



Spotlight on learning series

Lessons of lessons

A window into the evolution of the humanitarian system

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ALNAP is a global network of NGOs, UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/ Crescent Movement, donors, academics and consultants dedicated to learning how to improve response to humanitarian crises.

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1 Introduction

The humanitarian system uses monitoring and evaluation as a primary way to assess its own performance, learn and evolve. From the agency- and programme-specific, to large-scale and system-wide, humanitarian evaluations and their lessons are central for maintaining accountability within an otherwise largely unregulated sector.

For the past 25 years, ALNAP has shared lessons about humanitarian system performance as part of its mission to use learning to improve humanitarian crisis response. Between 2003 and 2021, ALNAP published 20 'Lessons Papers', which synthesise evaluation findings and recommendations across a range of contexts, disaster types and themes. These papers provide critical lessons and facilitate performance improvement for those who design, implement and evaluate humanitarian responses (Dillon and Campbell, 2018).

This review is a meta-analysis of nearly two decades of these ALNAP Lessons Papers. It aims to identify where and how the humanitarian system has evolved over time, and also show areas where progress has been weaker and attention is still needed.

2 Mapping the lessons

The authors selected 15 of the 20 ALNAP Lessons Papers published between 2003 and 2021 based on their breadth of applicability, i.e. favouring those that synthesised lessons from a number of disaster events, across multiple countries and spanning many years, for example [Flood Disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations \(2008\)](#), and [Humanitarian action in drought-related emergencies \(2011\)](#). Papers with more limited focus – from either one country or one specific crisis – were excluded, with two exceptions: [Key lessons from evaluations of humanitarian action in Liberia \(2003\)](#) and [Deepening Crisis in Gaza: Lessons for operational agencies \(2009\)](#). These were included because they relate specifically to conflict, and the authors wanted to capture insights from complex emergencies. Lessons Papers included in this analysis are listed in [Table 1](#).

Table 1: ALNAP Lessons Papers included in the inquiry

	Title	Year
1	Key lessons from evaluations of humanitarian action in Liberia	2003
2	South Asia Earthquake 2005: Learning from previous earthquake relief operations (first paper)	2005
3	Tsunami Emergency: Lessons from previous natural disasters	2005
4	Slow-Onset Disasters: Drought and food and livelihoods insecurity	2007
5	Responding to Earthquakes: Learning from earthquake relief and recovery operations	2008
6	Flood Disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations	2008
7	Deepening Crisis in Gaza: Lessons for operational agencies	2009
8	Learning from Urban Disasters: Learning from previous response and recovery operations	2009
9	Humanitarian action in drought-related emergencies	2011
10	Responding to Urban Disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations	2012
11	Responding to Flood Disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations	2014
12	Humanitarian interventions in settings of urban violence	2014
13	Responding to earthquakes	2019
14	Responding to Ebola epidemics	2020
15	Adapting humanitarian action to the effects of climate change	2021

Lessons from the above 15 papers were extracted verbatim and put in a matrix, coded by theme, crisis type and year.

Note: The Lessons Papers cover evaluations of emergency responses over a range of years. In some cases, the year assigned to a lesson is earlier than the year of publication, i.e. the lesson emerged in an evaluation published prior to the Lessons Paper.

Lessons were then separated into two categories: (1) technical areas of aid delivery and (2) broader, structural, system-wide issues facing the humanitarian sector as a whole (See [Table 2](#)).

Table 2: Thematic categorisation of lessons

Technical, operational issues	Structural, system-wide issues
Sector-specific areas: including water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), shelter, health, protection and food	Community engagement and accountability: including communication with affected people, participation and participatory approaches
Humanitarian Programme Cycle: including coordination, targeting, monitoring and evaluation	Localisation: including local capacity, local procurement and local collaboration
Cash: including vouchers, non-food items and cash-for-work schemes	Disaster risk: including preparedness, early warning and early action
	Humanitarian–development nexus: including relief, recovery, resilience and longer-term development
	Gender: acknowledging the special needs of different groups, especially women and girls

For a temporal analysis, the thematic lessons were ordered chronologically. This allowed the authors to identify trends and how these themes have evolved over time. To triangulate and validate findings, where possible, the authors matched the themes to the findings in ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) reports, which have tracked progress in key areas of interest for the humanitarian sector since 2010.

