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Background paper

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# Changing Humanitarian Action?



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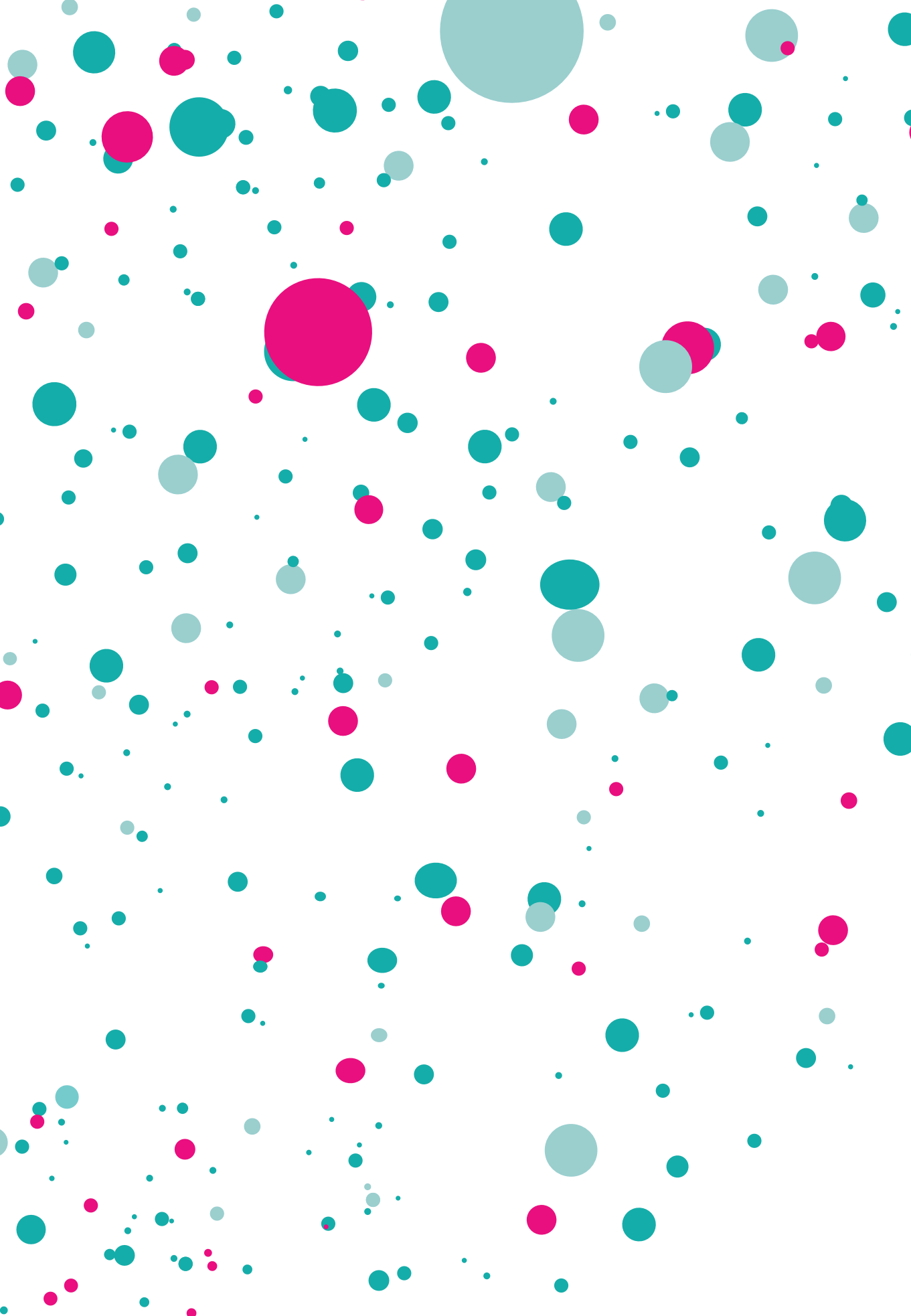
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The views contained in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the ALNAP Members.

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Since the dawn of recorded history, change has been one of the few constants in human life. In 600 BC, the Buddha said that ‘all component things in the world are changeable’. Around the same time, but half a world away, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus also observed that ‘change is the only constant in life’. Whether change is a constant of humanitarian life, however, is open to debate: many observers have complained that the humanitarian system fails to change, or does not change enough. Nevertheless, most humanitarians would accept that change **initiatives** are a constant of their working lives. From new procedures in the management and provision of assistance, to organisational restructuring, to system-wide initiatives such as Humanitarian Reform, The Transformative Agenda (TA), the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) and, most recently, the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) process, humanitarian organisations make significant investments in trying to change the current situation and improve humanitarian action.

Despite the time, money and energy that is spent on change, there has been very little attention paid to the processes by which change actually happens in the humanitarian ‘system’ (a term which, in itself, has implications for how we think about change, and which we will consider later). The focus of change initiatives is generally on what should change and why, rather than on how this change can effectively be achieved.

At a time when a number of significant change initiatives are underway in the humanitarian system, and when there are many calls to transform the fundamentals of humanitarian action, it seems fitting that the ALNAP Network – which exists to support change through evaluation and learning, and which is 20 years old this year – should meet to consider the topic of change in the humanitarian system, and attempt to gain a better understanding of how change happens, and how it can be supported.

This background paper for the Meeting seeks to frame and contextualise some of the ideas which ALNAP members may wish to discuss.

# WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'CHANGE'?

The term 'change' has been applied to a huge array of activities, aspirations and processes affecting humanitarian action. In some ways, the idea of change (and, closely related to it, improvement, transformation, reform, reinvention and so on) is so broad and nebulous that it conceals more than it reveals. In order to understand what 'change' means, we need to break the concept down into manageable pieces. Unfortunately, there is no universally accepted typology of change that can help us to do this. In considering changes – actual and proposed – in the humanitarian world, it may, however, be possible to identify a few organising principles.

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One way to differentiate between the type and level of change is in its dimension – the aspect of the system on which change efforts are focused. Dimensions of the humanitarian system include: the actors involved (who conducts humanitarian activities?); the nature and objectives of humanitarian work (what are they doing?); the methods and approaches used in humanitarian work (how are they doing it?); the location and context of work (where is international aid being provided?); and the timing of humanitarian activities (when do activities take place? What is the balance between activities before and after a crisis?). Much of the recent discussion on 'localisation', for example, has centred on the first of these dimensions – who should provide aid – while discussions regarding cash transfers have tended to concentrate on how aid is provided.

Change activities can also be differentiated by their **design**. Some activities are designed to create change by altering organisational or systemic structures, for example. Others focus on procedures, or the introduction of tools and technologies, while still others prioritise changes in the staffing and skills available to an organisation.

Another way to think about change (desired or achieved) is by **depth**. Some changes are fairly 'superficial': they aim to introduce a new process into existing structures, for instance, and do not require people to make major changes in their behaviour or the way they think. Other changes may aim to change the culture of an organisation or the system as a whole, and so address much deeper, less accessible, elements of the organisation.

A fourth way to characterise changes is by the **degree** and **speed** of change expected. This is really about the 'end state' of change – how different will the final state be from the existing state? How much of the status quo will remain? And how quickly can this change be achieved? Different expectations regarding the degree of change that is possible or desirable have marked the World Humanitarian Summit process, and surfaced in discussions on whether the system is broke or broken, the need for 'paradigm shifts', and whether change should be 'incremental' or 'transformational',<sup>1</sup> based on 'reform' or on 'reinvention'.

Planned change can also be thought of in terms of **distance** – the distance of the object of change from the people designing or managing the change process. Changes can occur, for example, at the level of the individuals themselves; their organisation, the humanitarian system, or the broader international political and economic system. Depending on the degree of distance, the design of the change process will tend to differ – from reflection and learning, to restructuring and the provision of tools and guidance, to influencing and advocacy activities.

But we should be careful not to think only about those changes that are planned or implemented within the system. Many of the most profound and significant changes happen to us, and are not planned by us. These often come from unexpected or unforeseen movement in social, economic or political forces outside the system. Seen from this perspective, we can also differentiate change in terms of the **direction** of the energy involved – does it come from the outside into the system, or is it generated within the system itself?

These approaches to differentiating changes are by no means perfect. They overlap with one another, and are open to debate. At the same time, they illustrate that not all changes are the same, and that our approach to different types of change will necessarily be different. There is no single change plan that can guide us in responding to major changes to the financing of humanitarian aid, in introducing a new IT process, or in attempting to change the culture of the system. The distinctions between different types of change also show how easy it is for people to talk about a change and yet have a very different understanding of what they are discussing, and very different expectations of what should happen.

Broadly speaking, those changes which are less deep, are closer in terms of distance, and are of more limited degree appear to be more likely to be implemented (Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014). The challenge comes when we intentionally try to create very big shifts in the status quo, in a number of related dimensions of activity, or in 'deep' ways that require people to make a fundamental reassessment of their basic assumptions and attitudes. This paper therefore focuses on how these more profound and

<sup>1</sup> Although these terms have frequently been used in opposition to one another, they are in fact not mutually exclusive – it is quite possible to have an incremental transformation.

