

Innovation and new ways of working across sectors

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Humanitarian actors will have to adapt to a changing world but it will not be easy or straightforward. Operations are changing as a result of innovations which bring many improvements but also throw up challenges.

There is real willingness and prioritisation within the humanitarian sector to invest in innovation in terms of developing new methods and approaches. One example is cash and market-based assistance, where during the last decade humanitarian organisations have developed innovative ways of delivering cash and market-based assistance instead of in-kind goods and services.

Delivered in the right way, cash and market-based assistance can be more effective than traditional aid in terms of supporting

local markets; more efficient in terms of cutting costs; and most importantly, it empowers beneficiaries to be more in control of assistance. The shift of cash from innovative to mainstream – presumably by diffusion of the understanding that cash brings advantages and opportunities – is shown by how, for example, WFP aims to have one third of its aid delivered through so called ‘digital food’ by 2015. In the Syria response, UNHCR estimates that more than 30 different agencies across six countries are using cash and voucher programming.

However, as with all change, cash-based assistance also represents challenges to existing systems and structures. A concrete challenge is how cash-based assistance crosses traditional sector and agency boundaries. Today, we mostly define needs and responses according to sectors, such as food, shelter, education or health. This is reflected in the cluster system and forms the basis of much of the humanitarian infrastructure, including UN agencies and specialised NGOs. Needs assessments are usually carried out by specialised agencies according to these sectors. Often it is the same agencies who implement the response, as well as evaluate their programmes in reports.

The challenge becomes evident when applying a cross-sectoral tool such as cash. In a situation where several agencies are assessing needs only within their respective sectors, it is possible to end up with several parallel cash transfer programmes, all potentially using different transfer methodologies, focusing on different sectors, but all with the identical objective of directing cash to the same beneficiary.

The potential for collaboration is obvious; providing one holistic cash-transfer programme to cover multiple needs would be more efficient and effective. But the structural issue is to decide who should be responsible for such a programme: which UN agency, or for that matter, which NGO? The challenge of introducing the innovation of cash into a sectorally divided system is neither to stop using the cluster system nor to ask agencies to stop specialising but to find new ways of working together.

Two concrete suggestions to achieve this are, firstly, to develop and improve collaboration around multi-sectoral needs assessments, and secondly, to strengthen the approach to response analysis; we, as a community, need to develop the way we decide on how to respond to a crisis and, taking the context and affected communities perspectives into account, we need to analyse which modality of response is best suited in a

specific context – and ideally also agree on who is best placed to respond.

Multi-sectoral needs assessments and joint response analysis require trust and genuine openness from all partners. We need to be willing to give up the inherent power that lies within the existing structures today, and we need to go beyond agency politics and territorial thinking. Creating such environments of improved cooperation will be crucial - but not easy.

This does not only apply to cash-based programmes, but relates to any innovation that leads to new forms of partnerships. Forming genuine partnerships entails moving towards more strategic levels, where decisions are taken in consultation, as opposed to relationships based on ‘funder’ and ‘implementing partners’. This is particularly relevant between donors and agencies, and also between international and local actors.

It is also relevant in terms of management structures, where more decisions should be taken closer to the field and actual needs. This should not be driven by risk-averse strategies but because local empowerment is seen as more effective and efficient. In the Norwegian Refugee Council we have time and time again seen the value of empowering local staff and involving beneficiaries to be part of designing programmes and implementing new approaches.

It is not just a case of working more together; leadership and decision making will be key challenges in terms of innovation and joint operations. Inter-cluster mechanisms will play an important role in this, and there will probably be a further increase in the use of consortia. In terms of cash-based programmes specifically, the private sector and the diaspora will play an increasing role, since they both have specialisation and a long tradition of transferring cash to customers or relatives. National governments will also have a role to play, as cash-transfer programmes have crucial links to governmental social protection programmes.

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A challenge – especially for big agencies – is to accept that new actors will come in, including small start-ups. These should be seen as valuable contributors to the humanitarian ecosystem, not as a challenge to existing positions. Inevitably, we will have to accept that not all agencies and approaches created in the past will be fit for tomorrow.

A central aspect of innovation is to create a culture for continuous improvement. However, despite the fact that all serious humanitarian actors recognise the importance of learning in terms of monitoring and evaluation, the problem is often not that the lessons are not identified but that the challenge often remains to learn the lessons and apply them. We must also acknowledge and address the fact that many of the obstacles to innovation lie within organisations themselves. These include rigid procedures and hierarchical systems, as well as risk-averse attitudes in terms of trying out something new with a risk of failure.

The importance of innovation is not new; as humanitarian actors, we have always been dependent on adapting to local contexts, working with people on the ground to find local solutions to diverse challenges. In this sense, innovation – emphasising local solutions and strategies by people in need themselves – is an essential aspect of good programming. It is when we stop being innovative in our approaches, by being overconfident in our previous experience and overlooking local realities and opportunities, that we fail; humility, openness and a willingness to learn are important values related to innovation.

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