3 Limitations

The main limitation of this analysis is that the primary source materials – the Lessons Papers themselves – vary in approach, findings and thematic focus, making it difficult to derive direct comparisons across papers. While ALNAP Lessons Papers all respond to a core information demand from decision-makers in humanitarian response, the research process has not always been tightly controlled. ALNAP has afforded authors relative freedom in terms of establishing a methodology that is suitable for each paper and the space to present insights according to each author's judgement. Each paper reflects the authors' own interpretations and assumptions.

ALNAP published a [Methods Note](#) in 2018 that enhanced methodological uniformity and rigour, but this has only been applied to the most recent Lessons Papers. Prior to this, the Lessons Papers' methodology was inconsistent; for example, the [South Asia Earthquake 2005: Learning from previous earthquake relief operations \(2005\)](#) does not outline the methodology used, whereas [Responding to Ebola epidemics \(2020\)](#) sets out a detailed and rigorous methodology.

Furthermore, there is no uniform definition of what constitutes a 'lesson'. Sometimes lessons are more observational in nature, written like findings taken from a specific crisis or response. Others are drafted as recommendations and take an instructive tone. Less frequently, lessons help build the evidence base, providing data and insights about a certain theme. In recent years, ALNAP has deliberately shifted towards making the lessons more instructive, reflecting the desires and expectations of its membership. Examples of these different lesson types are listed in [Table 3](#).

Table 3: Types of lessons

Observational lessons:	Good practice lessons:	Instructive lessons:
<i>These describe findings, notes or insights, or provide a 'good-to-know' message.</i>	<i>These help build an evidence base. They go further than an observation by offering more detailed guidance.</i>	<i>These are more 'recommendation' in nature. They provide a 'how-to' that operational readers can use more practically.</i>
<p>For example:</p> <p>Participation in post-disaster shelter reconstruction can play a vital role in the personal and collective psychosocial recovery process if there is an active role for disaster survivors.</p> <p>South Asia Earthquake 2005: Learning from previous earthquake relief operations (first paper) (2005)</p>	<p>For example:</p> <p>Effective interventions in droughts will often be multi-sectoral, and require collaboration across a variety of agencies. One way to increase collaboration is through consortia, working together to reach critical mass, build on each others' strengths, improve coordination, and facilitate learning.</p> <p>Humanitarian action in drought-related emergencies (2011)</p>	<p>For example:</p> <p>Conduct thorough assessments which recognise and identify the distinct ways earthquakes affect different populations.</p> <p>Collect data that is disaggregated by gender, age, ethnicity and income.</p> <p>Pay specific attention to vulnerable, marginalised and hidden populations.</p> <p>Responding to earthquakes (2019)</p>

ALNAP has not produced a Lessons Paper every year: between 2015 and 2018 there is a gap where no papers were produced and thus changes or progress over this period are not captured.

As noted, this analysis draws solely from the Lessons Papers, triangulated with the SOHS reports where possible. The conclusions are therefore indicative of trends found only from the source material. Importantly, where the authors note limited progress in some thematic areas, changes may be taking place but not captured within the data set used for this paper.

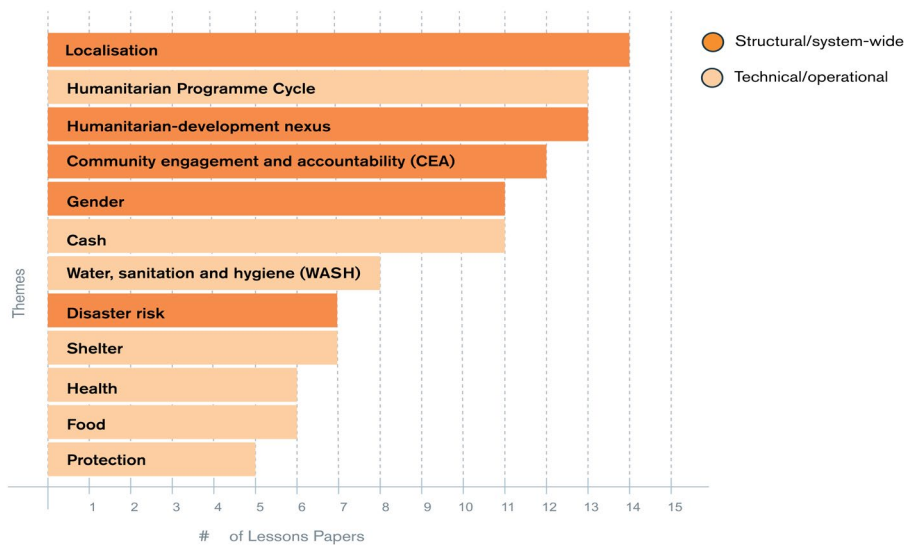
For the most part, the Lessons Papers have focused on disaster contexts related to natural hazards and have shied away from more complex, protracted crises. Only three of the 15 papers analysed focus on conflict settings, thus there is a bias towards learning from disaster settings.