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substantial changes come about. We will also focus in particular on those attempts to consciously facilitate change from within the system, rather than on the changes that occur from 'outside'.

## The context of change – humanitarians, the humanitarian system, and the world beyond

One of the main ideas this paper will illustrate is that the way we seek to change something depends largely on the way in which we understand what that thing is. With this in mind, it is worth considering some of the aspects of humanitarian organisations and of the humanitarian system that affect the way in which it changes, or can be changed. Many of the ideas discussed here build on earlier research undertaken by ALNAP (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008).

### Structure and organisation

The first point to note is that humanitarian organisations tend to be geographically dispersed, and – compared to other emergency-management systems, at least – to have fairly weak systems of command and control. This can make it extremely difficult to 'drive change' from the centre of the organisation: 'decisions...made by management [can be] avoided in the field' (Scott-Villiers, 2002: 429).

This lack of central control is even more pronounced in relation to the humanitarian system as a whole. The system comprises a large number of autonomous actors with differing accountabilities and no central governing body: any form of sustained centralised control is next to impossible (Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015). This means that 'no single entity can decree change' (Kreuger et al., 2016:13), so that any change process needs to be, to a great degree, voluntary and collaborative. Collaborative work is, however, complicated by the high levels of competition in the system. Observers differ on why this competition exists: for some it is an inevitable result of structural aspects of the system (Taylor, 2009), while for others it is more the result of 'enduring, but outdated, assumptions' (Bennet, 2016:69). Whatever the reasons (which become quite important in efforts to address the problem), there is general agreement that competition exists, and is a bar to improved collaboration (Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015, 2016; Kreuger et al., 2016; Taylor, 2009). One element of this competition that becomes immediately visible in many change programmes is organisations' reluctance to support changes that have been suggested elsewhere – a phenomenon often called the 'not invented here problem'. So, for example, the Transformative Agenda is seen as an 'OCHA thing' (Kreuger et al., 2016:40), and the Humanitarian Rights Up Front Initiative a 'UN thing' (Niland et al., 2015).

Any coordinated, system-wide approach to change is made even more difficult by the fact that 'there is no shared definition of the humanitarian agenda' (Darcy and Hofmann, 2003:5) and great diversity between organisations concerning the 'end point' of humanitarianism (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008). As a result, humanitarian action can be seen as an 'umbrella under which an array of differing interpretations and agendas shelter' (Kent, n.d.:5). It is hard to collaborate on major changes if you don't agree on

the destination. Moreover, if the objectives of humanitarianism (and so of any changes) are unclear, so are key concepts. ‘Protection’ – an area central to humanitarian action – has ‘multiple interpretations’ (Niland et al., 2015:10), while ‘accountability’ ‘has become a much-abused word which may mask poor understanding or misunderstanding amongst staff’ (Gostelow et al., 2010: 6). It is perhaps unsurprising then, that, in change processes such as the Transformative Agenda, ‘key reform concepts are unclear’ (Steets et al., 2016: 62)

Humanitarian action is also unusual – to say the least – in that ‘the system is a supply-driven industry in which those who are meant to benefit from its products and services are not the same actors who decide what is delivered or how’ (Obrecht and Warner, 2016: 43). People affected by crises are not operating in a humanitarian ‘market’; they cannot choose the type of aid they receive, or from whom (although the increased use of cash transfers in emergency responses may address this). Nor are they, generally, working in a system of public welfare with democratic oversight. They cannot vote out poor providers, or make use of systemic procedures of accountability. This dampens the demand for change and improvement, and also sharply reduces the number of ideas about what could change, and how change could be achieved. In ALNAP’s recent work on innovation, it was notable how few of the projects studied had been initiated by crisis-affected people themselves, despite their undoubted expertise and understanding of the crisis.

### **Attitudes and culture**

Humanitarian activity is based on values: most people engaged in the humanitarian system expect their work to express their personal value systems. These value systems may differ from one person to another, and there is lively debate on whether humanitarianism is a reflection of shared human values or rather a creation based on European cultural values (Donini, 2007; Niland et al., 2015). The fact remains, though, that many humanitarians have a strong emotional, values-based investment in their work, and in their organisations. This can make people ambivalent, or even openly resistant, to change. As one agency staff member recently told an ALNAP colleague: ‘people are not allowed to use the word change very much, because it implies that the previous was bad’. Humanitarians have explained their overt resistance to change processes as one of pushing back against ‘a different philosophy of what the organisation is all about’ (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008:2) and have even felt ‘a duty...to resist’ (Finger and Ruchat, 2000:14).

Moving from individual to group values, another area that arguably affects the ability of humanitarian organisations to change is ‘humanitarian culture’. We will consider the relationship between culture and change a little further on. For now it will suffice to make a couple of tentative observations. Culture involves internalised assumptions about basic human experiences and conditions: the nature of time, say, or the nature of work. In the humanitarian world, time is often seen as a series of short, repeated, discrete cycles, existing almost in opposition to ‘long-term’ developmental time. This is partly a consequence of short-term funding and planning, and it makes it harder to think in the longer time frame that is often required for change activities. In terms of work,

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humanitarian action tends to see 'real' work as involving the concrete and the practical – for good reason, as much life-saving activity is concrete and practical. When applied to change programmes, however, this can lead to an approach which is based on 'creating and deploying things... a focus on products, rather than on people' (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008: 52). A humanitarian colleague tells a rather depressing story of a long change process that led to the production of a sizeable volume of guidance notes: 'for the whole time I was there, it was used as a door stop'.

A further much-discussed element of humanitarian culture is the attitude to risk (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2013; Ali, n.d.). Many observers see the sector as risk-averse, or at least preferring to default to tried and tested solutions. This approach, it goes without saying, is not conducive to change.

### **Relationship to the 'external' world**

A final factor which influences change in the humanitarian sector is the very high degree of connection between the system and other external systems, in particular national and global political systems. An international humanitarian organisation will be working in a large number of countries, many of which will have highly contested and conflictual political environments. At the same time, they will be working (on advocacy and related activities) in the different political contexts of Washington, London, Kuala Lumpur or Addis Ababa. These multiple engagements will be taking place within geopolitical contexts that have a very significant bearing on the staff workload, ways of working, and organisational funding. Despite attempts to remain neutral and independent, the essentially political context of humanitarian action means that humanitarian actors are not 'free agents'; rather, they are meshed in a broad web of political relationships which might either accelerate or impede change, which means that the system is as likely to have to respond to changes occurring elsewhere as it is to initiate them itself.

Of course, it is not only politics that influences the humanitarian system. As a number of writers have pointed out (Barnett and Walker, 2015; Bennet, 2016; Bourns and Alexander, 2015; Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008; Kent et al., 2013) there are huge social, economic, demographic and technological changes that have a major impact. To take just one example: global migration affects humanitarianism in numerous ways. It creates populations in need (in south-east Europe, for example), and greatly increases the vulnerability of other areas to humanitarian crisis, as the population density of low-lying and coastal cities increases. At the same time, migration has influenced political discourse in many countries, from the UK to Myanmar, in ways that challenge humanitarian principles, but which also open avenues for debate and advocacy. The growth of diaspora communities opens alternative communication channels and financial flows between crisis-affected states and more affluent communities and may – if one takes an optimistic view – prompt many people to reassess 'otherness' and recognise the common humanity that underlies the humanitarian endeavour. So just one global trend – migration – has direct influence not only on the location, size and nature of humanitarian need, but also on how that need is addressed, and the financial and political context within which

it is addressed. It is also related to many other global changes (wars, improved communications, cheaper and more accessible transport, climate change, land tenure and so on) which in turn act directly and indirectly on the small world of humanitarian action.

# GOOD OR BAD AT CHANGE?

The humanitarian system has repeatedly been criticised for failing to change in response to these many and varied currents in the world around it. Many, both inside and outside the system, say that the system is ‘bad at change’. How accurate is this assessment?

In 2004 the humanitarian response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami showed that many of the problems and failures identified in the wake of the response to the Great Lakes regional emergency in 1994 had not been addressed (Cosgrave, 2007). Twelve years later, many of those same systemic problems have been identified in the World Humanitarian Summit process. Where the same problems remain unaddressed over a 22-year period, it might be safe to assume that, at the very least, there are severe limits to the ability of the humanitarian system to change and improve.

A number of observers would dispute this, however. In an article in *International Studies Quarterly*, the author concludes: ‘The central finding of this brief review is that the system is changing, although not in a smooth or consistent manner’(Taylor, 2009: 1044). Reviewing the specific issue of response to the needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs), a recent review suggested that the Transformative Agenda had led to ‘significant accomplishments’ in that area (Ferris, 2014:12). Even those who are generally critical of key aspects of the present system concede that there have been ‘many significant reforms’ (Barnett and Walker, 2015: 131) and that ‘developments in humanitarian response over the past five decades or so have been substantial’ (Bennet, 2016: 42). So it is not enough to say that the system doesn’t change – it does. The question is more about the nature of these changes – what are they, how deep are they, and what results do they have.

