience of

the East Timorese population, for example in hiding food, seeds and tools from the Indonesian militia.

One coping strategy used by communities, which might have a positive or negative impact on vulnerable groups, is their allocation of resources. A number of reports found a similar phenomenon, as highlighted in DEC (July 2001, p21):

Problems did occur with respect to the targeting of aid within communities. The Code of Conduct³ requires agencies to deliver assistance proportional to need, which often requires targeting within communities. However, such targeting may be contrary to local cultural norms and was certainly a source of beneficiary complaints for a number of reasons. Firstly, some assets are widely shared between households and agency attempts to target may not have been worth the effort in terms of their impacts. Secondly, communities do not always feel that members of a vulnerable group should receive more than others, yet it is often these people that aid agencies attempt to target.

There were similar findings in Sudan (DEC, 1999 and Concern, 2001); in Kosovo (FAO, July 2001) and in Bangladesh, where this phenomenon is recorded in detail (DFID-B, August 2001). In the case of the WFP intervention in Indonesia (September 2000, p16) a monitoring report noted: 'The problem of rice being evenly distributed to all households in a village (*bagi rata*) is prevalent. In many cases the government administrators of a village have been threatened with physical violence if the rice was not distributed evenly. For the sake of social harmony it is difficult to control this practice and difficult for the local programme administrators to carry out the programme according to the stated regulations.'

The ActionAid summary report includes a related point about targeting:

ActionAid's experience also suggests that the whole concept of targeting needs revisiting. Targeting has become a norm, seen by donors and others as 'best practice': supporting the idea that only the really needy should benefit. In fact it is resource-driven and increasingly used as an excuse for allocating insufficient resources and even as justification for 'dumping' unwanted goods. In Zambezia, household items left over from the flood response in the south were

Preparedness: Neglected by Governments and Donors

Consensus has developed over the last 10 years on the importance of preparedness for natural disasters (ProVention Consortium, 2002; IFRC, 2001). Funding of preparedness is not easy to track given current financial systems, but it appears that conceptual consensus has not translated into serious efforts on the part of governments, bilateral or multilateral donors to support preparedness; similar conclusions were drawn in the *Annual Review 2001*.

While three reports (see below) from this year's core sample deal specifically with preparedness, a number of other reports cover the issue, in relation to natural disasters. The overall picture is not encouraging. Eight out of nine reports, and the three NGO summary reports note that preparedness was poor or required greater attention (IFRC, August 2000; DFID-B, August 2001; Tearfund, October 2001; UNICEF, July 2001; ECHO, May 2001; Tearfund, August 2000; IFRC, November 2000; WFP, September 2001; ActionAid 2001; Concern, 2001; World Vision, 2001). There are also examples in the core sample of staff arriving late or unprepared (eg, OCHA, May 2001). Some evaluations see fit to excoriate agencies that are assessed as not fulfilling a key mandate, for example in the case of the IFRC intervention in Central America, quoted below, as well as Turkey (August 2000):

'The general inadequacy of the Secretariat's preparations to respond in a timely manner and with professionalism is a fundamental issue in its dealings with the major Participating National Societies (PNS). Unless these are corrected – and the team is aware of some of the many initiatives underway – it is difficult to foresee that the Secretariat will be able to establish its key role as the serving leader in the disaster response area with its member National Societies,' (IFRC, November 2000, 17).

The main recommendations as to how preparedness can be improved are:

- develop clear policy on preparedness;
- improve staff capacity through training and the development of relevant tools and manuals;
- support national capacity in planning and forecasting; and,
- support local community mobilisation and preparedness through training.

However, none of these recommendations get to the heart of the problem – the lack of commitment of governments and agencies to preparedness. Subsequently, the response is almost always reactive rather than proactive, a point made often in the past, for example in the *Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda* (JEEAR 1996). There was only one example of good practice identified in this year's reports apart from those which dealt specifically with preparedness, that of the DEC agencies in Mozambique (DEC, July 2001, p45): 'DEC agencies that had invested in disaster preparedness saw a return on this. The staff of Tearfund's partner, Ministerio Centro de Louvor ... had participated in Tearfund's emergency management training in the 1990s, which probably resulted in a faster and more effective response by MCL. Oxfam saw a large return from its investment in global preparedness through its Humanitarian Department which was able to mobilise significant material and

Box 4.8
contd

human resources quickly in response to the floods. ... Almost all the DEC agencies have internal emergency management structures that allow them to manage emergency response quickly.'

Three reports from this year's evaluations deal specifically with disaster preparedness, two of which cover smaller-scale interventions. SDC (July 2001) assesses a neighbourhood disaster support project in Turkey whose objective was the development of disaster response capacity and disaster awareness at a local level, through training courses. The report found that the training courses were appropriate and effective, but that neighbourhood committees were not as yet sustainable. BRCS/IFRC (March 2000) assesses an initiative on Community Based Disaster Preparedness, involving capacity development at the national Red Cross branch and community levels in Bangladesh. Despite a general lack of funding, training was again assessed as effective, and there was evidence of increased confidence and understanding in the handling of disasters by community members. As in the Turkey case, capacity and sustainability of community units needed strengthening. The budget for this intervention was approximately US\$1 million per year over a four-year period, during which period 23 District-level disaster preparedness units were reactivated. These in turn developed disaster preparedness plans and carried out training and capacity development in 33 communities.

The third report is a synthesis of evaluations of DIPECHO's First Action Plan for the Andean Community, which financed 17 projects at a cost of 5.3 million Euro (ECHO, July 2001). These projects sought to improve disaster management through preparedness training, institutional strengthening, and pilot prevention measures. Projects targeted vulnerable, disadvantaged urban and rural communities, municipal agencies, and local disaster-related organisations such as Civil Defence and the Red Cross. Some 12,300 people received training, and many more were seen to benefit through prevention works, municipal disaster plans and improved local preparedness. Projects were assessed as effective at the community level in terms of improved community capacity in disaster preparedness, better disaster prevention, greater municipal capacity and commitment, and increased public awareness and confidence in the community's ability to identify and solve its problems. However, this intervention was assessed as lacking overall coordination. Sustainability was unlikely, given the one-year funding cycle and lack of follow-up assistance in capacity building.

Each of these three projects followed good practice by involving and increasing the capacity of local communities in disaster preparedness (ISDR, 2001). They also managed to facilitate the involvement of women, which led in each case to increases in their self-esteem. However, in each case, sustainability of the intervention was considered unlikely. While interventions of this kind are successful over the short-term, the general picture is neglect of disaster preparedness by governments and donors who continue irresponsibly to put the welfare of vulnerable people at risk. For example, DIPECHO's budget for 2000 was 7.5 million Euro out of a total ECHO budget of 491 million Euro, or less than two per cent of the total (ECHO, 2000).

allocated to widows and disabled people, mainly 'because the numbers fitted'. They were not distributed as part of any clear strategy such as support to displaced families, or as going-home recovery kits, and the targeting was mystifying to staff and local people (ActionAid, 2001, p15–16).

It appears that what was once sacrosanct in agency and evaluation circles – that relief should go to the most needy first – is increasingly being questioned on ethical and practical grounds. This is not to suggest the existence of some benevolent 'moral economy' in agricultural communities, nor is this the place to attempt to reach conclusions on the much-debated issue of cultural appropriateness of certain aid practices. Rather, the main point is the need for cultural sensitivity and understanding of context in planning and implementation. It has been known for some time that even in periods of crisis communities have their own means of providing mutual support (Corbett, 1988; Beck, 1994), and, as noted in the *Annual Review 2001*, it is generally these systems rather than external support that provide most benefit to the affected population. It remains rare to find interventions that attempt to build on these local coping systems.

A significant exception in terms of a focus on coping strategies is the livelihood study commissioned to complement the evaluation of WFP's intervention after the 2000 Bangladesh floods (WFP, 2000). This study found that the affected population used a number of strategies common in disasters, for example adjustment of food intake (including a comparative decrease in women's intake), sale of household assets, borrowing from relatives, and migration (including children being sent to live with relatives). Unusually, findings of this study were used to make a series of recommendations including the need for increased attention to gender issues in disasters, for example through the provision of FFW and CFW schemes focused on vulnerable women.

4.3.6 Participation

As was found in the *Annual Review 2001*, promoting participation in planning and design has proved extremely difficult. Even in interventions judged as successful, systematic participation was absent, for example DEC (July 2001, p18): 'The evaluation team found very little evidence of

beneficiary participation in the assessment and programme design phases. The same was generally true of the implementation phase, where beneficiary participation was largely limited to the “we provide the materials, you do the work” approach. The evaluation team found that participation in assessment and design was lacking even in the later stages of the rehabilitation process.’ FAO (July 2001); ECHO (May 2001); ECHO (May 2001a); ECHO (May 2001b); Tearfund (August 2000); Tearfund (January 2001); WFP (September 2001); ECHO (November 2000); and IFRC (January 2000) had similar findings. This lack exists despite the fact that as the ActionAid summary notes (2001, p2): ‘The participation of those affected by the emergency is highlighted by several country studies as a crucially important factor in increasing positive impact. Where participation has happened, it is almost always well received by communities and in some cases there is a suggestion of long-term empowerment through this process.’

There were no examples of systematic good practice that could be highlighted from this year’s reports, which should illustrate the extent of the problem, and the urgent need for development of good practice⁴.

4.3.7 Rights-Based Approaches and Protection⁵

Some commentators see increased attention to human rights approaches in humanitarian action. Contrasting philanthropic to rights-based approaches, one author writes:

this shift involves humanitarian philosophy in a move from the sentimental, paternalistic and privileged discourse of philanthropy and charity, to the political, egalitarian and empowering ideology of rights and duties ... political events in the last 10 years have combined with a new commitment by humanitarian agencies to put their core beliefs on paper since the Rwandan genocide and have involved humanitarians being much more explicit about their values in recent years (Slim, 2000, p3).

However, the evidence of the reports suggests the shift remains on paper with interventions still firmly set in the philanthropic mode, ie, externally determined and driven with limited participation from the affected population. Agency failure to promote gender equality is also linked to the

fact that the concept is based on a rights approach, while assistance to women is based on a needs approach.

Although Tearfund (August 2000) and DEC (July 2001) point out that implementers need to be accountable to those they seek to support, the most extensive coverage of the rights approach is found in ActionAid (2001). It argues for the use of developmental principles and a longer-term vision to respond to emergency-related needs, as well as a commitment to build on local resources and focus on poor people's priorities. ActionAid's response to the Gujarat earthquake provides an example of a programme focused mainly on supporting poor people's claims for compensation.

A rights-based approach (Slim, 2000, p3): 'recognises the potential of emergencies to redefine social relations and produce opportunities for the marginalised to gain ground. This may result in better livelihood options, living conditions or access to services, which may also make individuals and communities more resilient to future emergencies.'

Only eight reports cover protection, but none specifically in relation to human rights. Two UNICEF reports discuss programmes to reduce mine incidents (UNICEF, May 2000 and June 2000), and one the provision of firewood to reduce violence against and rape of women in refugee camps in Kenya (UNHCR, June 2001). Other reports deal with protection more marginally in the context of the overall intervention.