4 Interpreting the trends

4.1 Structural, system-wide themes appear more frequently in the Lessons Papers

Lessons centred on localisation, community engagement and accountability (CEA) and the humanitarian–development nexus appeared in nearly every Lesson Paper, whereas technical/operational lessons, including those related to specific sectors, were less frequent. [Figure 1](#) breaks down the number of papers in which a theme could be discerned.

Figure 1: Recurrence of themes across Lessons Papers



Issues of access and humanitarian principles also emerged but were not categorised because they appeared in fewer than four papers. As would be expected, both of these themes appeared in papers related to conflict: [Deepening Crisis in Gaza: Lessons for operational agencies \(2009\)](#), and [Humanitarian interventions in settings of urban violence \(2014\)](#). Where these themes arose in relation to disasters, the lessons specifically reference the challenges of engaging with state and non-state parties to a conflict ([Humanitarian action in drought-related emergencies \(2011\)](#) and [Responding to Urban Disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations \(2012\)](#))– or the need to prevent and mitigate potential conflict over natural resources ([Humanitarian action in drought-related emergencies \(2011\)](#)).

Issues around staff well-being appeared in only two papers: *Deepening Crisis in Gaza: Lessons for operational agencies (2009)* and *Responding to Ebola epidemics (2020)*, implying that this may not be a priority issue for the humanitarian sector. This is consistent with SOHS reports from 2012, 2015 and 2018, which discuss mental health and well-being exclusively in relation to affected populations and not in reference to staff.

What does this tell us?

It is unsurprising that themes such as CEA, localisation and the humanitarian–development nexus appear most often over time. These are core policy issues the system has tried to address in humanitarian reform efforts over the years, most recently the Grand Bargain commitments (IASC, 2017). Also, ALNAP has preferred to focus its Lessons Papers on issues most pertinent to the humanitarian system as a whole, rather than specific technical sectors or clusters. Aside from *Responding to Ebola epidemics (2020)*, none of the papers reviewed were sector specific. It is reasonable, then, that sector-related technical themes did not emerge as prominently as more underlying, cross-cutting issues.

The absence of lessons around certain themes is perhaps a more compelling insight. Access and principles were mainly limited to conflict-related lessons and rarely appeared in papers related to natural-hazard emergency response. Yet these issues are important in disaster settings as well. For example, following the 2015 Nepal earthquakes, humanitarians faced competing pressures of impartiality and government demands (NRC and HI, 2016: 27–28) and after the 2010 floods in Pakistan, neutrality was a concern for humanitarians working with the government (DARA, 2011; Bennett, 2011). ALNAP's 2018 SOHS reinforces this, citing concerns raised by the aid community about working with government partners in disaster-prone areas (ALNAP, 2018).

The dearth of lessons about access and principles in disaster contexts indicates that these issues are not a primary focus of learning in these settings. While the intersection between disaster and conflict is beginning to be more rigorously explored (Peters, n.d.), the fact that it has to date been largely neglected in evaluations on disaster settings is a potential blind spot in the humanitarian system as a whole.

4.2 Technical learning

While ALNAP has consciously pursued a more instructional approach in its recent Lessons Papers, lessons related to certain technical themes showed the most change from observational to instructional over time. The authors reason that these are instances where learning has taken place, pointing to areas where the humanitarian system has moved from acknowledging a practice as a good thing to do, to actually learning from its implementation.

There are a few possible explanations for the prevalence of technical themes in this trend towards more instructional papers: ALNAP's deliberate adoption of a more instructional framing for lessons in later papers, as noted above; or the fact that technical issues more commonly sit within the sphere of influence of operational agencies, who are the intended target audience of the Lessons Papers; or the potential that change, experimentation and learning may be more straightforward to apply to technical areas rather than sector-wide, structural issues.

Regardless, the shifts in these areas, as outlined below, indicate that the humanitarian system is indeed learning from past practice, experimenting with and refining new approaches.

4.2.1 Cash

Lessons on cash from the late 1990s and early 2000s highlight the observed benefits of a cash response – basic tenets that the humanitarian system takes for granted today. For example, an earlier lesson from the 2000 Mozambique floods notes that cash would have allowed beneficiaries to respond better to their own needs ([Flood Disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations \(2008\)](#)).