The experts interviewed for this background paper gave a mixed and nuanced description of change in the humanitarian system. The most commonly discussed change, and the one that many interviewees see as most fundamental, was growth: growth in the number and



scale of emergencies,<sup>2</sup> growth in funding, and – most commonly noted – growth (and increased diversity) in the number of humanitarian actors. The latter was seen as a result of the increased availability of funds, and also because of broader, economic changes in the world: ‘countries have become more prosperous and they want to get involved more in [this] kind of overseas aid’.

The other changes that interviewees mentioned most frequently included ‘professionalisation’ – a term which covered increased skills and improved selection processes for humanitarian workers, and also a range of bureaucratic activities, particularly in relation to financial processes and reporting. A related area was that of security and security management. Several interviewees focused on the increased involvement of traditional donor countries as combatants in complex emergencies, and the effects that this had on the perceived neutrality and independence of agencies funded by these countries. As their perceived independence declined, agencies were increasingly seen as targets, leading to tightening of security procedures, and to a level of ‘bunkerisation’. Finally, a number of interviewees discussed changes that had come about as a result of the increased availability of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

What stands out about these key changes in humanitarian action is that they were essentially reactive: they either happened to the humanitarian system as a result of outside forces, or they were adaptations made by the system in response to changes in the external environment, such as the greater use of new public management (NPM) approaches in the public-sector agencies in donor countries or these countries’ increased direct engagement in conflicts. They were generally not a result of any ‘grand plan’ to improve humanitarian effectiveness, but rather of the system ‘facing realities’ and making limited, ad hoc or sometimes opportunistic changes.

In these examples, where the humanitarian system has responded to changes in the external environment, it has generally done so by looking at the dimension of ‘how’ humanitarian action is accomplished, and used designs focused on procedures and structures. The changes have been broad, in that they have affected the whole system. In terms of degree, they have been quite significant – humanitarian action in 2017 looks very different to that in 1997 in a number of important ways – and yet very limited. Interviewees generally did not see these ‘big’ changes as having made a real difference to the lives of people affected by crisis: ‘we’re where we’ve always been’; ‘the needs are the same, [but] the world has become much more complex and in a way much more dangerous’.

The reactive changes also had unintended outcomes: ‘change has happened, but not the one that was sought’. Better communications allowed affected people to engage with each other in new ways, but they also ‘moved decision-making away from the field... away from populations in crisis and people in need’. New public management approaches

2 Or, at least, of emergencies to which the international system had access: some interviewees noted that this may be as much a result of increased access after the Cold War as of increased need.

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(such as results-based management, RBM), which were ‘designed to...provide a basis for increased productivity and improved efficiency in the delivery of public services’ (Parker et al., 2000: 131), actually led to ‘a lot more paper and explanations and rationalisations’ so that ‘most humanitarian actors have to dedicate between 15 and 40% of their time to fill all the different forms, reports, and other paperwork’.<sup>3</sup>

Interviewees also spoke about systemic changes that were less reactive and more consciously planned: particularly the Transformative Agenda (TA). They did not feel that these had been the most important changes in the humanitarian system, and, again, they did not generally feel that the TA had actually led to significant improvements in humanitarian action. One described it as ‘pretty lame’ while another suggested that reforms that were meant to make the system more effective had actually made it ‘complex and heavy’. However, research and evaluations regarding the TA and the process of Humanitarian Reform preceding it are more ambivalent. One review suggests that ‘the international institutional architecture has definitely gotten better. Humanitarian reform efforts have contributed to more effective international response which has alleviated suffering and saved lives’ (Ferris, 2014:12). Other research found, however, that ‘[there is] no hard evidence that UN-centred humanitarian reforms have improved the provision of humanitarian response thus far’ (Street, 2009: 4).<sup>4</sup> A recent ‘Review of Reviews’ is equivocal: ‘the Transformative Agenda made significant progress in encouraging change in a difficult context’ (Kreuger et al., 2016: 9) but also demonstrates a large number of ‘restrictions and drawbacks’ (ibid). The authors suggest that this is partially a result of the process following ‘a top-down, bureaucratic approach to change’ (ibid), and the report raises the question of whether the TA tried to do too many things at once, and perhaps concentrated more on changes to processes and structures than on changing results.

Whatever the overall success of the TA, there is general agreement that in one area – that of enhancing the accountability of humanitarian actors to people affected by crisis – there has been only limited improvement. It is not only the TA that has failed to improve humanitarian practice in this area. Calls for increased accountability have become almost a staple of humanitarian policy reviews and evaluations; there have been numerous agency-specific and system-wide initiatives aimed at improving accountability; agencies have come together in alliances and networks to ‘push the accountability agenda’, and there is now no shortage of guidance on how to design and conduct specific accountability initiatives. And yet all of this appears to have achieved ‘rhetorical rather than real results’ (SOHS, 2010: 29): in all three editions of The State of the Humanitarian System report to date, accountability has been one of the areas showing the least change and improvement (ALNAP, 2010, 2012, 2015).

The literature, and the experts interviewed for this paper, point to a number of potential reasons for the lack of change in the area of accountability. It could be partly a result of circumstance, of the very nature of humanitarian work (Barnett and Walker, 2015) that

3 Interestingly, similar findings have occurred in the field of health care (Parker et al., 2000).

4 Although it was written five years earlier, which may explain the different conclusion.



makes establishing accountability mechanisms in areas with a weak state and disrupted civil society inherently difficult. This is particularly true in situations of conflict, where the heightened suspicion of international actors, and their increased distance from the people they serve as a result of enhanced security procedures, seems to be making the situation with regards to accountability worse. As noted above, it could also be partly a result of divergent opinions and views on what accountability is, and what attempts to improve it are meant to achieve.

Lack of change in relation to accountability may also be a result of inertia – of actors' failure to devote time and energy to the very significant changes to funding and design processes that would be required, given these actors' multiple other activities. For example, donors would have to make funding more flexible (Steets et al., 2016) and agencies would need to be more adaptable in their programming: changing programme models and potentially providing goods and services that they may not be geared or skilled to provide. They would also have to be open to designing different approaches to accountability in different situations, to take account of local social contexts. 'The obstacles...are real and significant, and in some ways growing with the corporatisation of many humanitarian organisations' (Donini and Brown, 2014: 52).

These practical operational obstacles make change difficult. However, observers have also suggested that, for many humanitarians, and despite the rhetoric, the problem might be that accountability is not, in fact, desirable. 'From a perspective of self-interest, [humanitarian actors]...stand to lose' from increased accountability (Steets et al., 2016: viii). This provides a motivation, at the very least, not to engage fully with change activities, or even deliberately to block changes that are underway.

Resistance to change may also be less a matter of cool calculation, and more a question of attitudes: 'the personal behaviour, cultural baggage, [and] management style' of humanitarian workers (Donini and Brown, 2014: 55); unconscious assumptions of superiority inherited from a colonial past, and bolstered by a sense of professional expertise.

Lack of change in the area of accountability poses real questions about change. How much change is possible? Why does change fail to happen even when key stakeholders say they want it to? What are the best ways to address these constraints and support change? It is tempting to resort to fairly simple explanations that suggest fairly simple solutions for change. Such explanations undoubtedly contain a good degree of truth, but the solutions seldom seem to be put into practice, or when they are they do not seem to work – so it may be time to reassess at least some assumptions about how change happens.

# CREATING – AND UNDERSTANDING – CHANGE IN THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

The Transformative Agenda process<sup>5</sup> and, to a degree, a number of the institutional attempts to increase accountability demonstrate the ‘standard’, policy-led model to bringing about change in the humanitarian system. A problem is identified and policies are developed at headquarters – based on varying degrees of evidence – to address it. These policies are often supported by guidance on how to operationalise them at various levels of the organisation. The ‘hard’ and visible aspects of the organisation – structures and procedures – are changed, and the changes are ‘rolled out’, often through training activities that aim to communicate the change and to make people aware of, and able to follow, the new procedures.

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This type of change process has its strengths: the structures and procedures of an organisation obviously do have an effect on the way that it behaves and the results it achieves. It is also readily understood, in that it turns the process of change into a project (similar to those which many humanitarians implement) with defined activities and outputs, which are expected to lead to ‘outcomes’: changes in the way that individuals and the organisation as a whole work. As such, it offers the promise of clarity and control in situations which often feel overwhelming or ‘out of control’ and allows oversight and financial accountability (Scott-Villiers, 2002).

The approach (which also underpins much ‘change management’ in the public and private sectors) is linear and rational. It assumes that the future can be broadly predicted, largely because people will react in a rational way or – if they do not – they will allow their actions to be controlled by people higher up in the hierarchy. Essentially – as Gareth Morgan points out in his seminal book *Images of Organization* (2006)<sup>6</sup> – this approach works on the

5 ‘As a headquarters-led, inter-agency change process, the Transformative Agenda had a tendency to solve problems by creating guidance, processes and structures’ (Kreuger et al., 2016; 36). But it is also worth noting that it did attempt to improve on the standard change process by incorporating ‘an approach to guidance dissemination that is softer and more people-centered’ (Kreuger et al., 2016; 37).