The lack of attention may stem from the make-up of the evaluation set for this year, since there is only one ICRC evaluation in this year's core sample. However, even interventions in the contexts of Kosovo and East Timor, where human rights were to the fore, are framed in the reports as being in philanthropic rather than rights mode. The ECHO report on rehabilitation and shelter in Timor comments (May 2001e, p10): 'Lack of access to refugees and security issues represent the most difficult aspects of humanitarian intervention in West Timor.' But while there is one brief section and a general recommendation on protection, the evaluator notes that insufficient time was available to assess the issue.

One of the evaluation reports included in the *Annual Review 2001* noted that human security, including protection, might become the central humanitarian theme in this decade (Danida, 1999), and Paul (1999) argues

that all those present in the field have an obligation to ensure they mitigate the effects of, and prevent, abuses. However, protection is not well covered in the evaluation reports.

4.3.8 Results-Based Planning

Results-based planning, that is planning that supports the systematised measurement of results, was found to be less than adequate in the evaluations. This was the case in three main areas: objective setting, use of indicators, and routine monitoring.

The importance of the formulation of objectives has already been discussed with reference to the food aid sector and WFP. WFP, however, should not be singled out as few agencies were able to develop adequate objective statements. As noted above and discussed in more detail in the *Annual Review 2001*, this has meant that separate objectives are often not being set for relief and rehabilitation activities, and that rehabilitation activities are often assessed against inappropriate relief objectives. It has also meant a general difficulty, noted in several reports, in determining and subsequently measuring what interventions set out to achieve.

In the food-aid, water and health sectors in particular there is a weakness in use of indicators or data in general. In respect of food aid, inadequate monitoring meant a lack of available nutritional data to assess interventions; and only one report (DEC, July 2001) adequately integrates the Sphere standards into its discussion (for further details on use of Sphere see the Meta-Evaluation Section). In the water sector, evidence on changes in morbidity, mortality and the incidence of water-borne diseases is generally lacking in the reports, and the same can be said for the health sector. A further problem in the water and health sectors is the lack of disaggregated data, for example by sex, age and ethnic group, which means that who benefited is not clear. Several reports assume that benefits flowed to the whole population, which may or may not be the case.

Monitoring

About half of the reports cover monitoring in sufficient detail for a conclusion to be reached on its effectiveness. While the *Annual Review 2001* found monitoring to be weak across the board, this year's reports suggest an

improved picture. Seven note that monitoring was adequate or better, and there is also some good practice highlighted, for example the FAO intervention in Kosovo (FAO, July 2001), and the WFP intervention in Cambodia (WFP, April 2000). The latter notes (Annex 2, p9): 'The evaluation mission noted major efforts and progress by the country office, particularly its VAM [Vulnerability Analysis and Monitoring] unit – in designing improved M&E systems leading to impact assessment... A rich reservoir of data from various WFP in-house and outside surveys and rapid assessments has been assembled by the VAM unit over the past few years.' This includes a project database for tracking outputs on a monthly basis; two detailed baseline surveys; a gender equality study; PRA vulnerability assessments in more than 550 communes; and, several ad hoc surveys.

However, almost one third of the core sample (14 reports from across the range of agencies and sectors) note a general weakness in monitoring. The following quote from the evaluation of WFP's intervention in East Timor is representative (September 2001, p31): 'Priority information needs for programming, reporting and accountability purposes have not been systematically formulated by CO management. Major project objectives shifted or were not always clear as they were not formally reformulated after the EMOP moved into the recovery/rehabilitation phase. Performance indicators were completely missing.'

Even interventions that had set up a sound monitoring system did not always manage to develop adequate objective statements. For this reason a large number of reports recommend the introduction of logical framework analysis, apparently used successfully by DEC agencies in Mozambique (DEC, July 2001). Beneficiary satisfaction surveys should also be introduced as a required component of monitoring systems, to ensure that agencies pay systematic attention to beneficiary views.

Four reports (WFP, September 2001; Tearfund, August 2000; WFP, April 2000; and DEC, July 2001) briefly raise the issue of participation in monitoring. However, as noted above, the way in which 'beneficiary participation' is operationalised is mainly in the implementation of interventions, the nature of which have been pre-determined. Agencies should examine ways in which the affected population could become involved in monitoring as a means of increasing participation and

accountability. Unfortunately, no good practice can be highlighted from the evaluation reports on this subject.

4.4 Synthesis Conclusion

The evaluation reports reviewed for this year's *Annual Review* point to effective humanitarian action, despite some serious shortcomings. On balance, humanitarian interventions were successful in meeting short-term objectives, including feeding hungry people, reducing mortality rates, and supplying water and sanitation and health services. Despite this, there were a number of problematic areas in need of improvement, in particular: a lack of connectedness in all sectors covered; lack of attention to preparedness, rights-based approaches, targeting and gender equality; low levels of affected population participation; limited attention to indigenous coping strategies; and limited coordination. Perhaps the most important findings from this year's review are: that water-sector projects tend to perform better than the projects in other sectors; that targeting the vulnerable was seen in many reports as an external priority which did not meet the needs of 'communities'; and that support to housing may be inappropriate in the relief phase of interventions.

A number of organisational areas need to be improved, including better hiring practices, more systematic distribution of funds, and a strengthening of results-based planning. Some, such as better training for and support to field staff and improved administrative practices, are more amenable to change in the short-term, whereas other more structural areas require a more concentrated and longer-term focus. These include the need to move to rights-based approaches, to investigate targeting to ensure that it meets affected population's as well as agency requirements, and to intensify the focus on preparedness, participation and gender equality.

Although the evaluation reports lacked analysis of why interventions succeeded or failed, the key success factor that came across strongly was the existence of dedicated staff in the field, often working within inefficient institutions that hindered their work.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to draw together the various strands that have been presented on ‘independent’ evaluation follow-up, learning and knowledge management, the synthesis of the findings of this year’s ‘crop’ of evaluations of humanitarian action and the assessment of the quality of those evaluations presented in the colour page Meta-Evaluation Section following this chapter. Together they represent a rich array of sources and insights into how the Humanitarian Sector is performing and how it currently approaches the task of learning from experience.

A notable feature of these sources and of this year’s Annual Review is the sheer breadth of disciplines and sectors introduced and discussed; instructional science, post-disaster housing, group dynamics, targeting methods, occupational standards, ratings systems, ICT architecture, policy formulation, gender analysis and individual learning styles, to name but a few. Such breadth is entirely appropriate – the Humanitarian Sector is highly multi-disciplinary and, because of its many unique characteristics, needs to look outside itself and draw on whatever may be of use in its efforts to progress and improve. It is only right that the ALNAP Annual Review should reflect and, where appropriate, facilitate this ‘reaching out’ by the Sector.

This chapter begins (Section 5.2) by reflecting on the performance of the Humanitarian Sector, reviewing the main points emerging from Chapter 4. In Section 5.3 it reconsiders the main points emerging from the material presented on learning and knowledge management in Chapters 2 and 3. Though this material was only intended as a preliminary, ‘mapping’, study by ALNAP, it has generated a provisional agenda on how to improve learning in order to improve performance, for consideration by humanitarian agencies individually and by the Humanitarian Sector as a whole. This provisional agenda is presented in Section 5.4.

5.2 Assessing the Performance of the Sector

Chapter 4’s analysis of the 46 evaluation reports and the 9 synthesis reports that form this year’s core sample, notes that the majority of interventions achieved their short-term objectives and that, with certain provisos

concerning shortcomings in the practice and quality of the evaluations, it was 'the story of a job well done'. Putting the provisos aside for the moment, this assessment represents a massive achievement by the Humanitarian Sector – one that should be fully recognised and indeed celebrated. In considering this achievement, two points are worth highlighting.

First, the majority (approximately 75 per cent) of the programmes evaluated were implemented by NGOs. Over recent years humanitarian NGOs have been criticised, at times strongly, by the media and other observers. While such criticisms may have been warranted in the particular cases, the overall evidence is that NGOs generally perform well in providing assistance 'on the ground'.

Second, much of this achievement appears to have been due to the quality and commitment of the staff employed by humanitarian agencies. The sense one gains from the reports and the overall assessment, is that it is the quality and commitment of the staff that compensates for the inefficiencies and failing of the Sector in its operations, and enables 'the job well done' verdict. Yet, we know from the evidence presented in Chapters 3 and 4 that the Sector's record in its treatment of those same staff is often poor, with low investment in skills development and inadequate training provision, all factors that contribute to the high attrition and turnover rates in the Sector. For the performance of a sector to be dependent on a continuous supply of willing and able staff prepared to 'give it their all' for a few years and then drop out to work in sectors that offer a more stable and secure lifestyle cannot be sustainable. It is certainly not conducive to increased professionalism and the development of a strong learning culture.

In addition to the human resources (HR) issues, Chapter 4 highlighted a further nine areas as being problematic and drew the following conclusions:

Preparedness There is a continuing general disregard by governments and agencies of the importance of preparedness as a means of reducing vulnerability and loss of life, when disasters and population displacements occur.

Coordination Poor coordination continues to be the reality especially at the international level.

Participation and capacity-building Facilitating community participation in planning and decision-making continues to be problematic, no examples of systematic good practice were found in this year's reports.

Supporting indigenous coping strategies Despite recognition of the key role played by indigenous coping strategies during and following crises, the Sector has yet to develop means for supporting and building on them.

Gender equality Gender equality continues to be poorly covered by evaluation reports with gender perspectives systematically ignored by many programmes.

Targeting agencies Targeting agencies need to be more responsive to different cultural practices.

Linking relief, rehabilitation and development (Connectedness) Linkages between the different 'modes' remain weak, and the transition through them continues to be a persistent problem in most operations.

Protection There was a general lack of attention to protection and many humanitarian agencies continue to operate in traditional 'assistance-delivery' mode.

Results-based planning The setting of objectives and monitoring is particularly poor in the Sector, hampering the evaluation process and limiting the Sector's ability to assess its performance. Mandatory beneficiary satisfaction surveys are proposed as a means of improving monitoring systems and making programmes more responsive to the needs of affected populations.

Chapter 4's analysis by principal sector this year reveals interesting differences in performance in terms of meeting short-term objectives between sectors, with 'health' and 'water and sanitation' (watsan) performing best, 'food and emergency agriculture' less well and 'shelter and housing' the least well. This is not to say however that the well performing sectors did not have problems beyond meeting their short-term objectives – indeed connectedness was a problem for all sectors. For instance, despite its success in rapidly providing water to sustain life the water sector was generally very poor at extending this success into the provision of sustainable, user-managed systems.

The poor results for 'shelter and housing' were echoed in the Mitch sample (a synthesis of 12 evaluation reports and two synthesis reports, produced since 1998). In attempting to identify why shelter and housing provision is so problematic, Chapter 4 highlights five factors generic to the Humanitarian Sector:

- an inability to engage with the affected population around planning;
- an inability to understand issues related to social processes;

- poor levels of preparedness;
- poor management, including slow disbursement of funds from HQ to the field; and
- the relief/rehabilitation divide and subsequent lack of allocation of responsibility or development of expertise.