By the mid-to-late-2000s, the lessons had shifted from acknowledging the benefits of cash to outlining specific good practice in cash programming. By 2010, for example, good practice included considerations of impact and the lessons become more instructive on how to implement cash programming. This evolution is in line with SOHS findings on cash, which note that cash responses entered the mainstream by the late 2000s (ALNAP, 2012: 13).

Although the use of cash had already grown significantly by 2014 – constituting roughly 6% of humanitarian assistance that year (Bailey and Harvey, 2017: 7), the [ALNAP Lessons Paper 'Humanitarian interventions in settings of urban violence' \(2014\)](#) invites the reader to 'consider' cash response implying that, even by 2014, cash may not have been considered in all contexts. This is reinforced by the [2018 State of the World's Cash report](#), which found that the 'tools and processes required for the routine consideration of [cash transfer programming]' were not being used systematically (CALP, 2018).

Yet lessons over time in this area point out the multiple benefits of a cash response, and the continued increase in the use of cash reflects the sector's internalisation of its merits. The most recent SOHS marked a 30% increase in the use of cash between 2018 and 2021 – accounting for one-fifth of all international humanitarian assistance – with continued evidence of its positive effects (ALNAP, 2022).

Observational lesson	Instructive lesson
<p>Benefits to the use of cash, 1996/1997</p> <p>[In the response to the Kenya flood 1996–1997] Cash schemes allowed households to avoid taking exploitative loans from moneylenders and to clear their debts, to buy essential items and to invest in small-scale income-generating activities. This provided economic benefits for individual households and local businesses in addition to benefits for the whole community (Oxfam, 1999).</p> <p>Flood Disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations (2008)</p>	<p>Detailed market analysis, 2011</p> <p>The careful analysis of markets is essential for an appropriate response option that involves cash. Cash responses should occur only when commodities are available. Accurate market analysis and monitoring, and adjusting the transfer value or switching to in-kind distribution when necessary is crucial to ensure that cash provided will meet needs as intended and not adversely affect the price or availability of commodities.</p> <p>Humanitarian action in drought-related emergencies (2011)</p>

4.2.2 Food

Lessons relating to food assistance provide a clear example of a shift from observational to instructive lessons. Early lessons discuss how food can save lives, but caution that it should not be the default response option. Over time, the lessons start to include good practices, for example on local procurement, avoiding disruption to local harvests and markets, and the benefits and drawbacks of different types of food distribution. Given that the food security sector is consistently one of the best funded – in 2017, more funding went to food security than to any other sector [ALNAP, 2018] – the growth and emergence of best practice in this area is hardly surprising.

Observational lesson	Instructive lesson
<p>Ethiopia food security crisis, 1996</p> <p>Food aid can save lives and support livelihoods, particularly when used early and long enough to protect the livelihood assets that people rely on.</p> <p>Flood Disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations (2008)</p>	<p>Food distribution modalities, 2014</p> <p>Carefully consider the pros and cons of different food distribution schemes. When markets no longer function and some areas are cut off from food supplies, food distribution might be the only solution ... In some places, the most traditional food aid distribution method – dry rations – has proven extremely difficult in terms of targeting the right people and ensuring efficient logistics throughout the supply chain.</p> <p>The distribution of cooked meals (wet rations) is also an option ... Diversion of cooked food at the distribution site is less likely and the transfer of the cost of cooking fuel from families to the aid agencies is another advantage (Grünwald, 2012).</p> <p>Humanitarian interventions in settings of urban violence (2014)</p>

4.2.3 Humanitarian Programme Cycle

The coordination and professionalisation of humanitarian response has evolved considerably over the years. In 2005, findings from the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition about poor coordination of assistance and its implications for recipients triggered a formal global Humanitarian Response Review, which, among other reforms, delivered the cluster approach: the coordination architecture that endures today. A few years later, another global reform, the Transformative Agenda, initiated the Humanitarian Programme Cycle – a process to better streamline humanitarian response from needs assessment to implementation all the way to evaluation.

The lessons related to the Humanitarian Programme Cycle chart this evolution. As shown by the examples below, they demonstrate a shift from thinking about coordination as a means to minimise duplication, to acknowledging the importance of including government organisations in coordination mechanisms, to offering an alternative form of coordination. This finding correlates with the SOHS (2012, 2015 and 2018), which notes that coordination at the country level has incrementally improved over the years. The most recent SOHS (2022) notes that this enhanced coordination has resulted in greater efficiency and improved effectiveness in some sectors.