6 This paper owes a great debt to Morgan’s *Images of Organization*, both in terms of its underlying concept – that mental models are instrumental in the design and success of change processes – and in how this section is structured.

assumption that an organisation is a bit like a machine: with inputs and outputs, levers for change, and the possibility of being 're-engineered' (see also Handy, 1993; Olson and Eoyang, 2001). Since it sees the organisation as a machine, and assumes that it can be changed in the way a machine can be changed, it 'works well only under conditions where machines work well: when there is a straightforward task to perform [and] when the environment is stable' (Morgan, 2006: 27).

These conditions do not apply in the humanitarian sector, and time and again humanitarian organisations have found that they 'cannot simply communicate directives to change policy or practice and expect them to be implemented' (Sandison, 2007:133). Staff attitudes and values also have a strong influence on how the organisation's policies and guidelines are followed and put into practice. As a result 'all organisations struggle to bridge the perennial policy–practice gap' (Gostelow et al., 2010: 10).

It seems that other, less mechanical, ways of thinking about organisations, and of supporting change, are needed.

### **The humanitarian system today – models of competition**

Morgan's insight in *Images of Organization* is that the way we think about organisations influences the way that we try to change them. So if we think of the organisation as a machine, we try to change it in the way we would repair a machine. If, however, we think of an organisation as a community, we will be more likely to use approaches designed for social change; or if we think of it as a person, we might try to change its behaviour by 'changing its mind'. Of course, the organisation is none of these things, but 'the metaphor may create valuable insights' if used as a conscious tool (Morgan, 2006: 5). At the same time, because these metaphors are incomplete, and only highlight certain elements of an organisation, their unconscious use can create distortions and misperceptions, and 'the way of seeing through metaphor becomes a way of not seeing'. In the following section we examine some other metaphors for the humanitarian system, and consider how these might influence our approach to change.

### **The market model**

In a system as diverse as the humanitarian sector, it is quite possible for different models, or elements of different models, to exist at same time. Indeed, we tend to hold a variety of different metaphors in our minds at any one time. And so, while the 'machine metaphor' underpins much of the thinking about organisational change, there are other models which are also fairly common in the sector, and which are used to explain why change does (or doesn't) occur.


One such metaphor is that of the market. The idea here is that humanitarian organisations compete with one another, and with other actors such as the private sector, for 'market share'. Change operates as a process of 'creative destruction' whereby the organisations that can provide and 'sell' the most effective goods and services prosper and grow, while those which do not become obsolete, lose customers, and die.



# THERE ARE DIFFERENT MODELS

FOR UNDERSTANDING  
HUMANITARIAN  
IT AS A MARKET, AS  
ECOSYSTEM, AS A  
A POLITICAL

CHANGE IN THE  
SYSTEM: TO SEE  
A SOCIETY, AS AN  
MIND OR THROUGH  
ECONOMY ANGLE.



The model is often referred to, explicitly or implicitly, in discussions of the humanitarian system and change. International humanitarian organisations are compared to multinational corporations (Kent et al., 2013) and enterprises (Kent, n.d.). Changes are seen in terms of ‘market share’ (Steets et al., 2016), and the perceived inability of established humanitarian organisations to change leads to forecasts of failure: that these organisations will be rendered obsolete by new actors, better suited to the demands of the humanitarian market in the 21st century.

It is a powerful metaphor, not least because many people in leadership positions subscribe to it. International organisations plan for growth (Jayawickrama and Pan, 2010), see each other as competitors, and look for comparative advantage: there is ‘a preoccupation with growth, competition and market share’ (Bennet, 2016: 57). It is also a very useful metaphor. It clarifies that the humanitarian ‘system’ is not a single, centralised hierarchy, but is composed of a large number of relatively autonomous actors. By emphasising the possibility of organisational collapse, it provides a strong emotional impetus for organisational change. It supports innovation (which the model often sees as a tool used by market actors to increase their market share) and is the basis for ideas like the H2H (humanitarian to humanitarian organisations group) of ‘humanitarian entrepreneurs’ and the Ground Truth approach to obtaining feedback from affected people. Critically, where people affected by crisis are seen as the customers, the market metaphor emphasises their importance in making decisions regarding humanitarian action.

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Whether markets do in fact change according to the principle of creative destruction is, however, open to doubt. Articles documenting companies’ ever-decreasing ‘life expectancy’, often used as evidence for the idea, are generally referring to the length of time that companies spend in specific stock-market indices – the FTSE 100 or the Fortune 500 – rather than their entire lifetime. Many companies leave these indices because their sector, as a whole, becomes less profitable than other sectors, or, conversely, because they become the subjects of mergers and acquisitions, which may well suggest that they are actually successful in the market (Daepf et al., 2015). Moreover, the relatively weak evidence for creative destruction is also culturally specific. Markets do not all work in the same way: European and Japanese firms, for example, tend to ‘live’ for longer – often much longer – than firms in the USA, in markets that appear far more stable than a model based on ‘growth or death’ would suggest. Interestingly, even where one might expect to see creative destruction in action, it can be strangely absent. For instance, the fiercely competitive grocery sector in the UK is largely dominated by six firms that have been trading for over a century, and these established companies appear to be becoming more successful. In 2014 they had 66% of market share – up from 55% in 2000.<sup>7</sup> To the degree that change is occurring through creative destruction, it is almost exclusively among smaller companies (and again, they are generally bought up, rather than going into liquidation).

7 If Asda (founded 1949) is included, the relative figures are 83% and 69% of market share respectively. The increase in market share of the big supermarkets over the period 2000–2015 appears to be largely a result of acquisitions of smaller chains. Information from Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_supermarket\\_chains\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_supermarket_chains_in_the_United_Kingdom)

In short, it appears that markets do not necessarily change – or change as dramatically – as the ‘market model’ of change driven by competition would suggest. So should we expect market-led competition to drive change in the humanitarian sector?

To date, ideas of competition may have changed the assumptions and behaviour of humanitarian actors (as outlined above) but they do not seem to have led to much structural change. The ‘big beasts’ of the sector – large intergovernmental agencies and international NGOs – have not succumbed to smaller or more agile organisations, or become extinct (as has happened in some other sectors) as a result of a meteorite of information technology. In fact, the proportion of formal humanitarian funding that goes to ‘non-traditional’ actors seems to have fallen over the last decade (Kellet, 2010; Lattimer, 2016; Swithern, 2014, 2015), which suggests that ‘customers’ are not transferring their loyalty even to organisations that might better meet their needs.

Whether they will do so in the future, depends, of course, on who are the customers in this metaphor. If they are the people affected by crisis, then significant, ‘market-driven’ change seems unlikely to happen in the many (predominantly conflict-affected) situations where there are very few actors able or willing to provide basic services. It also seems unlikely to happen while humanitarian coordination systems are designed to improve efficiency by reducing competition. And finally, of course, it will probably not happen unless affected people are seen as ‘customers’, rather than as ‘beneficiaries’, and their views prioritised in designing programmes. And this, in turn, is unlikely to happen while these ‘customers’ lack the resources to purchase goods and services (although the move to cash aid should provide resources to people in some circumstances). If, on the other hand, donors are the ‘customers’, additional constraints apply: donors have limited objective information on the performance of many agencies on which to base choices, and the nature of humanitarian activity also makes it difficult to issue ‘bottom line’ statements that would permit a comparative judgement between different providers (Ramalingam et al., 2009). At present, many donors can only fund organisations based in their own country. Given the importance of popular opinion regarding humanitarian aid, they are also likely to be conservative and risk-averse in their funding choices.

So, although representing an important corrective to the machine metaphor, the market metaphor is also imperfect. The humanitarian system is not organised as a market – indeed, in many respects it is organised to reduce competitive, market-oriented behaviour. Change has not taken place as it might be expected to do in a market – although it is debateable whether the creative destruction model works even there. And there seem to be major structural barriers to the system working like a market, and so changing in the same way, at least in the near future.

## The political economy model

The fact that humanitarian organisations do not rely for their funding on the people they aim to assist, but rather on donors (mainly rich-world governments, but also individuals, trusts and corporations), brings us to a second model of how the humanitarian system is structured, and – by extension – how it changes.

From this perspective, the humanitarian system is seen as a large number of organisations, all of which are actively pursuing their organisational interests. While these interests are often not defined in the literature, the analysis generally focuses on an interest in increasing the organisation's power, and, as a corollary, increasing its income. The fulfilment of stated humanitarian objectives is not considered as an interest here: the focus is on less legitimate, more self-serving interests (what Morgan would describe as 'career interests', rather than the more legitimate 'task interests').