Four other factors specific to the shelter/housing sector were identified:

- the political pressure to allocate resources in a swift and visible fashion, coupled with the ability of housing programmes to absorb large allocations of funds fast, at least on paper, even though delivery is slower and highly problematic;
- the substantial cost of providing a house to a household compared with other forms of assistance and that it represents a contribution to a household's asset base rather than a consumable, as is the case with most other forms of relief assistance (see bullet point 4);
- the involvement of land titling and ownership issues in the provision of housing, especially in areas where land titles are unclear and land ownership is a frequent source of community and gender conflict, substantially complicating housing provision;
- shelter and housing, perhaps more acutely than any other sector, squarely straddles the relief/rehabilitation divide, exacerbating the generic relief/rehabilitation problem, with substantial confusion over whether supporting 'emergency' housing is relief or rehabilitation.

Based on this analysis, Chapter 4 concludes that direct support to housing may best be left to rehabilitation/development organisations. It suggests that those concerned with humanitarian action should review the appropriateness of providing direct support to housing as an 'emergency' intervention, and concentrate on providing sufficient resources through other forms of assistance (eg, food or cash for work) to enable households to make their own decisions on how to meet their housing needs.

Comparing the results of this year's synthesis of evaluation reports with last year's synthesis (ALNAP, 2001) it would appear that in some areas at least, coordination being a case in point, this year's results are better. This is not to say that coordination has improved in the Humanitarian Sector, simply that this year's sample provides a more positive picture than last year's. A possible contributing factor may be the smaller number of Kosovo evaluation reports included in this year's sample. Despite the better picture

in some areas it is clear that many of the problems highlighted in Chapter 4 are the same as those highlighted last year. The ability of the ALNAP Annual Review series to highlight recurring problem areas within the Humanitarian Sector represents in itself a positive contribution. However, it raises questions about how the recurring problems are being dealt with by the Sector, such as:

- which are the organisations, and coordinating bodies that are best placed to tackle the recurring problems?
- do they consciously 'own' the problems? ie, are the issues being actively considered by key bodies within the Sector, such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD, donor coordination networks and meetings, NGO networks and umbrella groups such as the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response?
- What progress is being made each year in the effort to tackle such problems?

An option that might be considered for future ALNAP Annual Reviews is to monitor and report on progress in addressing recurring problem areas. This would, however, require additional resources to be allocated to the preparation of the Annual Review and agreement from the organisations and bodies likely to be the focus of such monitoring.

5.3 Learning in the Humanitarian Sector

5.3.1 Strengths and Weaknesses of Current Practice

Chapter 3 identified the principal strengths and weaknesses of learning and knowledge-management practices within the Humanitarian Sector, as summarised below:

Strengths

- After-action reviews (AARs) and learning workshops are used by an increasing number of agencies.
- Communities of interest and communities of practice are operating within the Sector.

- The Sector has some good common networks and sources of learning.
- Some clear examples of good practice and potential beacons exist within the Sector.
- The evaluation mechanism is well established within the Sector (if often imperfectly practiced) and enables the monitoring of performance trends and the identification and sharing of lessons.

Weaknesses

- The Sector lacks clarity – in objectives, responsibilities, relationships and outcomes – and this makes learning more difficult.
- The Sector has yet to establish a culture of self-reflexive learning where self-criticism is encouraged and criticism by others is handled positively and constructively.
- The Sector suffers from very high rates of staff turnover, a fundamental obstacle to learning and knowledge transfer within ongoing programmes, as well as between programmes and organisations – a problem of which the severity does not appear to be fully acknowledged.
- Practices in relation to staff competencies and staff development in the Sector appear very patchy.
- The Sector may well contain a high proportion of individuals whose learning styles are of the ‘Activist’ and ‘Pragmatist’ types, in which case: i. much of the current training provision does not address their learning preferences (for on-the-job training, coaching and simulation exercises); ii. the likely dominance of these types hampers the Sector’s overall learning ability; iii. the Sector may actually be resistant to ‘reflection’ and ‘theory’.
- While Reliefweb provides a valuable service to the Sector, the Sector does not currently possess a comprehensive electronic library facility;
- Training provision in the Sector is currently poorly linked to action and the primary need for the Sector to learn from how it operates in action;
- Training provision is currently uncoordinated and unintegrated and it does not possess a central ‘university’ facility providing a focal point for training and learning by the Sector.
- Learning and knowledge management are not sufficiently prioritised by many organisations or by the Sector as a whole. Incentives for learning are weak within organisations and within the Sector as a whole.
- The potential contribution of evaluation genres to learning is often hampered by a lack of clarity as to the purpose, the under-use of approaches and techniques likely to increase learning at the individual and

team level (ie, utilisation-focused methods, participatory methods, self-evaluation and real-time evaluation) and the under-use of evaluation materials and case studies in training.

- The use of the AAR process in the Sector does not always appear to conform to requirements for effective functioning of the mechanism.
- The Sector does not have enough, or sufficiently well developed, mechanisms to facilitate and encourage cross-organisational and Sectorwide learning. It lacks an assigned central responsibility for lesson-learning processes.

Underlying many of these weaknesses are the perennial issues of the structure and funding of the Humanitarian Sector. Short-term funding, pressures to maintain low overheads and competitive behaviour among a potentially large number of organisations vying for profile and access to the limited number of significant funding sources, are probably the major barriers to effective learning by, and in, the Sector. For instance high staff turnover and lack of investment in staff development can be largely attributed to the 'stop-start' funding and the almost obsessive concern for low overheads shown by private and public donors alike. Resistance to criticism, the lack of critical reflexive learning processes and the lack of cross-organisational learning mechanisms are likely to be as much attributable to competition for funding as to the highly vocational nature of humanitarian work.

The fact that training provision is uncoordinated and unintegrated must surely be the inevitable product of the large number of organisations in the Sector and their reluctance to invest in collective training provision. In identifying the agenda for improving learning and knowledge management in the Humanitarian Sector, it is important that the role of these fundamental structural and funding aspects of the Sector are acknowledged. The success of efforts to improve learning and knowledge management in the Sector will to a substantial extent be determined by the Sector's ability to confront and address these structural and funding constraints.

5.3.2 Comparison with Other Sectors

Though only three other sectors were examined in relation to their learning and knowledge-management approaches and practices, it would seem that the Humanitarian Sector compares unfavourably with each.

The US Army clearly invests heavily in learning at all levels of the organisation and considerable resources are devoted to knowledge construction, representation and transfer. The scale of the resources involved is very substantial and the resources available for learning in the Humanitarian Sector inevitably tiny by comparison (though the wisdom of such divergent funding levels for learning in two sectors increasingly operating side by side in conflicts should not be allowed to pass unquestioned). Despite decades of under-funding, the UK NHS, strengthened with a renewed political commitment and an inflow of additional funding, has consciously developed a wide range of approaches and practices to support learning and manage knowledge within the sector. A key learning point for the Humanitarian Sector is the significant role played by staff competencies and the development of occupational standards in providing an objective framework for the development of the human resources within the Sector. Of the three sectors, the UK construction industry arguably shares more structural characteristics with the Humanitarian Sector and appears to have made the least progress in devising learning and knowledge-management mechanisms to overcome the obstacles presented by its fragmented structure and high staff turnover. Yet, even this sector compares favourably with the Humanitarian Sector in terms of its development of mechanisms for learning and knowledge management (with competencies and occupational standards playing an important role once again) and of a mechanism for learning that would appear to hold promise for the Humanitarian Sector.

In short, the Humanitarian Sector has a substantial task ahead of it to replicate the sort of approaches and practices that exist in other sectors. The needs are significant and will require long-term commitment.

5.4 An Agenda for Improving Learning and Knowledge Management in the Humanitarian Sector

To address the weaknesses identified, the following actions are offered as suggestions to humanitarian organisations individually and collectively.

5.4.1 Possible Actions for Individual Humanitarian Organisations

- a Undertake an assessment of the organisation's current approaches and practices in learning and knowledge management.** Such assessments might make use of the self-assessment protocols and checklists contained in the 'Fieldbooks' by Senge et al (1994) and Bukowitz and Williams (1999), even though their terminology reflects an orientation to the private sector.
- b Undertake an assessment of the organisation's learning and training activities to see if they meet the requirements for effective learning in, and from, action.** Such an assessment can make use of the questions contained in Box 5.1 and might seek to cover all activities including AARs, learning workshops, and learning-oriented evaluations.
- c Undertake an assessment of the preferred learning styles of humanitarian personnel employed by the organisation and use this to assess the organisation's current provision of, and support to, training.** The assessment of current training provision might include induction courses, as well as general and specific training provision provided either in-house or by external providers, and the extent to which they address the learning needs and preferred learning styles of humanitarian personnel. The organisation might also consider the extent to which an appropriate mix of the four dominant learning styles is achieved at the levels of teams, departments and the overall organisation.
- d Ensure the organisation has in place a comprehensive programme to support learning and knowledge management** and provides the necessary learning 'space' to allow individuals to benefit in practice. Elements of a comprehensive programme might include the development of:
- competency frameworks and staff development programmes;
 - incentive frameworks (eg, staff annual reviews, criteria for remuneration, annual awards for contributions to learning, etc);
 - infrastructure (reorganising shared drives and intranets to facilitate knowledge transfer throughout the organisation, ensuring that personnel are able to provide feedback on their learning to such systems);
 - operational and organisational processes (establish regular opportunities

for AARs and lessons-learned processes with responsibilities for follow-up clearly identified).

e **The leadership of the organisation should signal its commitment to, and prioritisation of, learning within the organisation and work to develop a culture of learning and self-critical reflection.** The leadership of organisations is often critical in setting the ‘tone’ and agenda for changes in organisational culture. Demonstrating a self-critical, ‘no blame’ approach to staff is a powerful means of encouraging cultural change within the organisation.

Box 5.1

A Framework for Assessing Learning Activities in the Humanitarian Sector (Kawalek & Hammond, 2001)

During the course of the ALNAP mapping study¹, an assessment framework was developed that identified the principal interacting elements between the individual/team ‘learners’ and action-situations, involved in problem solving. The framework derives from ‘Systems Theory’ (see Jayaratna, 1994; Checkland, 1981; Checkland and Scholes, 1990; Beer 1967). It differs from other learning frameworks in that it is oriented to *learning in and from action*, well suited to the dynamic and complex operational situations characteristic of the Humanitarian Sector. Where elements of the framework are not present in a learning activity, it is unlikely to be optimally effective. In addition to the fundamental question ‘Is the learning activity supported by the organisation?’ the following questions should be asked of all learning activities in the Humanitarian Sector to assess if they contain the elements necessary for effective learning.

Does the process provide for or enable:

- An analysis of the problem-solving process?
- An analysis of changes in the situation?
- An analysis of the effectiveness of the interaction between the learner and the action situation?
- Awareness of participants’ mental models (*Weltanschauungen*)²
- Critical self-reflexive thinking?
- Critical analysis of the use of literature and other sources?
- Critical analysis of the use of tools, techniques and methods in action?
- Feedback to the learner on their interaction with the situation?
- An awareness of the timing of the learning in relation to the evolving situation in action?
- The learner to take control and responsibility for the learning process?
- An evaluation of the learning process?
- Learners’ ‘defensive reasoning’ to be overcome and an ‘opening up’?

f Ensure that the HR Information Systems are able to assess rates of staff turnover within and between the organisation's humanitarian programmes. Where these rates are considered to be high, take steps to i. reduce turnover to acceptable levels and ii. protect the organisation's mechanisms for learning and knowledge transfer from the effects of high rates of turnover. Some organisations' HR Information Systems are not capable of providing information on turnover within and between programmes. Organisations may need to assess whether their hiring and contracting policies contribute to the high rates of turnover. A review of organisational policies on handover between departing staff and their replacements may be necessary, as well as a review of the extent to which such policies are adhered to in practice.