Observational lesson	Instructive lesson
<p>Coordination as something not yet achieved</p> <p>Coordination is often a scarce resource in disasters yet remains the key operational principle for effective response. It is important in order to avoid duplication of effort so that resources are directed to those most severely affected by the disaster.</p> <p><i>Tsunami Emergency: Lessons from previous natural disasters (2005)</i></p>	<p>Considering an alternative coordination model to the cluster system</p> <p>Area-based coordination has to be set up and strengthened at the most relevant level in the urban system, whether that is the neighbourhood, the municipality or a group of communities. In urban contexts, this kind of multi-sector geographical coordination could replace the more compartmentalised cluster system.</p> <p><i>Humanitarian interventions in settings of urban violence (2014)</i></p>

4.2.4 Health

Lessons related to health tend to be limited in earlier Lessons Papers, and focus on factors that practitioners should consider – such as unmet health needs and the risk of post-disaster epidemics. Later lessons provide clearer operational instruction such as quickly restoring access to health services after an emergency, offering a variety of health services and working closely with local healthcare providers.

Observational lesson	Instructive lesson
<p>Post-disaster epidemics are uncommon where populations are not displaced: however, the number of cases of communicable diseases will often rise after a disaster.</p> <p><i>Responding to Urban Disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations (2012)</i></p>	<p>Resources should not be focused solely on fighting Ebola; ongoing healthcare provision should be supported during an epidemic response ... It is essential for the humanitarian community to ensure that people can continue to access basic healthcare services, including care for those with chronic and acute diseases, as well as those with other infectious diseases, such as HIV and malaria.</p> <p><i>Responding to Ebola epidemics (2020)</i></p>

What does this tell us?

In earlier lessons, many of these technical themes are described in terms of their potential, as something that could benefit programme effectiveness. The lessons become more refined and targeted over time, implying that the system has integrated this knowledge into its practice as it builds an evidence base on the effective delivery.

This reinforces the notion that the humanitarian system can adapt and learn and has made progress in a number of areas critical to the effectiveness of assistance, namely those related to 'specific changes to the process of aid delivery' (ALNAP, 2018). As noted in several editions of the SOHS (ALNAP, 2012; 2015; 2018), these types of improvements have been seen at the level of individual agencies, but improving performance in inter-agency contexts or within the system as a whole remains a challenge. This finding is consistent with a forthcoming ALNAP paper looking at the relation between learning and change, which finds that while 'strategic transformations that have been called for have not taken place ... , changes that have come about as a result of organisational learning have been largely in the form of corrections and improvements to existing practices' (Ramalingam and Mitchell, forthcoming 2022).

4.3 Progress is less even when it comes to structural, system-wide lessons

Unlike the technical lessons, those that relate to more structural and system-wide issues of humanitarian assistance tend to stay at the observational end of the spectrum and don't change much over time, as demonstrated in [Table 4](#).

Table 4: Static lessons by theme

Theme	2000–2005	2006–2012	2013–2021
CEA: Consultation of affected people	<p>Target populations must be identified on the basis of actual need, and beneficiary consultation and participation is essential for effective targeting.</p> <p>South Asia Earthquake 2005: Learning from previous earthquake relief operations (first paper) (2005)</p>	<p>Agencies should consult before making targeting decisions, and should provide a public and transparent explanation of the criteria used for targeting, identification and registration of beneficiaries.</p> <p>Humanitarian action in drought-related emergencies (2011)</p>	<p>Humanitarian actors should listen to affected people and communities, recognise the importance of their anticipatory capacity.</p> <p>Adapting humanitarian action to the effects of climate change (2021)</p>
Disaster risk reduction: Early warning	<p>Certainly one of the most important ways donors and international agencies should support disaster preparedness ... is to assist regional governments to develop and invest in an early warning system, including for tsunamis, akin to the one that exists for tremors as they occur under the Pacific Ocean.</p> <p>Tsunami Emergency: Lessons from previous natural disasters (2005)</p>	<p>Early warning is critical in responding to situations caused by drought.</p> <p>Effective early warning is sensitive to changes in the livelihoods of vulnerable populations, and is linked to early response mechanisms.</p> <p>Humanitarian action in drought-related emergencies (2011)</p>	<p>Advocate for greater investment into early warning against heatwaves.</p> <p>Adapting humanitarian action to the effects of climate change (2021)</p>
Humanitarian– development nexus: Connectedness	<p>Unless local and international agencies think about recovery early on, their activities may contribute to recreating the same vulnerabilities that existed before the disaster.</p> <p>South Asia Earthquake 2005: Learning from previous earthquake relief operations (2005)</p>	<p>Development policies and projects that ignore vulnerability often exacerbate disaster problems or even create disasters.</p> <p>Flood Disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations (2008)</p>	<p>To address vulnerability sustainably, it is necessary to deal not only with specific issues such as housing type but also with poverty and the risk of future disasters. Interventions that address poverty as well as physical issues are more likely to be sustainable.</p> <p>Responding to Flood Disasters (2014)</p>