In contrast to the market model, the political economy model often groups organisations according to their perceived common interests. Donors are seen to have one set of interests, and large international NGOs another.<sup>8</sup> More broadly, the humanitarian 'haves' are seen as having an interest in keeping their power away from the 'have nots'. Traditional donors, large international NGOs and UN agencies form a 'humanitarian club' (Barnett and Walker, 2015: 131); a 'highly centralised and exclusive group' (Bennet, 2016: 58). In this model, much of the lack of change exhibited by the humanitarian system can be explained by the desire of these established actors to retain as much power as possible, and to prevent new competition. So the lack of progress on protection can be seen as a result of 'vested interests and seemingly intractable institutional agendas and preoccupations (Niland et al., 2015:10); lack of movement in early-response programming is, at least in part, because a move away from food-aid programmes would lead to a loss of income for many agencies (Jaspars, 2006); and donors resist activities which 'result in their control over field level activities being significantly reduced' (Jayawickrama and Pan, 2010: 8).

The model is useful, in that it makes explicit the tension between organisations' stated aims and their desire for self-preservation, growth and power. This focus on power is particularly helpful, as (unlike the market model) it emphasises the inequalities of power within the humanitarian system: particularly inequalities between donors and implementers, between large and small organisations, and between organisations headquartered in the 'global North', and those in the 'global South'. By focussing on interests – albeit a rather narrow band of interests – the model also contains a formula for change: organisations will be prepared to lose power or money in some areas, as long as they gain it in others. This logic – and the political economy model as a whole – underlines the 'Grand Bargain', as well as proposals for reform such as 'creating financial incentives for humanitarian organisations to take accountability to affected populations seriously – for example, by linking funding decisions to beneficiary satisfaction' (Steets et al., 2016: 43).

8 The best example of this approach is probably (Steets et al., 2016).



Again, the model probably reflects many truths but obscures some others. It is based on certain working assumptions which are probably not entirely true: that people are rational actors, and will consistently make decisions (on the basis of good information) to preserve their interests; that these interests are clear and relatively undifferentiated; that interests are common across organisations; and that the strategies that organisations create to guard their interests invariably work out as planned.

Any review of change in the organisational sector would, however, suggest that these assumptions do not always hold. The outlines of the TA process and attempts to improve accountability in the system suggest that, while interests certainly do play a role, there is more to the process of change in the sector than agencies competing for power.

# SOME ALTERNATIVE MODELS FOR UNDERSTANDING CHANGE IN THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

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## **The system as a society**

One alternative way of thinking about the humanitarian system – and for thinking about how it might change – is to imagine the system as a society, complete with politics and with culture. This approach can help us to build on our understanding from the models currently in use, and also to consider elements of change that we might otherwise overlook.

## **The importance of politics**

If we imagine the humanitarian system as a society, we have to see it as containing politics. All societies are political. Whereas politics is anathema to the rational, mechanical model of the world, and appears as an unfortunate but necessary element of organisational life in the political economy model, an approach that sees the humanitarian system as a society not only recognises but also welcomes the centrality of politics. Politics is not ‘a dysfunctional force that can be attributed to some regrettable set of circumstances or causes’ (Morgan, 2006: 163), but ‘an essential part of organizational life...not...an optional and dysfunctional extra’ (ibid.:150). It is the method by which tensions and conflicts are resolved, ideas are tested and change comes about. As Duncan Green notes, power can be used to do bad, but it is also a requirement for doing good (Green, 2016). Change in the humanitarian system, as in any system, occurs ‘through a process that is inherently political’ (Jayawickrama and Pan, 2010: 4).

So if we aim to support change, we should look more closely at how politics happens in the societies we know best. As recent experience has shown, political outcomes are often unexpected, and hard to predict through a simple mapping of interests. There are various reasons for this. First, ‘interest groups’ are generally much less monolithic than they

might at first appear: ‘the monoliths of “the state” or “big business” or “the international system” are actually turbulent networks full of potential allies as well as opponents’ (Green, 2016: 243). Donors do not share identical interests, and neither do international NGOs or national civil society organisations (CSOs) – or even the different departments of one organisation. As a result, there are more possibilities for change in the system than a simple analysis of interests might suggest. Second, any individual or organisation will tend to have multiple interests at the same time. Studies of organisational change in the humanitarian sector have shown that, while these interests include the maintenance and growth of power, they also include a broad range of other concerns: changes often come about when these other concerns are understood to be more important than power (Jayawickrama and Pan, 2010; Kent, n.d.). Third, power is held in many different ways in the system. Money and control of resources are certainly important, but in the humanitarian world, as in the broader political world, so are control of knowledge and information, use of networks and relationships, alignment with broadly held ideologies and proximity to a situation and ability to act. The ability to make changes will depend on the relative importance of these variables in any given context, and on how these sources of power are used.

In short, considering political processes shows us that multiple stakeholders, all with a variety of interests to fulfil, will attempt to exploit many different types of power to create or prevent change. This is a far more ‘fluid’ process than the political economy model would lead us to expect. It is also a more hopeful one for anyone involved in change. If interests are not unitary, fixed and monolithic, if they do not guide behaviour in pre-determined and predictable ways, then there is far more opportunity for the individual or the group to influence change.

### **The role of culture**

Politics is not the only element of a society which has a great effect on change: so too does culture. The importance of changing culture (or sometimes changing ‘mindsets’) is broadly acknowledged in the humanitarian literature. Recognising that procedural changes have not brought about the level of change they had hoped for, humanitarians have called for a ‘culture shift’ around the Transformative Agenda and the Human Rights Up Front (HRUF) initiative (Dyukova and Chetcuti, 2014; Kreuger et al., 2016; Niland et al., 2015). Organisational culture is seen as central to innovation (Obrecht and Warner, 2016) and to accountability, and it is the sector’s culture that ‘create[s] compelling reasons to remain closed and centralised and averse to innovation, learning and transformation’ (Bennet, 2016: 5).

But while we recognise that culture is important, and can stimulate, or more often delay, change, humanitarians seem less certain about what culture actually is, and how it might be addressed. In this we are not alone. Social anthropologists, who dedicate much of their time to studying culture, disagree profoundly on what it is, why it exists, and how it is created and changed. For some, a culture is a set of social structures and phenomena that meet the needs of individuals in the society, or which address social tensions, and

so allow the society to maintain equilibrium. Others see culture as a way of ensuring that members of a society internalise and reproduce its power inequalities, or as expressions of common, basic human thought processes that find different forms in different places, or as a means of basic social communications that allows people from the same group to predict and understand how others will behave, without necessarily sharing objectives or values. These differing understandings of culture imply different relations between culture and individual action and so, critically, differing levels of ability for an individual to 'change' the culture. Is the culture hard-wired into their brain, and so directing their actions, or is it more something that they interact with, which determines them, but which they also determine?

Organisational theorists have tended to be even more diverse and less helpful in their understandings of what culture is, and how it changes. The most commonly used approach to culture in organisations is that of Edgar Schein, who says that culture is the 'taken for granted, underlying, and usually unconscious assumptions that determine perceptions, thought processes, feelings and behaviour (Schein, 2000:129). It is a learned response to 'major internal and external tasks that all groups face' (ibid.) outlining key issues such as the relationship of the group to the environment; the nature of human relationships – who people are, and how they should relate to one another – and the nature of correct or useful activity. Some of the key points here, which are shared by many organisational theorists, are that culture is not conscious, or even visible to the people who are part of it: rather it is 'taken for granted' or 'the norm'. It is relatively holistic – the different elements of the culture, the beliefs, rituals and so on, cover most situations and mutually support each other in a system of meaning. And it generally determines behaviour. While Schein sees culture as 'an ongoing, proactive process of reality construction (Schein, 2000: 137), much of this reality is 'set' early on in an organisation's history. Later changes are more likely to occur if they are modelled by those with the most influence in the organisation, or at times of trauma for the organisation.

If we are going to engage in or with change, we need to consider culture. This is particularly true if we are interested in deep change within an existing system (it is much less important if the change is more superficial, or involves replacing the whole system or organisation with another one). This is frustrating in many ways. Just as in society as a whole, we know culture is there, but may find it difficult to identify or explain; we know that culture evolves, but not how it changes: 'Current available evidence does not identify any effective, generalisable strategies to change organisational culture' (Parmelli et al., 2011: 1). So perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn from seeing the system from the perspective of culture is that it is likely to be difficult to change. The model is useful in other ways, too. It reminds us that organisations are not just collections of individuals – they are social spaces, and any change has a strong social dimension. It also, importantly, reminds us that social groups are not entirely rational – that just as rational, neoclassical economics finds it difficult to explain behaviour at cultural festivals, such as Christmas or Eid, so too might a rational approach to change have difficulty explaining why people support, or resist, things which do not seem related to their interests.



## The system as an 'ecosystem'

It has recently become increasingly common to refer to the humanitarian 'ecosystem' (e.g. Various, 2016). In some ways, this is confusing: ecosystems are generally defined as being biological communities of organisms interacting with each other and with their environment, rather than social communities or organisations. But as a metaphor, the idea of an ecosystem makes sense, because it is an example of a very specific type of system – the 'complex adaptive system'.