5.4.2 Possible Actions for the Sector as a Whole

a Take concerted action to reduce the incidence of high staff turnover in the Sector. Reducing the rate of staff turnover is likely to require a range of measures including steps to address the Sector's underlying instability in the funding base. Steps to improve the stability of the Sector's funding base might start with a collective review of current and potential funding arrangements by those organisations within the Sector providing or raising funds. The objective of the review being to extend agencies' financial planning horizon. With a longer financial planning horizon agencies could offer longer-term contracts, reduce the pressure to lay-off good staff after operations and view investment in staff development as being more worthwhile. Another possible initiative might be the establishment of an interagency HR/staff development group or a community of practice, specifically to share good practice and address the turnover issue (see below).

b Improve the resource provision for learning within the Sector In addition to organisations giving greater priority to learning at the individual, team and organisational levels, the Sector needs to encourage increased investment in organisational and cross-organisational learning and knowledge-sharing and transfer. Funding organisations could give such encouragement by making provision for learning activities within their funding of organisational overheads, requiring organisations applying for funds to set out their learning policies and practices, or providing new budget lines for organisational and cross-organisational learning programmes.

c Support the establishment and development of ‘communities of interest’ and ‘communities of practice’ in the Sector. The Sector has a number of communities of interest/practice either within large organisations or cross-agency groupings focusing on a particular subject area. An inventory could usefully be prepared of the current communities of interest/practice and, where gaps are identified, support given to the establishment of new communities. Given the persistent problems identified with the shelter/housing sector, the first new community of practice (CoP) could usefully be in this field. ALNAP might be well placed to lead the establishment and facilitation of a CoP with this specific improvement objective.

Box 5.2

The ALNAP Learning Support Office

The Learning Support Office (LSO) concept was born out of ALNAP member discussions at the time of the 1999 Kosovo Crisis and their frustration at the continued lack of a Sectorwide mechanism to facilitate learning at field level. The concept has been through various stages of development including a retrospective look at how an LSO might have operated in the Orissa, Sierra Leone and East Timor contexts. Key objectives of these earlier consultative studies were to verify the existence of a genuine need and necessary level of demand; to clarify and prioritise activities that might be undertaken; and, to ensure there was no mandate or activity overlap with other organisations or mechanisms.

Central to the concept is the notion of establishing a capacity in recently commenced humanitarian operations that would bring LEARNING IN from previous operations, facilitate LATERAL LEARNING between organisations (including local organisations and institutions), teams and sectors during the operation and capture LEARNING OUT for use in subsequent operations.

ALNAP has approved the field-testing of the concept in an ongoing operation during 2002 and an ALNAP Interest Group formed. A smaller Steering Group is in the process of formation. The test LSO will provide the following services:

Learning-in Facilitating access to pertinent information (past responses, good practice, international standards, etc) and/or sources for the required information (LSO Resource Centre/local resources-facilities-expertise/international expertise³ etc). Where there is an evident need, this should include generic briefings for internationals on country/context/conditions/nationals/security etc, and, for nationals on international system/mechanisms/funding / standards etc.

Lateral learning Facilitation of cross-organisational links/exchanges; discussion groups and seminars; and access to responding agencies' in-field expertise and skills.

Learning-out Info/data collection, analysis (including trends), archiving and documentation of response.

Further information can be obtained from (www.alnap.org).

d Test the COLA mechanism (developed in relation to the UK Construction Industry) to establish its applicability to the Humanitarian Sector and its effectiveness in facilitating cross-organisational learning. The COLA mechanism appears promising, but needs testing before any wider application in the Humanitarian Sector. The testing process would provide the opportunity for collaboration with, and sharing of, experience and perspectives with those working to improve learning and knowledge management in a different sector.

e Provide greater opportunities for cross-organisational and Sectorwide learning during and immediately after operations. In addition to the efforts of individual organisations to improve team and organisational learning during and after operations, there is a need for greater provision of cross-organisational and Sectorwide learning opportunities. The ALNAP Learning Support Office would appear to offer a logical approach to the provision of such opportunities (Box 5.2).

f Provide greater opportunities for ‘on-the-job’ training and the provision of field-based training in ongoing operations. The apparent preference for on-the-job training by many humanitarian personnel could be met by an increased provision of training during operations with the content of the training relating very closely to the current work situation of participants. The ALNAP Learning Support Office offers a means of providing a collective facility and organising point for the provision of training accessible to all types of organisation.

g Consider establishing an interagency group to work on coordination and integration of training provision for the Sector. Training provision in the Sector is uncoordinated and would benefit from greater integration, but the Sector lacks an active group with a mission to improve coordination and integration. The UN Learning Chiefs could serve as a model for such an interagency group. Conceivably the Learning Chiefs for the UN’s principal humanitarian agencies could be invited to be the first members of an interagency group to also include representatives of bilateral donor organisations, Red Cross agencies, NGOs and training providers such as RedR, InterWorks and the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre. Work on developing learning standards currently underway in the UN family could be extended to the Humanitarian Sector as a whole.

h Consider establishing an interagency group or community of practice to share experience and work on HR and staff development issues. This group could work in parallel with the

interagency training group suggested above. Conceivably one interagency group might be able to cover both training and HR/staff development issues. An immediate priority of an HR group would be to address the high staff turnover issue (see above).

i Learning from the experience of lesson-learning from multi-national peacekeeping operations, responsibility for coordination of such initiatives in the Humanitarian Sector should be assigned to a single organisation. ALNAP is the logical focus for lesson-learning in the Humanitarian Sector, but this additional role would require additional resources.

j Consider establishing an annual Awards Mechanism for ‘instances of outstanding learning practice’ in the Humanitarian Sector. This would mirror practice in other sectors, would act as an incentive for learning and would help in the identification and sharing of instances of good practice.

k Consider the development of an electronic library for the Sector that could be accessed by anyone and serve as the ‘Knowledge Bank’ for the Sector. Reliefweb would be the obvious location for such a library with links to specialist collections. Mechanisms to enable feedback on use would increase its ability to address the needs of users.

l Develop common information and communication technology architecture for learning. It would be desirable for the Sector to develop on-line courses and on-line ‘learning sets’ as a means of increasing the provision of opportunities for learning in the Sector. On-line provision would reduce the costs and address the needs of a geographically disparate set of participants. Learning sets would be supported by Learning Set Advisers. However, a large section of those involved in the Humanitarian Sector are unable to access online services and this points to the need for parallel investment in complementary learning mechanisms and increased investment in connectivity

m Consider the development of a ‘University for the Humanitarian Sector’ as a medium-term goal and work towards achieving it. A guiding model for such a facility would be the corporate university model, developed over the last decade in the private/corporate sector. The ‘University for the Humanitarian Sector’ need not be a physical facility but

a combination of on-line courses and libraries (see above) and existing facilities willing to collaborate in this venture. A first step in the process of establishing such a facility might be establishing closer collaboration between existing universities providing humanitarian-related courses and their faculties. A possible objective of such collaboration might be working towards common certification of courses.

n Consider undertaking the following studies:

- further development of the assessment framework (see Box 5.1) for learning in, and from, action;
- how AARs and other learning events/mechanisms are followed up, and the extent to which they do contribute to changed practice;
- a survey of learning styles and preferences in the Humanitarian Sector.

o **Make greater use of research and knowledge resources in universities and other centres of learning.** The Military, the NHS and the UK construction industry all have links with universities (close and strong in the case of the military and NHS). These links are quite poorly developed with the Humanitarian Sector, possibly as a consequence of learning-style preferences or simply the limited number of university departments running humanitarian-related courses. Yet, the number of subjects/issues in the Humanitarian Sector that need systematic work to be undertaken is substantial. Research undertaken by universities has often been patchy and badly managed, followed up or used by the Sector. Links with university departments in fields such as psychology, systems analysis, ICT, knowledge management, learning science etc, should be strengthened. One approach might be for the Sector/ALNAP to identify issues in need of studies and universities that are willing to undertake work on these issues. The results would be shared and the success of the experience (from the researcher/university and agency perspectives) would be evaluated and reported on (resulting in learning by all parties about how to do it better and/or the use of other researchers/departments/universities for subsequent studies).

The above suggestions for consideration by individual humanitarian organisations and collectively by the Sector are comprehensive and represent a challenging task. Prioritisation and scheduling will be inevitable but the challenge of addressing all the points – from Information Communication Technology architecture, to organisational cultures and from more stable funding to occupational standards – has to be embraced if the Sector is to learn effectively from its repeated experiences and convert this into a continuous process of learning and performance improvement.

Meta-Evaluation Section

I Introduction

The purpose of the Meta-Evaluation Section is to highlight strengths and weaknesses in the evaluation of humanitarian action, as revealed by each year's core sample of evaluation reports; and, to make recommendations for improvement in practice. The analysis this year is based on assessments of the 41 English-language evaluation reports¹ included in the core sample, using the ALNAP Quality Proforma, reproduced at the end of this section.

This section begins with an introduction to the Quality Proforma and a description of the assessment process. It then presents findings with respect to major gaps in the evaluations, followed by discussion of strengths and weaknesses organised under the Quality Proforma headings. Two boxes are also included, Box I providing a comparison between the quality of the core sample of 'external' evaluation reports and an additional sample of seven 'internal' evaluation² reports, currently categorised in the ALNAP Evaluative Reports Database (ERD) as Reviews; and Box II, providing a good-practice case.

The quality of evaluation reports was found on balance to be unsatisfactory. Many areas could be strengthened, in particular fostering understanding of why interventions succeed or fail; transparency in selection and use of methods; social/contextual 'understanding'; and attention to protection. Good practice could be highlighted in most areas of enquiry, but was rarely systematic.

I.i The Development of the ALNAP Quality Proforma

The Quality Proforma was developed in 2000 drawing on current evaluation criteria³ and what is commonly accepted as 'good practice' in the evaluation of humanitarian action (EHA). The aim was not to rank evaluation reports, rather, to reach general conclusions on trends in respect of the evaluation of the humanitarian action process itself, helping to identify both good and weak practices. Assessments using the Quality Proforma are made entirely on the basis of information contained in an evaluation report.⁴

The Quality Proforma underwent a process of refinement and strengthening following its first application in the *ALNAP Annual Review 2001* and ALNAP Full Member feedback. This process also sought to highlight its value further 'upstream' in the project cycle. Discussion at the October 2001 ALNAP Full

Member Biannual revealed broad acceptance of the revised Proforma and its use by some ALNAP Members in support of their evaluation activities.

It is anticipated that the Proforma will be reviewed on an annual basis, to ensure that it reflects, as appropriate parallel developments such as the work being undertaken in the US on evaluation checklists (Stufflebeam, 2000, 2001). This year's application of the Proforma has also revealed the need for further clarification of the Proforma guidance notes.