Theme	2000–2005	2006–2012	2013–2021
Gender and marginalised groups: Differentiating vulnerabilities	Gender is an important dimension within response to natural disasters (ILO, 2000) and that agencies must incorporate a gender analysis into their work. This is not because women constitute the majority of victims but because women in particular are made more vulnerable to disasters due to their socioeconomic status and their lack of access to resources. Tsunami Emergency: Lessons from previous natural disasters (2005)	Targeting assistance is crucial for ensuring that the needs of the most vulnerable groups (e.g. children, women, disabled, elderly and detainees) are addressed in emergency operations. To address their specific needs it is important to understand the dimensions and the sources of their vulnerability. Deepening Crisis in Gaza: Lessons for operational agencies (2009)	Conduct thorough assessments which recognise and identify the distinct ways earthquakes affect different populations. Collect data that is disaggregated by gender, age, ethnicity and income (ACAPS, 2015: 1). Pay specific attention to vulnerable, marginalised and hidden populations. Responding to Earthquakes (2019)

What does this tell us?

The need to shift from a reactive approach to one that reduces risk and to link relief with recovery efforts are recurring lessons throughout the papers. Yet, the lessons rarely move beyond these observations, with the exception of one suggestion that flexible funding could allow development programmes to pivot to humanitarian response as needed ([Humanitarian action in drought-related emergencies \(2011\)](#)). What's clear is that operationalising the humanitarian–development nexus, by understanding that assistance is tied to an interconnected web of needs, requires significant changes in the way assistance is conceived and delivered. What's less clear are specific lessons for how to go about doing it. The 2022 SOHS reinforces this, noting that despite normative policy shifts, system-wide results and observable change for affected people has not been realised (ALNAP, 2022).

Another consistent message from the lessons is the need to recognise the vulnerabilities of women and other marginalised groups. Less prominent are lessons on what has worked to protect and meet the specific needs of these groups. This repetition aligns with findings from the 2018 SOHS, which noted that between 2015 and 2017, there was increased interest from donors and more activity at HQ level related to the situation of women and girls. When it came to operationalising this on the ground though, the SOHS noted gaps with few programmes actually addressing the specific needs of women (ALNAP, 2018).

Issues such as engaging with affected people and supporting local action, require significant changes across the humanitarian system, relying on input and motivation from a range of actors – political leaders, donors and organisational management. As detailed below, these are areas where there has been the most consistent stagnation.

4.4 Localisation and community engagement and accountability show least progress

The importance of engaging communities and improving accountability to affected people has been a staple of humanitarian response evaluations since the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (Borton, 1996). Over time, numerous initiatives have attempted to close the accountability gap for people affected by crisis, and the concept has surfaced in numerous major policy initiatives, most notably Grand Bargain's 'Participation Revolution'.

It is no wonder, then, that community engagement and accountability (CEA) is highlighted as good practice across themes, time and disaster context (See [Table 5](#)).