Not all systems are the same. Some are fairly simple, composed of a small number of elements doing predetermined tasks. It is fairly easy, even without training, to understand how they work. Some are complicated, with many elements, with multiple relationships, working in predetermined ways. An aeroplane is a good example of a complicated system: there are a huge number of parts working on a very large number of sophisticated operations. To the untrained observer, it is almost impossible to see how this works. With enough expertise, however, it is possible to fully understand all the relationships in the system, and to predict with 100% accuracy how any particular part will work in any particular situation, because despite the complexity, the parts can only do what they are designed to do. When people use 'machine models' of change, they tend to assume that organisations or the humanitarian system work like an aeroplane, as a complicated system.

But, as we have seen, they don't. Events and activities in the humanitarian system do not follow predetermined routines or programmes. This is because the humanitarian system, like an ecosystem, is not just complicated – it is complex. Ecosystems and the humanitarian system are two different types of complex adaptive system.

What does this mean? Like animals in an ecosystem, but unlike fuses in an aeroplane, the elements that make up the humanitarian system have a certain amount of freedom to act, and use this freedom to adapt their behaviour depending on the actions of other organisations. Because all of the elements are acting and reacting all the time, this leads to complicated webs of action, response and new action reaching across the whole system. One consequence of this is that it is impossible to predict how the system as a whole will behave in the future: how a forest will grow and change in response to the introduction of a new organism, or how the humanitarian system will respond to a new initiative. Complex adaptive systems are 'non-linear' and unpredictable.

A second crucial element of complex adaptive systems is that they are self-organising. Through the sequences of action and response (known in the literature as 'feedback') the elements that make up the system will tend to organise themselves into a situation of equilibrium. Ben Ramalingam, whose book *Aid on the Edge of Chaos* (Ramalingam, 2013) provides a fascinating review of the workings of complexity in the aid industry, explains that this feedback can be 'amplifying or dampening, slow or fast, predictable or unpredictable (Ramalingam, 2013:157). In general, the feedback will tend to dampen down change and move the system back to equilibrium. But it can also push the whole

thing out of equilibrium, to a tipping point, when relatively small changes lead to a complete resetting of the system into a very different shape.<sup>9</sup> Which explains the third thing that it is helpful to understand about complex adaptive systems: ‘Change...occurs in slow steady processes such as demographic shifts and in sudden, unforeseeable jumps. Nothing seems to change until suddenly it does’ (Green, 2016:16).

The metaphor of the ecosystem, then, implies that change is non-linear and unpredictable; that the system will tend to return to a steady state; but that radical, sudden change is possible. In terms of change, it suggests that a planned, linear approach is unlikely to work: instead we should be aware of what is happening in the system at any given point, and be prepared to act or adapt to support change as the context changes. It also usefully reminds us that the elements of a system all relate to each other, and so change in one area will affect, and be affected by, what is happening in other areas. Finally, the metaphor helps us to understand that in working with the humanitarian system, we are dealing with a dynamic, living process, and not a static object. The system is constantly changing without our intervention, and our efforts to change it will be more like joining a football game than sitting down to fix a broken clock.

### The system as a mind

Another metaphor for systems is that of the human mind, which is widely used among organisational thinkers, and has had a profound impact on how organisational and systemic change are understood. Just as the culture metaphor draws on anthropology, the mind metaphor uses psychology to better understand how human beings – and by extension human systems – change their minds.

A number of different theories and approaches grounded in psychology have been used to try to understand these changes. Some of the better known include Kubler Ross’ ‘five stages of grief’ model (Kubler-Ross, 1969), Argyris and Schön’s single and double-loop learning model (Argyris and Schön, 1974), and, to a degree, the ‘nudge’ model that has recently gained popularity in UK and US politics.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most influential approach to individual and organisational change, however, has drawn on Gestalt psychology, which addresses the relationship between the world and our perception of it. Broadly, the approach suggests that human beings do not perceive the whole reality of which they are a part (‘the ground’) but unconsciously select certain elements to create a ‘figure’: an internally consistent representation of reality that is not, in fact, the sum of the elements which initially created it, but which is experienced as the whole. These figures are extremely durable, but can be changed by a process whereby the individual becomes aware of inconsistencies, and then directs energy to breaking down the existing figure and creating a new one. Because ‘human action is a self-regulating system that deals with an unstable state in such a way as to produce

9 A ‘phase transition’ occurring at ‘the edge of chaos’ for those interested in the terminology.

10 ‘To a degree’ because while nudge theory has some psychological influences, it derives mainly from behavioural economics, and has been criticised by some psychologists for taking too little account of psychological processes.

a state of stability' (Nevis, 2005: 18); the mind will generally resist this process, as it aims to maintain the stability of the existing figure. Resistance to change, then, should not be seen as a conscious process to subvert it, but rather as a normal and healthy process that enables the individual (or organisation) to retain stability and purpose in a chaotic world.

Moreover, resistance takes various forms which aim to deflect attention and energy from the destruction of the current state, and which may not, at first, appear as resistance at all. These include: projection, where we disown aspects of ourselves and our ownership of a situation ('we can't do it because the donors won't support it'; 'the problem is the system: it doesn't want to change'); deflection, where we relate to a problem in ways which move the energy away from really changing the situation (by creating guidelines or lists of recommendations, for example, which provide the appearance of 'doing something' while not fundamentally engaging with underlying issues); confluence, where we avoid using energy in conflict and disagreement, and settle instead for superficial agreement (failing to agree on precise definitions of concepts such as accountability, but instead using broad definitions which hide challenges and tensions; and introjection, where we swallow ideas uncritically, without paying real attention to them ('yes, that sounds like a good idea, we should sign up to that').

Considering the system as a mind opens us to a fuller and potentially useful understanding of resistance to change. The model suggests that there can be no real change without resistance, and that this resistance is a natural element of any healthy system. It also, crucially, redefines resistance as processes that divert energy away from the need to change, and the processes that are involved in change. From this perspective, a broad range of activities, including many we often think of as contributing to change, can be seen as unconscious attempts to prevent change from happening.

# WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THE MODELS?

None of the models outlined in this paper is a perfect description of the reality of change: as noted above, all of them are partial, and emphasise certain elements while hiding others. So, despite the promises of any number of 'how to' books outlining change-management processes, it is unlikely that any single descriptive model, let alone any single design for change, will ever work in all circumstances: 'No two change processes need look the same. In fact this is an impossibility – no technique ever materializes in the same way twice' (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1998: 10). Taken together, however, the models may provide some insights on how change can occur – or be prevented – in the humanitarian system. In particular, the additional models presented here – society, mind, ecosystem – help to explain some of the elements that have been observed in humanitarian change processes, and which are not highlighted by the models currently in use. In this section, we outline some of the main insights arising from these alternative models of organisations and organisational change.

## **We have much less control over change than we think**

Perhaps the key idea from the various models is that organisations tend not to work like machines, and we have much less control over organisations than we do over machines. Interactions and feedback between the various parts of an organisation, or of a system, will lead to unanticipated changes; interests will change as alliances shift; people will act in unexpected ways as a result of cultural and psychological processes.

This means that 'classical' approaches to planning will not necessarily be effective in change programmes. Plans that 'should' work will be blocked, become irrelevant in the face of changing circumstances, or will produce unexpected outcomes. As Duncan Green writes: 'One of the main lessons I drew from researching ten case studies... is the importance of unpredictable events and accidents' (Green, 2016:239). Ben Ramalingam



gives a number of illuminating examples of unexpected outcomes in *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*, and several authors have noted that the (unplanned) effects of the TA process include increased donor control and far more time spent on bureaucratic procedures (Barnett and Walker, 2015; Kreuger et al., 2016).<sup>11</sup>

If our usual project planning approaches don't work, what then? There is no single or simple answer, but the following approaches seem to offer some solutions.

### **a. Collect – and act on – information as you go along**

The impossibility of knowing in advance how a system will develop and change means that it is risky and impractical to base any plans on projections of the future. But this is precisely what we do in the humanitarian system. Information is generally collected 'up front', in one-off assessments. Far less attention is given to collecting information about situations as they unfold (Global Clusters, 2015; Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015; Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014). Unfortunately, however good the assessment, it can quickly become obsolete. A better alternative (or complement) to the one-off assessment is an approach which 'interweaves thought and action, learning and adapting as we go' (Green, 2016:7). This adaptive approach to programming – whether humanitarian or change programmes – is difficult. It requires good monitoring of the situation and, even more importantly, the ability to change activities on the basis of this information. But the benefits are clear. In the development sphere, the Doing Development Differently (DDD) movement has championed this type of 'adaptive programming' (Valters et al., 2016), and can point to success in programmes such as SAVI (Booth and Chambers, 2014). In the humanitarian world, the idea of adaption based on regularly updated information has been shown to be a core element of success in a number of innovation programmes (Obrecht and Warner, 2016). Practitioners of innovation tend to start with the expectation that the final result will differ from the original plan, and the growing field of humanitarian innovation offers a number of lessons on how to adapt and change an idea to address unexpected challenges and opportunities.