I.ii Method and Sample Covered

The sample

The countries and regions covered by the 41 English-language core sample reports are: Liberia, Somalia, Angola, East Timor, Russia and Belarus, Kosovo, Horn of Africa, Cambodia, Kenya and Sudan (all with a focus on complex emergencies); and Mozambique, Central America, Venezuela, Turkey, El Salvador, Bangladesh, India and Indonesia (all with a focus on natural disasters). One report, an evaluation of orthopaedic programmes, had a multi-country focus, and one on the Middle East a dual focus on complex emergencies and natural disasters.

Thirteen of the reports were commissioned by the UN system; ten by ECHO; six by NGOs; five by bilateral agencies; four by the Red Cross; two jointly bilateral/NGO; and one jointly bilateral/UN. This range of countries, emergencies and agencies would indicate that the evaluation reports assessed are broadly representative of the humanitarian system, so that findings can broadly be taken to reflect current EHA practice.

Timeliness and public availability of evaluations

The data available in the 41 reports suggests that the evaluations were carried out in a timely fashion, with 12 evaluations (29 per cent) carried out of ongoing interventions, 19 evaluations (46 per cent) carried out within one month of the end of operations, and a further six (15 per cent) carried out within two to three months of the end of the operations. Fifty-six per cent of reports were finalised within one month, and 28 per cent within two to four months of the end of the evaluation work. This suggests that agencies are commissioning evaluations within an appropriate timeframe, and

evaluators are completing reports relatively quickly. The former should lead to the promotion of more effective evaluation, as key stakeholders are more likely to be present and remember important events either during or shortly after the intervention. The latter should lead to results of the evaluation being fed quickly back into the agency.

The public availability of evaluations is much less satisfactory. Roughly seventy per cent of reports provided to ALNAP for the Annual Review were marked by agencies as 'access by ALNAP Full Members only'. NGOs and some UN agencies in particular appear reticent about sharing reports. There is however some good practice in this area, with UNHCR and more recently ECHO making their evaluation reports publicly available through their websites, a practice that should be standard for any organisation that considers accountability important.

Assessment process

To increase rigour and counter potential for assessor bias and error, the assessments were undertaken by the author of this chapter and Peter Wiles⁵ both of whom were involved in the *Annual Review 2001* meta-evaluation exercise and the subsequent Quality Proforma revision.

The assessment process was twofold. An initial assessment of the core evaluation reports was undertaken independently by each assessor, resulting in an 83 per cent rating consistency across the two assessors.⁶ Discussion on issues of interpretation of guidance notes, possible errors and omissions ensued and was followed by a final independent review by each assessor. The resulting 90 per cent consistency rate was deemed an acceptable margin for the purposes of this meta-evaluation.

In recognition of borderline cases, a fifth rating 'close to satisfactory' was added to the four ratings used in the *Annual Review 2001* – 'good', 'satisfactory', 'unsatisfactory' and 'poor'. A 'satisfactory' rating was taken as the benchmark of an adequate performance.

While the versions of the Proforma applied this year and in the *Annual Review 2001* include similar headings, a two-year period is too short to allow valid assessment of change in the quality of evaluation reports, and only general and at best tentative comparisons of findings are presented below.

II Assessment Against the ALNAP Quality Proforma

II.i Proforma Section 2 Terms of Reference (TOR)⁷

Information Area	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Quality of statement on intervention to be evaluated	20%	36%	10%	34%
Quality of statement on purpose of intervention	47%	16%	5%	32%
Quality of statement on intended use/users of evaluation output(s)	3%	8%	13%	76%
Quality of guidance on report format	30%	7%	3%	60%

Eleven reports, or over 25 per cent of the sample, contained no terms of reference. In some cases terms of reference appeared to have been left out accidentally, but in others, for example UNHCR reports, there seemed to be a policy decision not to include them. This is poor practice, as terms of reference provide the objectives, perspective and expectations of the commissioning agency, and help the reader decide on the quality of the report. They are also a place where the commissioning agency can highlight follow-up procedures with respect to the recommendations that emerge from the evaluation.

The quality of the terms of reference included in the remaining 30 reports was found to be uneven. The reports did well in terms of an adequate statement on the intervention to be evaluated, as well as a clear statement on the purpose of the evaluation, with some 75 per cent of terms of reference rating as satisfactory or better in these two areas.

TOR: statement on expectation of good practice in approach and method

Commissioning agencies were less successful in outlining the theory/conceptual approach and method they wished adopted. Most used several or all of the DAC criteria as a way of structuring their section on method, although as noted these criteria were rarely adapted from a focus on outcomes. Because of this, TOR required evaluators to concentrate on determining the results of the intervention without requiring a parallel focus

on the main factors causing those results. As noted, if commissioning agencies expect evaluators to provide lessons learned as well as statements on results, they need to reorient TOR to support this dual focus. There were no cases where TOR discussed relevant evaluation theory as a background to the choice of method.

The method section most frequently set out the need for document review, and interviews with beneficiaries and agency staff. Commissioning agencies did not explain in the TOR the rationale for selection of the method being recommended. This may be because the TOR used by some agencies (eg, ECHO and WHO) are generic and based on guidance from in-house evaluation manuals.

This gap needs to be filled, because choice of evaluation theory influences choice of evaluation method, which in turn influences evaluation results. This is not to suggest that all staff working in evaluation offices need to become specialists in evaluation theory, only that agency guidance on evaluation needs to include adequate discussion of the implications of choice of method, so as to provide staff with an understanding of this issue.

TOR: intended use and follow-up

One of the most important findings of this assessment is that TOR rarely set out what follow-up to evaluation findings was intended by the commissioning agency. Only three reports were rated as satisfactory or better in this area, with 76 per cent of reports being assessed as poor, suggesting that agencies:

- are commissioning evaluations without a clear idea of the use that will be made of the evaluation;
- have not considered potential follow-up; or
- do not want to make known to the public what follow-up will take place,

none of which is acceptable. Agencies could make the evaluation process more credible and provide greater support to evaluators by establishing intended use. One good practice case was the evaluation of the WHO intervention in East Timor where the TOR noted (May 2001, p37):

WHO will make efforts to make partners and interested parties aware of the report and make the report accessible to them. Comments on the report will be requested from collaborating partners. The report will be made available on the WHO website. The report will be discussed at WHO Dili office, SEARO and HQ. The conclusions and

recommendations will be formally commented upon linked to the places and responsibilities to which they apply. Decisions will be made regarding follow up, compliance will be reported 6 months later.

It includes key elements for follow-up: means of dissemination of findings; allocation of responsibility; and a timetable. Assessment of whether this process was adhered to is beyond the scope of this meta-evaluation, but at least setting out what will happen to evaluation reports lays the basis for determining actual use.

TOR: guidance on report format

On balance TOR did not provide adequate guidance on report format. While about 30 per cent of reports were assessed as good in this area, 60 per cent were assessed as poor. This is not to suggest that every report should follow a similar format; however, many reports did not include key elements such as itineraries, lists of people consulted or bibliographies.

Including details in the TOR on report format may serve as a reminder in this area to both evaluators and commissioning agencies. A checklist of a possible report format is included in the Proforma at the end of this section.

II.ii Proforma Section 3 Contextual Analysis⁸

Information Area	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Quality of analysis of context in relation to affected area and population	12%	24%	38%	26%
Quality of information on and analysis of, historical involvement of agency	6%	31%	20%	43%
Quality of analysis of crisis and programme events	14%	20%	17%	49%

Historical, social, cultural, economic and political considerations

The quality of context analysis; of information on the historical involvement

of the agency; and of analysis of the crisis and programme events, were found to be satisfactory or better in about 35 per cent of cases. Only two reports were assessed as consistently good in these areas, the evaluation of DEC agencies' interventions in Mozambique (DEC, July 2001), and of the IFRC intervention in Turkey (IFRC, August 2000). Twenty-six per cent of reports were assessed as poor and 38 per cent as unsatisfactory in terms of analysis of context; 43 per cent as poor and 20 per cent as unsatisfactory in terms of information on historical involvement of the agency; and about 50 per cent as poor and 17 per cent as unsatisfactory in terms of analysis of the crisis and programme events.

Clearly, commissioning agencies and evaluators need to do better in terms of including and analysing contextual information. The *Annual Review 2001* came to a more positive conclusion in respect of the 33 non-Kosovo reports, while the chapter on the Kosovo reports lamented lack of context as one of the main gaps in the evaluation reports. Contextual information is important because it can provide explanatory details as to why interventions performed in the way they did. For example, few reports provided adequate details about the make-up of the affected population, their former way of life, or coping strategies. Detailing this information will make it easier to understand whether the intervention chosen was appropriate, and how external circumstances supported or hindered it. Contextual information does not have to stretch for pages, but basic information, as outlined in the Proforma section 3.1.i, should be provided. The Programme Evaluation Standards provide the following guidance for context (Joint Committee, 1994: p133): 'The context in which the program exists should be examined in enough detail, so that its likely influences on the program can be identified.'

As noted, reports did poorly in the reconstruction of key events taking into account the views and perspectives of the main stakeholders. A majority of reports did not include a basic chronology, one way for the reader to understand the context. Because of this, the reader is often left with little understanding of what actually took place and who was involved. Commissioning agencies may feel that a substantial amount of detail, for example on the unfolding of the crisis, may not be required as this is already known within the agency. However, knowledge currently held in reports can be one means of increasing the chances of lessons learned in one crisis being transferred to another.

Institutional Considerations

Information Area	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Quality of information on, and analysis of agency guiding principles	33%	17%	13%	37%
Information on/analysis of agency HR policies, procedures & practices	31%	37%	20%	12%

The Proforma for this year's *Annual Review* included a more explicit focus on institutional issues, seen as one of the gaps in the *Annual Review 2001* version. The generally positive results in this area found last year were repeated this year. Fifty per cent of reports were assessed as satisfactory or better in terms of providing information on, and analysis of, the agency's guiding principles, and 68 per cent were assessed as satisfactory or better in terms of the quality of information on, and analysis of, the agency's human-resource policies, procedures and practices. In the latter area only 12 per cent of reports were assessed as poor, with the remaining 20 per cent being assessed as unsatisfactory.

Part of the reason for the relatively better performance in this area is that a number of reports focus specifically on institutional issues, for example the IFRC and WHO reports (IFRC, January 2000; August 2000 and November 2000; and WHO, May 2000 and May 2001a). On the other hand, where there was a joint focus in reports on assessing institutional factors and results, reporting on the latter sometimes lost out to the former, as many evaluators appeared to have greater expertise in carrying out institutional analysis than in examining results.

Discussion of agency mandate, guiding principles and/or policies was not included in over half of the reports. Most agencies now have policies related to their main areas of work, and introducing them as a yardstick against which to measure performance is a key area of evaluation which needs to be improved. A good-practice case was found in the UNHCR/Danida evaluation of UNHCR's intervention in support of IDPs in Angola (May 2001), which included a very nuanced and detailed discussion of UNHCR policy. Agencies' gender equality policies sorely lacked attention, but should be automatically used as a measure of success in any evaluation.

Planning considerations

Information Area	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Planning, assessment and monitoring	32%	44%	18%	6%

Reports were assessed as generally positive in their attention to planning, assessment, and monitoring procedures, with 32 per cent rating as good and 44 per cent as satisfactory. One area in need of strengthening, however, is the development and maintenance of partnerships, identified in Chapter 4 as a key element to successful interventions. Given their importance, how partnerships are developed and maintained and their impact on performance needs to be examined in more depth.