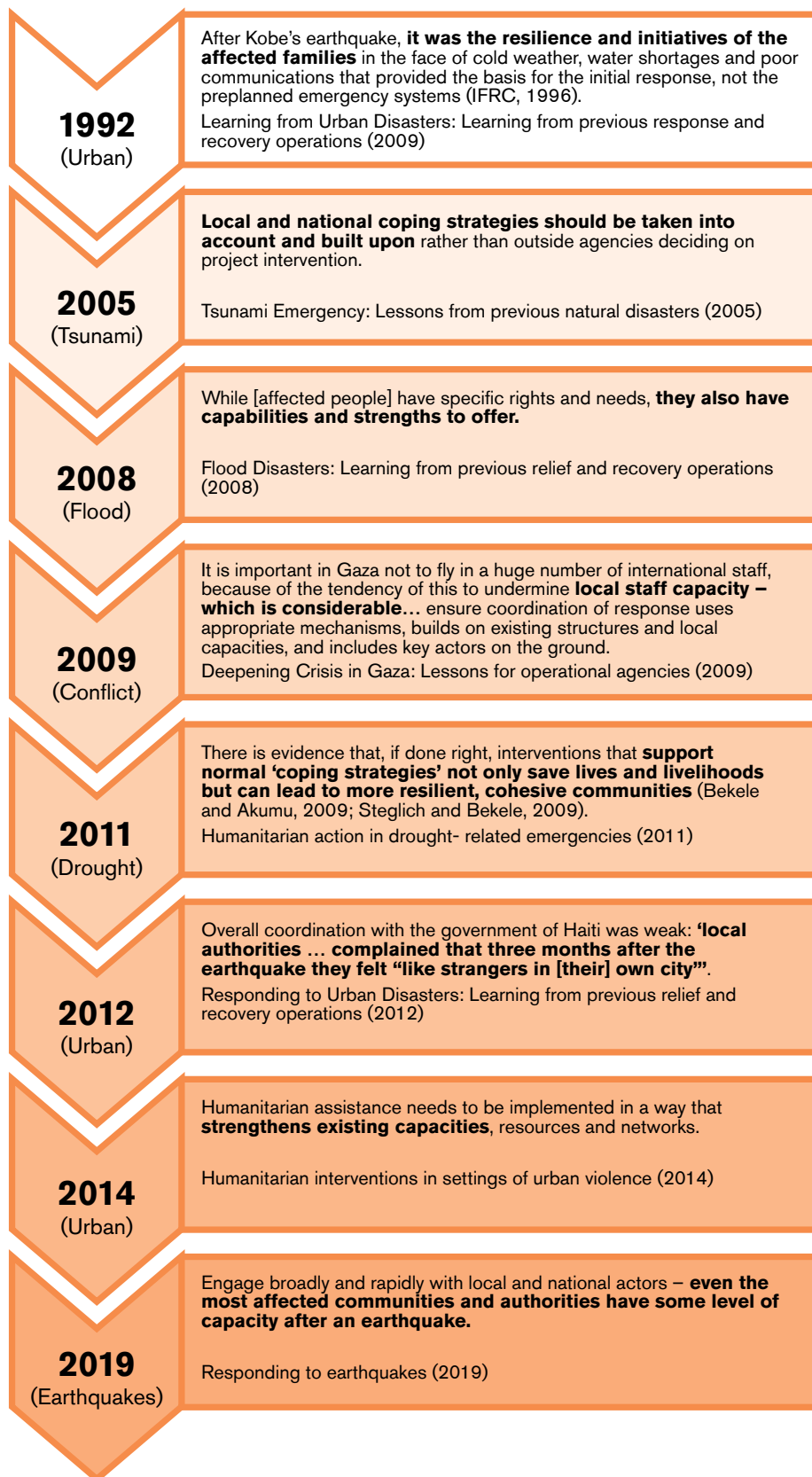
Table 5: Lessons on community engagement and accountability cut across humanitarian issues

Theme	Disaster context	Lesson related to CEA
Shelter	Earthquake	<p>It is important that criteria for eligibility for shelter are transparent and fair, and that people in similar conditions receive similar aid. Options and choices, as well as criteria, should be clearly communicated, preferably through existing customary community mechanisms. Beneficiary consultation is, therefore, a critical component of emergency shelter assistance.</p> <p><i>South Asia Earthquake 2005: Learning from previous earthquake relief operations (first paper) (2005)</i></p>
Humanitarian Programme Cycle	Tsunami	<p>Sources do agree ... that target populations must be identified on the basis of actual need rather than expediency, and that meaningful beneficiary consultation/participation is essential if targeting is to take place.</p> <p><i>Tsunami Emergency: lessons from previous natural disasters (2005)</i></p>
WASH	Drought	<p>Community participation is essential to ensure appropriate site selection, design, sustained management and maintenance of water infrastructure.</p> <p><i>Slow-Onset Disasters: Drought and food and livelihoods insecurity (2007)</i></p>