### **b. Provide as much certainty as possible (which generally isn't much)**

ALNAP's research on humanitarian innovation certainly does not suggest that 'anything goes' and that everything in a change process can be made up as you go along. Rather, in the most successful processes, 'there was a broad but clear plan for the innovation process that struck a balance between structure and flexibility' (Obrecht and Warner, 2016:42).

Three areas of structure seem to be particularly important. The first is the vision or objective of the change process: what is change for? Clarity of vision seems to have contributed to successful change in humanitarian organisations, while on the other hand, less successful programmes have often been unclear about the benefits the change will bring, concentrating on the desired change, or on processes to reach it, rather than on results (Kreuger et al., 2016; Street, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> The emergence of unexpected results is not restricted to the humanitarian world: healthcare reform has led to 'seriously dysfunctional, as well as functional consequences' (Scott, 2003:117).

WE HAVE MUCH LESS

CONTROL

OVER CHANGE  
THAN WE THINK.

The second is clarifying roles – who is meant to do what? The importance of clarity of roles in complex environments has been seen both in humanitarian programmes (Knox Clarke, 2014) and in innovation programmes in humanitarian organisations (Obrecht and Warner, 2016). Again, where roles are not clear, change programmes seem to be less successful (Gostelow et al., 2010; Kreuger et al., 2016; Niland et al., 2015). This does not mean that roles should be fixed – they will often change over the life of a programme. What matters is that they are clear.

The final area of qualified certainty lies in establishing outline procedures that are broad enough to encompass a variety of circumstances, but specific enough to be useful. Eisenhardt and Sull (2001) have championed the idea of ‘simple rules’, ‘straightforward, hard and fast rules which define direction without confining it’ (Eisenhardt and Sull, 2001:1). They suggest that organisations which work in complex, adaptive systems will benefit from making basic rules about when to stop and start activities, and the types of activities they will, and will not, perform. Without the benefit of *Harvard Business Review* articles, many effective humanitarian programmes working in difficult and unpredictable conflicts have developed simple rules for themselves (Knox Clarke, 2014), as have development activists (Green, 2016). The fact that these rules are often tacit and unwritten does not make them any less effective.

### **c. Use networks and decentralised approaches**

There is a strong affinity between detailed, ‘classical’ planning approaches and centralisation. Detailed plans (and guidelines) and centralised and hierarchical organisations work well in situations which are relatively stable and predictable (Quarantelli, 1988). But in rapidly changing or unpredictable situations there are real advantages to using a more decentralised and networked approach. Networks bring multiple points of view of the situation, enabling it to be better understood. They will tend to include elements that are closer to the situation, and so able to respond to changes more rapidly. And they will often create multiple responses to a situation, some of which will fail, and some of which will be successful, and can be expanded.

So it is no surprise that successful organisational change programmes in the humanitarian world often seem to be built around cross-functional teams with strong field presence, who can create networks across the organisation (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008). Similarly, successful innovations involve multiple actors, arranged in networks that often change as the innovation process unfolds (Obrecht and Warner, 2016).

### **d. Rethink the role of leadership**

Decentralised approaches do not make leadership unimportant. The support of people in leadership positions has made a significant contribution to the success of a number of change initiatives in the humanitarian sector (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008; Kreuger et al., 2016), while a lack of leadership support appears to have held other changes back

(Niland et al., 2015). The role of leadership is also seen as important in change efforts in other sectors (Kotter, 1996; Parmelli et al., 2011; Scott, 2003).

At the same time, successful leadership of change is not about designing the process and ensuring that it is followed. Rather, it is about continually drawing attention to the importance of change, and ensuring that the necessary resources and support are available (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008). Perhaps more importantly, it is about modelling the change in leaders' own behaviour: what leaders do is generally far more influential than what they say (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008; Ogbonna, 1993). The leadership task in a successful change process is also about a (measured) loss of control: being open to ambiguity, doubt and conflict, and allowing space for these natural companions of any change process to be expressed; and being open to giving away power. As John Kotter observes, 'the solution to the change problem is not one larger than life individual... may people need to help with the leadership task' (Kotter, 1996:30).

Where there is a need for deep changes to the culture of an organisation or system, it may be necessary for leaders to relinquish power entirely, and leave the organisation. Schein suggests that the leadership of an organisation, and particularly its early leaders, have a significant role in creating and projecting the organisation's culture. As a result, sometimes the best way to model change is to leave (Ogbonna, 1993; Schein, 2000). It is no surprise that a number of successful change programmes in the humanitarian sector have been accompanied by changes in the organisation's senior management (Jayawickrama and Pan, 2010; Kent, n.d.; Scott-Villiers, 2002).

## **We need to be aware of the size, shape and composition of the thing we are 'changing'**

The alternative models presented here also suggest that we need to challenge simple assumptions about what an organisation, or a system, is and how it works. Models from complexity and politics underline that the system is made up of many different parts, all of which are interacting with each other. The relationships between these parts can be as important as the parts themselves, and the interactions mean that every human system is dynamic: always in motion, always changing, and not sitting, inert, waiting for us to 'change' it. Models that consider culture and psychology remind us that systems have many levels, and that the behaviour that we see 'on the surface' may be influenced by deeper patterns of meaning. Few of these relationships – between parts, between levels, between the 'inside' and the 'outside' – can be modelled in advance. But we can try to incorporate these realities of living systems into our thinking about change.

### **a. Be careful of 'projects'**

Many change initiatives are designed as projects, with a discrete budget, set of objectives and indicators, and management team. This approach has its attractions: it can draw attention to the desired change, ensure allocation of resources, and allow for measurement and accountability. But it also has one very important drawback, particularly when the

project aims to make deeper changes. By structuring the change in the same way as any other organisational process, the different, disruptive nature of the change is lost, and the change can actually reinforce the status quo. As Pascale (quoted in Crainer, 1996) puts it: ‘organizations that churn through a succession of doings...without altering their underlying being often end up older... but rarely wiser. Transformation entails a shift in being’ (Crainer, 1996). The SCHR peer review on accountability came to a similar conclusion: accountability is about changing the way that an organisation works, not just about making changes within existing ways of working.

### **b. Look for the links**

While it will not be possible to model in advance all of the linkages and relationships that will affect how any change progresses, it is important to recognise that these links exist, and will have a strong effect on the process. It can be useful to anticipate how structures, procedures, relationships and skills might affect systemic or organisational behaviour, and how changes in one area might support or impede changes elsewhere. In one change initiative, significant advances in accountability were achieved by making the link between financial processes and field activities. ‘The chief financial officer joined teams which sat with community organisations to review and reflect together. As he did this, he and his colleagues realised some of the problems their systems were causing’ (Scott-Villiers, 2002:433). It is useful to be alert to these links as they become visible, and be prepared to change the scope of work to include these areas as they emerge.

### **c. Consider dynamics**

The interviews conducted for this paper brought home the fact that, while the desired changes do not always happen, the system is always changing, often in major and important ways. No human system or organisation is a piece of clay, waiting to be shaped. It is more like a sports match in which we can participate, and attempt to influence the result.

This means that we may be far more successful in supporting changes that are already happening than in introducing completely new ideas. And if we look carefully, we will often find that change is underway somewhere in the system. From this perspective, we should try to ‘identify the spaces where change is already happening and try to encourage and nurture them’ (Ramalingam, 2013).

When we look at change programmes that appear to have had some success in the humanitarian system, we can see this approach in action. The introduction of clusters was easier where ‘proto clusters’ or cluster-like bodies already existed (Street, 2009). While in one organisational change programme ‘staff as far apart as Orissa and Rio de Janeiro said ALPS was asking them to do what they were already doing: “At last”, one said, “our organisation is catching up with us”’ (Scott-Villiers, 2002:432).



#### **d. Go ‘outside’**

The humanitarian system does not have a wall around it. As suggested earlier, there are multiple linkages and relationships between parts of the humanitarian system and other political, economic and social systems in the world ‘outside’ – and many of these links have become stronger over recent decades.

This means that many of the most important changes that occur in the humanitarian system will come from ‘outside’ the system: as we saw, experts interviewed for this paper tended to see the most significant changes in humanitarian action to have come from outside, or to have been adaptations or responses to changes taking place in the wider world.

It also means that the key constraints to changes planned ‘inside’ the system may lie ‘outside’ it: there are severe ‘limits of humanitarian protection when political solutions are lacking and UNSC decisions and credibility are constrained by geopolitical agendas’ (Niland et al., 2015:46); and improvements to the situation of IDPs requires, in the first place, national authorities to fulfil their responsibilities (Ferris, 2014). It is important to remember that the behaviour of humanitarian organisations, and the success of humanitarian change initiatives, will often depend on factors external to the system itself (Kent, n.d.). This is not to suggest that humanitarians are helpless in the face of the world ‘outside’. They can – and do – use external trends to draw attention to the need for change, or use new technologies to address existing problems. In these cases, humanitarians are adapting to external trends to support their own change objectives.