Appropriateness of intervention expenditure and indicators The *Annual Review 2001* pointed out that significant amounts disbursed for relief purposes are actually being used for rehabilitation. Indicative figures for this year, discussed in Chapter 4, show that 33 per cent of allocated funds were used for rehabilitation purposes, 28 per cent for relief funds, and 35 per cent for a mix of relief and rehabilitation (Figure 4.3).

Given this level of disbursement to rehabilitation, questions were included in the Proforma as to whether the relief/rehabilitation split was adequately considered in reports, with a focus on whether adequate financial details as to the split were provided; the appropriateness of this split; and whether an appropriate set of indicators was used for each.

This proved a difficult area to assess because a majority of reports either did not include financial data or provided it without clarifying the relief/rehabilitation split. In addition, eleven of the reports were not assessed against this Proforma heading since they related to interventions focused almost exclusively on relief or rehabilitation.

Among the good practice examples of reports that clearly identified different types of allocation was the evaluation of the DFID-funded intervention in Bangladesh (DFID-B, August 2001). It provides a breakdown of relief and rehabilitation activities; the name of the organisation receiving the funds; the type of intervention; the amount received; the number of households receiving benefits; the districts covered; and the project period. To ensure such information is available, funders must insist on careful records

being kept. While this may be problematic in some relief cases, it is not in most rehabilitation interventions.

In agency planning documents, many interventions, or significant parts of interventions, appear to be largely justified on the grounds of relief of human suffering, when they are in reality closer to rehabilitation projects and should be assessed accordingly. In almost 80 per cent of reports either appropriate indicators for the different phases of interventions were not included or the issue was not addressed. This suggests that evaluators are, in most cases, judging rehabilitation interventions with indicators more suited for relief, with the implication that interventions are probably being assessed as more successful than is actually the case.

II.iii Proforma Section 4 Approach and Methods

Information Area	Good	Satis- factory	Unsatis- factory	Poor
Selection of evaluation theory and rationale	3%	10%	6%	81%
Selection of methods and rationale	11%	22%	24%	43%

As noted above, terms of reference do little to support evaluators in their selection of methods, and this laxness is repeated in the reports where the majority simply state that they reviewed documents and spoke to agency staff and some beneficiaries. In four cases, or 10 per cent of the sample, even these details were absent (ADRA/DRC Danida, January 2001; Danida/DRC, May 2000; ActionAid Mozambique, December 2000 and UNICEF, July 2001).

Choice of method has a significant impact on evaluation results – hence the often intense debate in the general evaluation field concerning methodology, as evident in the quantitative/qualitative ‘paradigm war’. As Lipsey (2000, p11) notes with reference to meta-evaluations of delinquency programmes:

the evaluator’s finding about program effects on a given outcome variable seems to be influenced as much by the evaluator’s methodological choices as by the actual effectiveness of the intervention. Clearly, this situation requires the evaluator to exercise great care in those choices and draw as much as possible on existing knowledge about method effects in designing an outcome evaluation.

Lack of consultation with non-beneficiaries and lack of attention to gender equality are two examples from the evaluation set where choice of method has influenced results. In terms of detailing the selection of method and providing a rationale for that selection, 43 per cent of reports were assessed as poor, and 24 per cent as unsatisfactory. That evaluators do not see fit to include adequate details on methods used and commissioning agencies accept this is a major weakness that significantly reduces the credibility of report findings. Evaluators need to make their methods clear and to discuss the likely impact of selection on findings, including potential for bias.

The lack of description of method and rationale for the selection links to the lack of use of evaluation theory. Assessment against the Proforma found that over 80 per cent of reports were poor in terms of describing evaluation theory used, with a further 6 per cent assessed as unsatisfactory. The evaluation of the IFRC intervention in the Americas provides the only example of good practice in this area. Drawing similar conclusions as this author, the evaluators comment on the focus in evaluations on general observations, and how this leads to a lack of lessons learned (see III.i below).

Evaluation of humanitarian action criteria

Information Area	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Quality of report vis a vis EHA criteria	21%	55%	18%	6%

A strength of the reports, as was found in the *Annual Review 2001*, was their organisation around the DAC evaluation criteria. Fifty-five per cent of reports were assessed as satisfactory in their use of the DAC criteria, with a further 21 per cent being assessed as good. Despite the problems identified above, the criteria are at least being used in a systematic fashion to provide a broad picture of results. Among the criteria, cost-effectiveness and coherence were least used, because of a lack of data in the case of cost-effectiveness and, perhaps because of a lack of familiarity with or understanding of the concept, in the case of coherence. The challenge now is to broaden the focus of these criteria so that analysis of process is included.

The focus when using the criteria also needs to extend beyond whether impact was achieved to how it was achieved. The ActionAid summary report (2001, p1, **bold in original**) comments: ‘It is clear from the country studies that **positive impact is made not only by choosing the right things to do, but by doing them in the right way**. Where beneficiaries have commented on positive impact, they often value attitudes and ideas as well as practical help.’ When determining impact, evaluations need to do more to assess if interventions are providing support in a way that ensures the affected population maintains its dignity, one of the key elements of the Red Cross Code of Conduct.

II.iv Further Weaknesses Revealed

Information Area	Good	Satis- factory	Unsatis- factory	Poor
Constraints to the evaluation	10%	8%	15%	67%
Evaluation team expertise/experience	-	5%	9%	86%
Chronology of evaluation process	6%	36%	25%	33%

A further finding from the assessment was that few evaluations used generally considered good practice. For example, there was little explicit use of multi-method approaches or triangulation; poor attention to gender equality; and almost no discussion with non-beneficiaries. Two of the 41 reports, both on mine-related programmes supported by UNICEF (May 2000 and June 2000), did use a control-group approach, but, as with the WFP (2000) intervention in China assessed for the *Annual Review 2001*, the exceptions proved the rule. Other problematic areas included:

- failure to outline constraints to carrying out the evaluation, such as lack of time, data and access to key stakeholders, or use of translators. Reports were assessed as poor in 67 per cent of cases and unsatisfactory in 15 per cent of cases;
- failure to outline the expertise and past experience of the evaluation team. Reports were assessed as poor in 86 per cent of cases; and
- inadequate attention to detailing the chronology of the evaluation process. Reports performed better on this criterion with 36 per cent being assessed as satisfactory, 25 per cent as unsatisfactory and 33 per cent as poor.

This overall failure to pay adequate attention to methodological questions must rest squarely with commissioning agencies; it is caused by:

- poor hiring practices, for example the insistence on hiring nationals from the country or region funding the intervention, even though these consultants may not have appropriate evaluation skills or local knowledge. As in the evaluations assessed in the *Annual Review 2001*, almost all of the evaluations for this year's *Annual Review* were carried out by expatriate consultants;
- lack of gender balance in evaluation teams;
- lack of knowledge in some cases of fundamental evaluation principles;
- a failure to draw on findings on methods in the general evaluation field; and
- lack of direction in terms of reference.

Some of these issues are being addressed by ALNAP⁹ training courses and modules, which may lead to improved practice in future.

As noted, almost all the reports used a standard method with a focus on establishing results. An example of an alternative and innovative methodological approach was found in the evaluation of Tearfund's intervention following Hurricane Mitch (August 2000, January 2001). This evaluation has three phases, the first two of which are included in this assessment. The idea of making several visits is itself innovative, and similar to the Groupe URD's (2001) 'mini-seminar' evaluation in El Salvador, and the DEC approach (see Box II).

Tearfund used a mix of methods, including group sessions; unstructured interviews with the affected population; case studies; brought together partners and beneficiaries in two-day discussion forums; and used a video of one partner's programme as a means of stimulating discussion around housing programmes.

Finally, one phenomenon observed in a number of the reports was the use of a strengths/weakness analysis (eg, PAHO, July 2001; IFRC, August 2000; FAO, July 2001; SDC, August 2001; Tearfund, October 2001; August 2000; UNICEF, July 2001; ECHO, March 2000). While this is an appropriate method in some circumstances, and can lead to identification of key lessons and so enhance the learning process, commissioning agencies and evaluators need to justify more clearly reasons for adopting this approach. Agencies should guard against this method being used to mask criticisms, for example by not prioritising whether strengths or weaknesses are more important.

II.v Proforma Section 5 Good Practice

Reference to International Standards

Information Area	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Use of International Standards	6%	8%	18%	68%

Although standards such as the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct and Sphere are increasingly used in implementation, they are not being used in the evaluation of humanitarian action. Only four reports were found to be satisfactory or better in use of international standards, either examining whether the implementers themselves had adequately used these standards, or using the standards to evaluate the intervention. Sixty-eight per cent of reports were assessed as poor in this area, and a further 18 per cent as unsatisfactory.

Even though Sphere covers the main sectors evaluated by the reports, it appears that evaluators are either unaware of the Sphere standards or did not think their use was appropriate. The same may be true for commissioning agencies, as discussion of international standards was rarely included in TOR. The ActionAid summary report confirms this finding (2001, p28, **bold in original**): **‘There are mixed levels of awareness of the Code of Conduct and Sphere standards, and these are rarely applied in programme design. This may represent a risk to ActionAid’s reputation globally and could affect funding opportunities.’** Slim’s (2001) hypothesis that humanitarian action is moving towards a rights approach is not confirmed by this analysis, even for an agency such as ActionAid that is probably at the leading edge in this area.

One example of good practice is the evaluation of the WFP intervention in East Timor. This incorporates the Sphere standards in the evaluation of monitoring, participation and coordination, even though, as quoted above, the evaluation team was requested not to include them. It also includes a discussion of the understanding of human rights within WFP in relation to the current mandate of the UN system:

In relation to human rights, it is evident that despite the Secretary-General’s injunction [Secretary-General Reform Programme], WFP as an institution has not sought to adopt a human-rights approach and senior staff are unsure what it would mean to do so and are

apprehensive that it will leave WFP 'hostage' to the right to food. WFP staff commonly say that WFP is addressing human rights by providing food, but this demonstrates a lack of understanding of the human-rights approach, underlined by a generally hostile attitude to the concept of rights or entitlements, (September, 2001, p42).

Coordination

Information Area	Good	Satis- factory	Unsatis- factor	Poor
Consideration given to coordination	36%	31%	17%	16%

While coordination itself may be problematic, evaluation of coordination is less so. Thirty-six per cent of reports were assessed as good and 31 per cent as satisfactory in this area, with 16 per cent assessed as poor. There were a number of good practice case studies, for example the Danida/DRC (May 2000) evaluation of DRC's reintegration and rehabilitation programme in Somalia, which in a single page assessed:

- DRC participation in sectoral working groups;
- DRC cooperation with UNHCR and the EU;
- coordination among NGOs; and
- coordination with the government at District level.

Other examples of good practice can be found in DEC (July 2001); OCHA (May 2001); WHO (May 2001 and May 2001a) and IFRC (August 2000). Reports tended to be stronger in assessment of inter-agency coordination, while coordination with the government or local authorities received less attention.