Theme	Disaster context	Lesson related to CEA
Humanitarian-development nexus	Urban disasters	<p>Good communication and community outreach by local authorities and community organisations in the post-disaster setting are critical to maintaining a stable environment and enabling progress in relief and recovery.</p> <p>Learning from Urban Disasters: Learning from previous response and recovery operations (2009)</p>
Cash	Drought	<p>Beneficiaries, particularly women, need to be consulted on their preference for cash versus in-kind distributions, and for their advice on the most safe and effective ways of transfer (Ali et al., 2005).</p> <p>Humanitarian action in drought-related emergencies (2011)</p>
Localisation	Urban disasters	<p>Identify and work with existing neighbourhood and community groups. Neighbourhoods with existing networks and a history of community activities are well positioned to participate proactively in relief and reconstruction (Nakagawa and Shaw, 2004; Sanderson, 2000).</p> <p>Responding to Urban Disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations (2012)</p>
Protection	Urban violence	<p>In order to implement protection programs in violent urban settings, it is important for humanitarian workers to build trust with the different actors and communities involved, and then make gradual connections between other types of assistance and protection.</p> <p>Humanitarian interventions in settings of urban violence (2014)</p>
Health	Epidemic	<p>The political, sociological and economic context in which an outbreak occurs should be considered when designing and implementing an Ebola response. It is useful to be aware of population's legitimate frustrations and being [sic] sensitive to people's feelings and other competing needs.</p> <p>Responding to Ebola epidemics (2020)</p>
Gender	Epidemic	<p>Gender roles have specific consequences in the context of Ebola. The response should make sure that all gender groups are equally heard and involved in all aspects of the response, including decision-making.</p> <p>Responding to Ebola epidemics (2020)</p>
Disaster risk reduction	Climate change	<p>Humanitarian actors should listen to affected people and communities, recognise the importance of their anticipatory capacity and champion further research on how traditional knowledge can inform us about risks and potential disasters</p> <p>Adapting humanitarian action to the effects of climate change (2021)</p>

Similarly, the issue of localisation appeared in almost every Lessons Paper, with a striking repetition across time (See [Figure 2](#)). For both localisation and CEA, the lessons mainly remain at the observational level – framed as ‘an important thing to do’, without much by way of operational instruction.

Figure 2: Lessons related to local capacity over time



What does this tell us?

The lessons indicate that humanitarian efforts that include affected people – whether as part of a WASH programme or a shelter response – are not just better in principle but also result in higher quality and more relevant aid. The 2022 SOHS reinforces this, noting that aid recipients who were consulted beforehand were more than twice as likely to believe that the aid met their priority needs, compared to people who were not consulted.

The lessons point to the importance of CEA for achieving structural change in the humanitarian system too, such as in the humanitarian–development nexus as well as for issues like disaster risk reduction. The analysis also shows the need for community engagement across different types of crisis, appearing in lessons not only related to disasters, but to conflict as well.

Ensuring people can exercise agency and have the opportunity to participate in humanitarian response is something that the sector clearly reinforces and promotes. Despite this normative acknowledgement, as well as an expansion of feedback mechanisms on the ground, the repetition and similarity of lessons over time indicates that it is an area where progress is still limited. The findings from the SOHS 2015, 2018 and 2022 editions all concur: agencies still struggle to ensure greater participation and accountability for affected people.

The analysis around localisation indicates that its ideals – shifting power and resources away from international responders and towards local NGOs, communities and governments – are still far from being operationalised, despite high-level commitments and a global policy discourse that would suggest otherwise. Lessons dating back from 1996 consistently remind readers of local actors' capacity in disaster settings, indicating that the idea has not been internalised across the international humanitarian community. Despite international actors' reliance on local groups to deliver during the COVID-19 response, the 2022 SOHS found that this did not result in a transformative rebalance of power.

5 Conclusion

Sifting through over 20 years of humanitarian lessons tells a compelling story – one of both progress and inertia. The lessons point to important advances in technical areas of aid, but stagnation when it comes to operationalising familiar sticking points for the system such as localisation and community engagement and participation.

As Ramalingam and Mitchell note in their forthcoming paper, ‘Learning to Change: The case for systemic organisational learning in the humanitarian sector’, experimentation with new approaches is essential for learning and change to occur. As organisations try new approaches and document what does or doesn’t work, the evidence base for change grows. This provides humanitarians with both a principled basis (‘this is the right thing to do’) and a technical basis (‘this is how we will go about doing it’) to promote these changes (Ramalingam and Mitchell, forthcoming 2022).

This analysis suggests that, for certain key areas, the humanitarian system has not yet been able to move beyond the recognition of principled rationale for action (‘this is the right thing to do’). The persistence of lessons encouraging agencies to address system-wide problems such as promoting the participation and inclusion of affected people, empowering local actors, addressing the specific needs of women, and transcending the artificial distinctions of relief and recovery, shows that the need for change has been acknowledged for some time.

We know that, outside of this analysis, pockets of good practice have emerged and many agencies are experimenting with new ways of addressing these system-wide issues. But these approaches have yet to be scaled, and are not yet representative of how the system operates as a whole. System-wide, structural change takes time and there are many political and operational hindrances. Perhaps in the meantime, smaller efforts, taken in aggregation, may begin to scratch away at the underlying structural problems besetting the humanitarian sector, and may be the best option it currently has for realising change.

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