But the relationship between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ is not a one-way street. The humanitarian system is not solely subject to the world beyond. Humanitarian actors also shape the world around them. They ‘help to define shared international tasks (like development) and create and define categories of actor (like refugee)’ (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004). Advocacy activities can influence the perceptions and programmes of political actors, which in turn influence what is possible on the ground. Knowing this, actors seeking change in the system can use the media, or political networks, to enhance the possibility of achieving this change. In some cases, then, it might be necessary to use different tactics and approaches that catalyse change outside the system in order to make changes within it.

### **Change is about people**

The alternative models of organisation presented above are also useful in reminding us that organisations cannot change unless the people in them change their behaviour. They also show us that this behaviour can be influenced by multiple motivations and interests, rather than being purely a result of the pursuit of power or advantage.

#### **a. Think about emotion**

It has been observed on repeated occasions that changes in the humanitarian system often come about as a response to perceived threats, dangers, or feelings of failure: the

Human Rights Up Front initiative was largely a result of failings in Sri Lanka; while in the wake of the 1994 responses in the Great Lakes region, adverse media coverage (entailing reputational risks) mixed with guilt which ‘haunted many organisations and their staff for years to come’ (Buchanan-Smith et al., 2005:8) led to a number of reforms. Similarly, change in a number of other organisations has been catalysed by a combination of threat and remorse (Jayawickrama and Pan, 2010; Kent, n.d.; Scott-Villiers, 2002). It is important to recognise that the emotional drivers here are not exclusively ‘selfish’ – about gaining or retaining organisational advantage – but also relate to values held by humanitarian staff.

However, the emotional conditions that support change can also, paradoxically, lead to insecurity and an increased desire for stability and control: ‘Anxiety generates an impulse for more supervision, more information, and more hesitation’ (Scott-Villiers, 2002:434). To redirect this energy towards more positive change behaviours, there is value in actively seeking out concerns and disagreements, and discussing them with interest and respect. This is more than a matter of obtaining ‘buy-in’: it also allows changes to be informed by a broader range of experiences and knowledge.

## **b. Get social**

Perceptions...drive change in the system’ (Taylor, 2009:1037). Much of what passes for ‘reality’ in the humanitarian world (as in any social system) is actually a social construct – a shared picture created by the various actors engaged in a situation. For instance, in the period running up to independence, agencies in South Sudan adhered to ‘the widely-held conceptual narrative of a rapid transition to development’ (Poole and Primrose, 2010:1), while in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a commonly held ‘post-conflict narrative’ led to a situation where ‘the DRC Humanitarian Action Plan is now routinely underfunded yet humanitarian needs remain as high as ever’ (Darcy et al., 2013:10). This tendency of humanitarians to create and then follow existing mental models has been noted in a number of other situations (Darcy, 2009; Knox Clarke, 2013).

To the degree that reality is social, then changing that reality is also a social activity. ALNAP’s earlier work on change suggests that one of the key differences between system change activities that have ‘taken off’ (such as cash) and those that haven’t (such as early response) is the extent to which groups or communities of interest have formed around the topic (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008). Once again, those attempting to support innovation in humanitarian action have recognised the importance of this social aspect of change: ‘Many innovation processes start through collective recognition of problems or opportunities enabled by an informal interaction...Conferences, workshops, coffee shops and emergency response settings have all served as incubators for initial introductions and the sharing of ideas, frustrations and approaches that have eventually led to an innovation’ (Obrecht and Warner, 2016:55).



### **c. Over-communicate**

Because change relies, ultimately, on people's behaviour, it is important that people understand the reasons for change, the benefits the change will bring, and the scope and nature of the change process. This is particularly difficult in globally dispersed humanitarian organisations, and even more difficult in the atomised humanitarian system: critiques of the TA, for example, suggest that one of the main constraints to success has been a lack of information on what it was all about (Dyukova and Chetcuti, 2014; Street, 2009). At the same time, high levels of communication were seen as critical to the success of change efforts elsewhere in the system (Jayawickrama and Pan, 2010; Scott-Villiers, 2002). One rule seems to hold: however much the change is communicated, it should probably be communicated more.

### **d. Know what resistance really looks like**

We have seen above how an understanding of change grounded in Gestalt thinking helps to clarify the many, varied and subtle ways in which people resist change. Margaret Wheatley writes: 'Life always reacts to directives, it never obeys them' (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1998:6). From very early years, most of us will have tested and refined ways of avoiding things that we do not wish to do, and are probably so proficient in these avoidance techniques that we do not even think about them. Among the most effective approaches to avoiding change are several that work because they look very much like participation in the change process: agreeing (but without commitment or expectation of following through); energetically doing things without fundamentally changing how we do them; engaging in earnest and passionate debates, rather than acting on change. If we hope to support change, it can be useful to question our own actions – and those of others. How much of what we do around change is actually unconscious resistance?

## **Change is difficult: it takes a long time, and success is not guaranteed**

The final message from these models is that change is difficult: politics, cultures, ecosystems and minds change all the time, but it is not easy to make them change in the ways that one wants. As Olson and Eoyang remind us, 'the future is easier to imagine than create' (Olson and Eoyang, 2001:115). This is not, particularly, a humanitarian problem: across all sectors, the expert consensus seems to be that most change initiatives fail (Kotter, 1996; Maurer, 1996; Olson and Eoyang, 2001).

### **a. Check and align expectations**

Much of the frustration about change that is felt in humanitarian circles arises from the failure of change initiatives to meet expectations. As we have seen above, there are different views on how successful the TA has been, and many of those who are critical, while accepting that change has occurred, feel that 'the success of the Transformative Agenda is limited... it did not make as much progress as it could have' (Kreuger et al., 2016:48). Some observers – from within and outside the humanitarian sector – have



suggested that at least part of the problem here is that humanitarians often have unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved. This is, arguably, a natural result of what David Reiff (2002) sees as the utopian nature of humanitarianism. On the one hand, there is a strongly felt need to make the world better than it is. On the other is the fact that ‘the large and persistent performance gap in the humanitarian aid system appears practically inevitable’ (Taylor, 2009:1038 – see also Boin and T’Hart, n.d.). We need perfection. But while crises – and the response to crises – can be improved, they are probably not perfectable. As a result, humanitarians are ‘so conscious of the enormity of unmet needs that they fail to see the significant accomplishments which have taken place’ (Ferris, 2014:12).

Another challenge in terms of framing expectations is the idea that the system has to change completely in order for outcomes to radically improve. In fact, ‘[Change] Theory would suggest that if fundamental – or even significant – change is to occur...some characteristics of the organisation must not change’ (Goodstein and Burke, 2000:389). This is an interesting perspective. Localisation is a powerful idea, and would create massive change in terms of who provides aid. But does it mean that national organisations should completely replace international ones? And if it did, how significant would the changes be in terms of other dimensions of change? Would humanitarian operations occur in different places? Would different goods and services be provided? It is likely that there would be both significant changes and significant continuities. Similarly, a move to cash would imply massive change in what is provided, and how – but some sectors would probably not see major change (Steets et al., 2016), and many organisations would remain in powerful positions, albeit with a more normative than operational role.

None of this detracts from the fact that there are elements of humanitarian practice that are unacceptable. Lack of progress and change on key issues – such as accountability and early intervention – are shocking to many people. But the experience of practitioners who have attempted change in other complex systems should make us think a bit more consciously about our assumptions and expectations:<sup>12</sup> ‘vision statements that are disconnected from the current reality create a gap that is too large to cross’ (Olson and Eoyang, 2001:115).

## **b. Allow more time**

Change takes longer than the annual funding cycles by which much humanitarian life is measured. In ALNAP’s previous work on change, the processes studied had been on-going for periods of three to 15 years (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008). This seems to accord with

<sup>12</sup> It is sobering to compare the experience of the humanitarian sector with that of the health sector in relation to change (and in particular, the health sector’s experience of introducing evidence-based medical practice). First, the health sector has been much more successful in documenting change processes, and attempting to find effective approaches to change. Second, the sector appears far more sanguine about the degree to which change can be achieved, and the time that it takes (Aarons et al., 2011; Grol and Wensing, 2004; McCluskey and Cusick, 2002; Scott, 2003; Wallen et al., 2010).

the experience of other sectors (Kotter, 1996; Scott, 2003). When thinking about a change, and particularly when thinking about the resources required, it is important to bear these time frames in mind.

Change does not only occur over long time frames. It also takes a lot of time and energy away from other activities (Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2016) by creating additional work, and by directing energy into confusion and disagreement. It is important to think of the 'opportunity cost' of change – will the results be worth the disruption? – and to plan to ensure business continuity while the change is occurring.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

This paper has attempted to outline what we mean by change; to consider the sector's current capacity for change; to investigate mental models which might inform our understanding of change and point to 'what works' in making changes in the humanitarian system.

One key challenge in writing this paper is the very limited number of written descriptions of change processes in the humanitarian system. While we collectively expend vast amounts of time and expense on attempting to make changes, we appear, both in absolute terms and in relation to other sectors, to have spent very little time on trying to identify 'what works'.

We hope that the 31st ALNAP Meeting will go some way towards addressing this.



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