Protection

Information Area	Good	Satis- factory	Unsatis- factor	Poor
Consideration given to protection	12%	9%	11%	68%

Consideration given to protection by reports was limited. The Proforma defines protection quite broadly, so that reports were assessed in relation to both complex emergencies and natural disasters. Sixty-eight per cent of

reports were assessed as poor in relation to their coverage of protection and 11 per cent as unsatisfactory. The two cases of good practice identified both came from UNHCR: the evaluation of support to IDPs in Angola (UNHCR/Danida, May 2001); and of a firewood project in Kenya aiming to reduce rape against women.

Although most of the literature and guidance on protection has been developed in relation to complex emergencies, it is also relevant to evaluation of natural disasters, for example, in relation to the protection of women against rape and violence. However, there were no examples of good practice in relation to natural disasters, suggesting that evaluators should reorient their thinking on this issue.

Social differentiation

Gender equality

Information Area	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Consideration given to gender equality	15%	20%	5%	60%

Attention to gender equality was among the weaker areas in reports. Evaluators appeared for the most part unaware of the meaning of gender equality. Gender mainstreaming was most often equated with the need for special attention to women, failing to make a link between this and relations between men and women, the core issue in gender equality.

Gender equality policies were rarely invoked, and evaluation reports often either contained no information or dismissed gender equality issues in a few lines. Sixty per cent of reports were assessed as poor in this area, usually meaning they paid no attention to gender equality at all. This implies that sustained attempts to promote understanding of gender equality through the production of tools and training – for example on the part of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee – have proven largely unsuccessful.

The picture was not totally bleak however, and showed some improvement from the reports assessed in the *Annual Review 2001*, in particular from the reports on Kosovo where there was almost no discussion of gender-equality issues. Fifteen per cent of reports in the *Annual Review 2002* were assessed as good, and 20 per cent of reports as satisfactory. Outstanding was the

evaluation of the UNHCR (June 2001) intervention to support refugees in Kenya, which included:

- an in-depth gender analysis;
- use of relevant policy to assess the intervention;
- a strong focus on the way in which embedded gender relations affected the results of the intervention; and
- clear recommendations as to how to reorient the intervention to improve gender equality.

Vulnerable/marginalised¹⁰

Information Area	Good	Satis- factory	Unsatis- factory	Poor
Consideration given to the vulnerable and marginalised	15%	17%	12%	56%

Fifty-six per cent of reports were assessed as poor in terms of visibly addressing and integrating attention to the vulnerable/marginalised, for example the elderly, disabled, children and HIV patients, with only 15 per cent of reports assessed as good in this area. This weakness was related to the failure of reports to disaggregate the affected population – by sex, age and ethnic background, as well as socio-economic grouping. Given the repeated calls for disaggregation over the last ten years, as well as considerable work that has gone on, for example in the UN system, in this area, this should be standard practice. That this did not happen in more than half of the reports suggests that many evaluators do not have the background knowledge and/or skills to carry out basic social research. This may be particularly true for technical specialists who focus for example on logistics or water and sanitation, although not always the case, as was made clear in the evaluation of ECHO (May 2001b) support to the water and sanitation sector in Central America. This included a dual focus on technical and social issues. Without these basic social research skills it is impossible to focus adequate attention on the vulnerable and marginalised.

Stakeholder consultation

Consultation with the affected population

Information Area	Good	Satis- factory	Unsatis- factory	Poor
Nature/scope of consultation with affected population	6%	21%	9%	64%

Sixty-four per cent of reports were rated as poor and a further 9 per cent as unsatisfactory in terms of outlining the nature and scope of consultation with the affected population. This poor finding in relation to the consultation of affected populations, may result as much from a failure to describe adequately the approach taken as from a methodological weakness, for it is evident from the reports that many evaluators did talk to the affected population. The reports did not manage to reflect adequately the perspectives of the affected population, so findings appear to be largely the opinions of agency staff.

Also problematic is that commissioning agencies appear to accept the systematic failure of evaluators to disaggregate those consulted (eg, men, women, old or young people, people from different ethnic backgrounds) or outline how they were consulted. Similar findings were reported in the *Annual Review 2001*. Commissioning agencies need to do a better job as gatekeepers in ensuring that consultation takes place and is adequately reported on.

Consultation with other key stakeholders

Information Area	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Nature/scope of consultation with other key stakeholders	22%	27%	19%	32%

Reports performed better in terms of detailing consultation with other key stakeholders, in particular agency, partner, and government staff. Almost fifty per cent of reports were assessed as satisfactory or better in this area, although evaluators tended to do a better job consulting with agency rather than with government staff, and a number of reports did not even include a basic list of persons met, making it difficult to assess the validity of the information included in the report.

A good-practice example, in terms of undertaking and reporting adequately on stakeholder consultation, was the evaluation of DEC agencies in Mozambique (July 2001). The report provides clear details of 400 interviews, including the position of the respondent and the place and date of the interview. It sets out the scope and nature of interviews, disaggregated by sex, of a beneficiary study conducted as part of the evaluation, and notes the rationale for choice of evaluation location, and also describes its proactive approach to ensuring coverage of the often excluded 'vulnerable' (ibid, Vol 2, p23): 'In each locality the interviewer sought to interview at least one person from each of the groups considered to be most vulnerable, namely, the elderly, disabled, female heads of households and families with small children.'

Findings, conclusions and recommendations

Information Area	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Sharing of findings	17%	23%	10%	50%
Quality of conclusions	51%	41%	8%	-
Feasibility of recommendations	20%	60%	18%	2%

Reports were overall strongest in their ability to synthesise information into conclusions, with 51 per cent of reports assessed as good and 41 per cent as satisfactory. This suggests that there is little need for training or support in this area. The ability to write recommendations that were clear, relevant and feasible was more problematic, although reports performed relatively well in this area, with 20 per cent assessed as good and 60 per cent as satisfactory, and only one report assessed as poor. Reports usually provided only one recommendation option to the commissioning agency and did not fare so well in some areas of recommendation writing such as prioritisation, suggested timeframes, and responsibility for follow-up.

One good practice example was the IFRC report on the Americas (November 2000), where recommendations were carefully pitched so as to be feasible, demonstrating a sound knowledge of potential constraints to uptake by IFRC. This report also highlighted which recommendations were a priority, and provided a timeframe in some cases.

The evaluation process needs to place greater emphasis on the sharing of findings. This may be another case where evaluators are not reporting on their interactions with key stakeholders, as there are hints in many reports that this does take place. In 50 per cent of cases there was no sharing of findings or sharing was not discussed in the report. In a further 10 per cent of cases, reports were considered unsatisfactory. Discussion of findings during the evaluation process is a key way of encouraging stakeholder participation and feedback, and one means of ensuring that lessons are incorporated into agency thinking. Evaluators should pay more attention to this area and report on the actual process more fully. Given broad acknowledgement of the poor uptake of recommendations by agencies, evaluators should consider promoting and reporting on innovative methods in this area.

II.vi Proforma Section 6 Final Report and Presentation

Information Area	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Accessibility of the report	22%	63%	10%	5%
Quality of Executive Summary	37%	45%	5%	13%

Legibility

Reports were generally well written and accessible, with comprehensive executive summaries, which for the most part included both the main conclusions and recommendations. There was little poor practice in the area of legibility and accessibility, with most reports being assessed as satisfactory or better. On the other hand most reports could do more to integrate visual aids such as maps, figures and boxes; quite often these were relegated to annexes and not adequately discussed or commented on. Some reports stretched for many, single-spaced, small-print pages, making key points difficult to access.

III Issues Arising

III.i Learning in EHA

The most important gap identified in the evaluation set is the lack of attention to the causes of success and failure of humanitarian action. As noted in Chapter 4, the reader learns much about what has happened, but little about why it happened and how 'good practice' can be replicated. With explanation largely missing the reader does not, for example, learn how good staff are hired and supported; how partnerships are built up and maintained; how some agencies manage to carry out good needs assessments or are more prepared than others; or, why in the same intervention some agencies perform well and others poorly.

The neglect of why interventions succeed or fail appears to result from the lack of attention paid to the theoretical underpinnings that drive EHA (rarely made explicit in evaluation reports); and the formulaic use of the evaluation criteria that currently guide EHA practice.

A lack of theoretical framework in EHA

Simplifying greatly, the principal evaluation theories driving current practice are:

- **Outcome-oriented** the theory that evaluations should be carried out by independent agents to ensure accountability and credibility; and
- **User and lesson learning-oriented** the theory that key stakeholders should participate actively in the evaluation process to allow lessons to be learned and used.

These, and the numerous variations in practice that draw from them, come with a host of advocates, each with their own rationales. However, some of the evaluation literature sees a recent convergence between the two (eg, Patton, 1997) and in the context of EHA, given its dual accountability and learning purposes, they should be viewed as complementary rather than exclusive.

A crude analysis of the primary purpose of the core set, usually stated in the terms of reference, reveals that despite approximately 55 per cent of the reports having a balance of focus across learning and accountability and 26 per cent a having a primarily learning purpose, in practice, their approach and methods are almost exclusively outcome-oriented.

As was found in the *Annual Review 2001*, evaluations almost all take a similar 'traditional' approach, which appears to be the expected norm among commissioning agencies. Agency documents are reviewed; and interviews carried out with agency staff and, in some cases, the affected population, but the level of participation of key stakeholders is limited. This is not problematic if the main interest of agencies is accountability and 'what happened', but it is problematic if there is an interest in lesson-learning, where some argue that only a participatory approach is likely to promote lesson-learning (eg, Patton, 1997).¹¹

Use of DAC guidance criteria

The second factor, undermining EHA's potential as a lesson-learning tool, is the formulaic use of the DAC criteria (OECD-DAC, 1999) as a central organising feature. In most independent evaluation terms of reference, the criteria as adapted invite a focus on determining 'what happened' rather than 'why it happened' (a focus to some extent encouraged by the nature of the DAC criteria definitions¹²) reinforcing the lack of attention given to process. The use of the criteria in almost all evaluations of humanitarian action reinforces the lack of attention given to process and why events and interventions unfolded as they did.

This is not to suggest that, if evaluators pay more attention to the theory driving their practice, or if agencies amend their terms of reference to include a requirement that evaluators focus on explaining the cause of results, lessons will automatically be learned. It will however go some way to ensuring that evaluation meets its potential as a learning tool.

Where learning is the primary focus, other forms of evaluation or learning practices, such as self-evaluation and real time evaluation that focus on explaining causality, may be more likely to promote lesson-learning, (eg, UNHCR, February 2001).

This issue is discussed in some detail in an evaluation report on IFRC's operations in the Americas:

Too often reports deal primarily with observations or symptoms, regularly (and often repetitively) outlining a series of shortcomings but seldom if ever getting to the fundamental systemic weaknesses that lead to these recurring patterns. Many evaluation reports and recommendations are written in such detail that the systemic issues are not identified. This makes it very difficult for senior management to determine and implement required action, and to monitor results of the progress made. From the outset, the team believed that its greatest contribution would not be in chronicling the details, but in trying to learn the main lessons... (IFRC, November 2000, p11).

The report goes on to note the tension between the lesson-learning and accountability purposes of evaluation:

Organizational learning through evaluation and review is also characterized by tension arising from two quite different products of the evaluation/review process:

- a. the 'positive use' of the lessons learned to improve organizational performance in the future; and
- b. the 'negative use' of evaluation results as part of the formal and informal system of rewards and punishments relating to the performance of personnel.

How well these two potentially conflicting uses of evaluation can be reconciled in an organization is based largely on the broader strength of the general management process and the ingrained culture associated with risk taking. The attitudes encountered by the review team in the Federation broadly defined on these issues are not particularly reassuring... (IFRC, November 2000, p11-12)

Unless the two theoretical impulses that drive EHA are acknowledged, accountability and lesson-learning may not sit well together in the same evaluation. Planning for EHA should move away from a largely unthinking inclusion of both accountability and lesson-learning, and consider whether these key and mutually reinforcing functions can actually be carried out given the scope of a particular evaluation and the expertise available. Different skills and understanding of the evaluation process are required and it may not be realistic to expect one evaluation team to cover both areas.

Limited social learning

A further characteristic of the evaluation set is the lack of attention to social process. Approaches that ask ‘what happened?’ rather than ‘why did it happen?’ are unlikely to pay great attention to local political systems, gender equality, power relations, and coping strategies, and how these affect the performance of the intervention.

Evaluations need not become exercises in social research, but political, social, economic and cultural relations always play a part in determining why results are achieved or not, and an analysis of these relations needs to be factored into evaluations to help understand why interventions succeed or fail. The most relevant place for such analysis is usually the context section of the evaluation report, which currently tends to be unsatisfactory (see Profoma Section 3).

Although, one evaluation (UNHCR, June 2001) did manage a strong focus on accountability and an explanation of the structural features and social relations in the Kenyan refugee camps covered, demonstrating that the intervention as planned was likely to have limited success – it is the exception in the core sample.

III.ii The Evaluator as Advocate?

There is an undercurrent in several of the evaluation reports reflecting what might be called evaluator bias or perspective. This is perhaps most obvious in the three Tearfund evaluations, where the Tearfund’s Christian mission is promoted through the evaluation process, and the potential contradiction between that mission and the need for accountability is never quite resolved, for example around the question of who received support from Tearfund’s partners. Evaluator bias is also evident in the evaluation of ECHO support to the health sector in East Timor (May 2001d), where the evaluator

promotes the private health case; and in the evaluation of the WFP intervention in East Timor. In the latter case, the evaluation report assessed the intervention against the Sphere standards promoting their use despite being specifically requested by the commissioning agency not to do this:

The SPHERE Project includes Minimum Standards in Food Aid (ie, Chapter 4), which covers a number of areas in which EMOP 6177 was generally deficient including problem analysis, results monitoring and participation of the people affected by the emergency. The mission has been asked not to apply these standards because they are not binding on WFP...The mission however encourages WFP to make greater use of the SPHERE Standards and disseminate them within WFP as a key reference... (WFP, September 2001, p42).

It could be argued in this case that evaluators have a professional responsibility to use appropriate standards and measures. For example the *Program Evaluation Standards* (Joint Committee, 1994, ii) note under the Propriety heading:

The evaluation should be complete and fair in its examination and recording of strengths and weaknesses of the program being evaluated, so that strengths can be built upon and problem areas addressed.

What is included in a 'complete and fair' evaluation should be open to discussion, as should the responsibility of the evaluator; but this discussion can only take place – as in the general evaluation field over the last ten years – if there is acknowledgement that all evaluations, even those that are assumed to be 'objective', as well as all evaluators, have their own biases and perspectives.

III Conclusions

While good practice could be highlighted in most of the areas covered by the Proforma, there were few examples of systematic good practice across the evaluation set. A number of areas are in need of strengthening in order to bring EHA in line with good practice as set out by the OECD-DAC (1999) guidelines as well as other important evaluation guidance. Much of the responsibility for improving practice falls to the agencies commissioning the evaluations. These agencies need to:

- invest more in training so that staff in evaluation offices have a clearer

understanding of the purpose of, and different approaches to, evaluation, to enable them to play a more effective role in directing evaluation teams and as gate-keepers to ensure key areas are included;

- increase the focus on explaining why particular results were or were not achieved, and how far successes are replicable;
- clarify whether the central purpose of the evaluation exercise is for lesson-learning or for accountability. If both of these purposes are included, the agency needs to clarify how both functions will be met by one evaluation;
- select from a wider pool of consultants/researchers, including from the affected country;
- provide adequate guidance to evaluation teams, in particular on methodology;
- ensure that the evaluation process is transparent, for example by noting in the report why a particular method was chosen and how the evaluation team was selected; and
- publicise the mechanisms by which evaluation results will be used.

Some changes can be achieved immediately, such as inclusion of terms of reference, adequate details on the method employed, or lists of persons met as standard features of reports. Other areas are clearly more intractable and it will take many years to attain good practice levels across the system, such as: understanding the implications of the choice of a particular method for evaluation results; ensuring adequate attention to the views of the affected population, gender equality and protection; and establishing downward accountability to the affected population. First steps to address these issues are already being taken in several areas through ALNAP's training programmes and others', but much more needs to be done.

Internal and External Evaluations

The advantages and disadvantages of undertaking internal as opposed to external evaluations have been discussed in the evaluation field for some time. Rossi and Freeman (1993, p438–9) comment on this issue as follows:

... The current evidence is far from clear regarding whether inside or outside evaluations are more likely to be of higher quality... [but there is a likelihood that] accountability studies have the most utility if undertaken internally. As for other evaluative activities, the relative advantages of one location compared to another are unclear... Given the increased competence of [internal] staff and the visibility and scrutiny of the evaluation enterprise, there is no reason now to favor one organizational arrangement over another.

For the *Annual Review 2001*, seven reports (MSF-H, April 2000 and July 2001; Oxfam, August 2000 and 2001; UNICEF, March 2000; UNHCR, February 2001; World Vision Vietnam, June 2001) that fitted the ALNAP definition of an evaluation, except that they were carried out by agency staff members were assessed against the ALNAP Quality Proforma (see Introduction for more details). These seven reports are referred to as 'internal' reports below. The purpose of this exercise was to determine whether the quality of these seven reports was similar to that of the core sample of 41 'external' evaluation reports assessed in this chapter.

Although seven reports is a small sample from which to draw conclusions, a number of points emerged from this review:

- Internal reports were assessed as fairly similar to external evaluations, that is of low quality overall. Both sets of reports tended to have the same strengths and weaknesses, for example: in terms of strengths, a satisfactory analysis of context and coordination, relatively effective use of the DAC criteria, and the ability to synthesise findings; and in terms of weaknesses, little or inadequate discussion of indicators covering the relief and rehabilitation split, and little discussion of constraints to the evaluation process, international standards, protection or gender equality.
- None of the internal reports included terms of reference or adequate details on the intervention, possibly because internal reports had more of a lesson-learning focus than external evaluations. As the terms of reference for the MSF-H evaluation of its intervention in Tajikistan notes (July 2001, p23): 'An internal evaluation was agreed because it was felt that this would maximize learning opportunities and control over recommendations. There were also those who argued for an external evaluation in order to allow a more

independent perspective.' However, the rationale for carrying out an internal evaluation was not always made clear. The report just quoted for example commented: (p3): 'The ideal approach would have been a self-evaluation by those responsible for mental health policy and approach. However, during the preparations it became evident that key staff desired a more "distant perspective" on the intervention.' This information was considered readily available within the agency.

- Although more focused on lesson learning, the internal evaluations used fairly similar methods to external evaluations, that is review of documents, and formal interviews with agency staff and in some cases beneficiaries. It might have been expected that internal evaluations would have used more participatory or experimental methods to promote lesson learning but that was not the case in respect of this set.
- There were some cases of innovation, for example in the case of World Vision (June 2001), where Red Cross and Government of Vietnam staff joined the evaluation team, and Oxfam (August 2000) in Orissa where two Bangladeshi staff members of the agency were hired as part of the team to establish linkages between staff working in similar situations in India and Bangladesh.

Sources

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UNICEF (March 2000) *Evaluation of the "Lifestart in Emergencies" ECCD Project*. Skopje: UNICEF Skopje Office.

World Vision Vietnam (June 2001) *An Giang Flood Response and Rehabilitation Program Evaluation*. Ho Chi Minh City: World Vision Vietnam.

Good Practice in Evaluation of Humanitarian Action: the Disasters Emergency Committee

Over the two years of the ALNAP Annual Review, evaluations of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) agencies have been consistently strong, in particular the evaluations of the programmes in Central America, Kosovo, Orissa and Mozambique (DEC, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; July 2001). Strengths include: establishing the importance of context for intervention results; carrying out detailed surveys which include substantial beneficiary consultation; good attention to gender equality issues; a strong focus on the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct and Sphere; and the ability to analyse findings.

It would be useful to establish why the DEC has been able to produce rigorous evaluations on a consistent basis, and if this could be replicated by other agencies. There appear to be several main reasons why the DEC is able to produce comparatively strong evaluations:

- DEC provides adequate funds to hire competent evaluators, and teams are hired through a public tender process. Evaluation teams are skilled in social research and analysis, have good local knowledge, have a strong background in humanitarian action, and often have worked with NGOs.
- DEC is one of the few agencies that appears willing to either hire a local consulting company to carry out the evaluation, as in the case of the Central America evaluation, or to include local consultants on the evaluation team, as in the case of Kosovo, Orissa and Mozambique. The mix of international expertise and local knowledge and expertise seems to work particularly well. However like most other reports the DEC reports, with the exception of the Central America evaluation, did not state the expertise and experience of evaluators.
- Pre-evaluation visits are carried out while the response is still in the emergency phase, in order to capture information, talk to staff and get the evaluation on the agenda before the trail begins to go cold, staff leave etc. These visits can help to establish the agenda for the subsequent evaluation, highlighting issues, which will need to be studied in depth.
- A peer review group or team of specialist advisers is established. Their input has involved briefing the evaluators before the work starts on issues to look out for, discussion about methodology and review of the first draft of the report before it goes to the DEC agencies.
- DEC terms of reference are clear as to what is to be expected from the evaluation and set out the method to be followed.

- Because funds are raised as part of a public appeal, DEC interventions have a higher profile than those of most others, probably leading to a more rigorous evaluation process.

The DEC *Policy Handbook* notes that up to 1 per cent of the Appeal can be dedicated to evaluation. Actual figures are (source: Lawry-White, 2001):

Appeal	Raised £m	Eval. £	%Eval/Raised
1. Sudan	10.5	54,000	0.51
2. Bangladesh	5.5	39,965	0.73
3. Central America	18.5	97,717	0.53
4. Kosovo	53.8	296,000	0.55
5. Orissa cyclones, India	7.0	74,900	1.07
6. Mozambique	31.5	129,900	0.41

Most agencies do not publish the amounts spent on individual evaluations, but DEC probably does well in comparison to other agencies (for comparisons see ALNAP, 2001, p57).

DEC reports display certain generic evaluation weaknesses, such as in some cases poorly formed recommendations (Lawry-White, 2001), a failure to consult with non-beneficiaries, and a lack of accountability to the affected population. But they remain comparatively strong. Can their success be replicated? Certainly, other agencies could commit sufficient funds for evaluations, which would allow adequate time for a thorough evaluation process; a common complaint of evaluators was a lack of time. They could also hire more local consultants, and move away from hiring consultants solely because they originate from the country or region which funded the intervention. They could also make the process by which evaluation teams are hired clear in the introduction to evaluation reports, which would lead to greater transparency in the evaluation process.

Sources

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