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Table of Contents

Adaptive management and programming: the humanitarian perspective  Alice Obrecht ........ 3
Black Swans and Grey Rhinos: Aid and the Challenges of Agility  François Grünwald ........ 5
Standards – Friends or foes of agility?  Michaël Carrier ........................................... 10
Information technology: a ‘fig leaf’ to hide the sector’s lack of agility?
Lisa Daoud & Edmond Wach ................................................................. 13
Humanity & Inclusion’s experience with Lean Management
Damien Badoil & Aline Robert ................................................................. 18
Point of view: An “Agile Manifesto” for humanitarian and development projects
Mehdi Terbeche & Michael Carrier .......................................................... 22
Agility, accountability and quality: linking humanitarian and development aid more effectively  Jean-Bernard Véron ................................................................. 25
Building agile teams: collective intelligence and more human relations
Alain Olive, Charlotte Dufour & Monique Cardot ........................................ 29
Bibliography ........................................................................................................... 32
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Different concrete examples are then explored in relation to programme agility. First of all, by looking at increasing accountability demands and changes to the aid system, such as the implementation of standards and the increasing use of information technology: do they increase, or, on the contrary, limit our capacity to ‘be agile’? These are the questions raised by Michaël Carrier in his article, ‘Standards – Friends or foes of agility?’, and by Lisa Daoud and Edmond Wach in, ‘Information technology: a ‘fig leaf’ to hide the sector’s lack of agility?’ Similarly, agility is an issue at stake for organisations that have grown and whose internal structure has changed a lot in recent decades. Thus, Damien Badoil and Aline Robert describe the current experience of Humanity & Inclusion in using ‘Lean Management’ tools and methods to simplify their internal processes. Then, in the ‘Point of view’ section, Medhi Terbèche and Michaël Carrier argue that the objectives of agility and quality can only be achieved by respecting a certain number of good practices, and they suggest that a loose adaptation of the ‘Agile Manifesto’, which was drawn up by software developers in 2001, could be used by the aid sector.

Jean-Bernard Véron, for his part, takes us back to the field where an aid programme in Northern Mali has managed to achieve its objectives by putting agility and accountability towards the beneficiaries into practice – ahead of its time? When project management is based on knowledge of the context and the actors involved, flexibility and relations with the population, high quality results tend to follow.

The last facet of our kaleidoscope is the question of how to manage agile teams, as explored by Alain Olive, Charlotte Dufour and Monique Cardot. Over and above the important operational issues that this question raises is the fundamental question of the place of human beings in complex organisational systems, and the ability of the humanitarian sector to go back to what motivated its existence in the first place.

We hope you find this new issue stimulating and look forward to hearing your reactions.
Humanitarian organisational systems have been shaped over the past decades by two tendencies. The first is a tendency to think of humanitarian problems as clearly defined around life-saving and protection and involving short-term solutions. The second is a tendency towards certain types of performance management, influenced by new public management thinking and upwards accountability to donors, which conceives of good performance as that which is predicted, measured and monitored, through clear plans such as a logical framework.

Both influences have led to systems and processes that are good at performing certain functions, such as immediate life-saving assistance, but that are inadequate for many situations and objectives that humanitarians increasingly face. The creeping rigidity arising from pre-defined, short-term solutions and predictable performance management prevents humanitarian agencies from adapting when contexts, crises or needs change over time.

Adaptive management and agility are concepts which have gained popularity in the development aid sector and in private sector management, as approaches which enable organisations to deal more successfully with constant change and increasing levels of complexity. This article outlines the potential relevance of these concepts for humanitarian organisations, starting with some brief background to adaptiveness and examples of where humanitarian actors struggle to adapt, leading to poorer performance. The article then draws on themes from the ALNAP workshop and Groupe URD’s Autumn School on adaptiveness and agility to outline areas of work for 2019 to put into practice the concepts of adaptive management and agility.

**What does it mean to be adaptive?**

In the last five years, adaptive management and adaptive programming have been the focus of an active and growing movement for change within the international development aid community (Mercy Corps and IRC, 2016; Desai et al., 2018; Valters, Cummings and Nixon, 2016; Booth, Harris and Wild, 2016; Ramalingam, 2015; Ramalingam, 2013), born out of frustrations with failing apolitical ‘good governance’ initiatives and inflexible logical frameworks and contracts.

Adaptive management is defined differently by different authors and organisations, but all share the themes of learning and continuous improvement:

- The individual, programmatic and organizational ability to access and use knowledge, information and data in an ongoing manner in strategic and operational decisions. (Ramalingam, 2015: 2)
- An iterative process, calling for the integration of science and management, treating policies as experiments from which managers can learn. (Wise, 2006)
- A structured, iterative process of robust decision making in the face of uncertainty, with an aim to reducing uncertainty over time via system monitoring...a tool which should be used not only to change a system, but also to learn about the system. (Holling, 1978; Mercy Corps, 2018)
- Managing adaptively is about accepting, working with, and learning from change, and using this learning to be more effective. (Sugden, 2016)

ALNAP suggests a simplified definition of adaptive capacities as: the ability of an organisation to adjust and respond effectively to dynamics and uncertainty (adapted from Friedman et al., 2016; Aagaard, 2012).
Adaptive management and programming offer ways of working that enable an organisation to make appropriate and effective changes to what it does and how it works in the face of new learning or changes in the systems in which it operates.

**Where are humanitarian agencies failing to adapt?**

Humanitarian organisational systems were set up to respond with agility to dynamic crises. But two recent trends are straining these systems: first, the expectations for humanitarians have shifted, and the contexts in which they operate may have become more complex, meaning there are now more triggers for change, to which current humanitarian approaches are not fit to respond. It is not change itself that is the challenge, but the nature of the change that humanitarians face in most operating environments that is becoming problematic. Second, the systems used - both externally with donors and internally - for strategy, performance monitoring, accountability and risk management have evolved in ways that restrict the range of options that humanitarians have at their disposal in a dynamic environment, and make it harder to implement changes in a timely and efficient manner. A combination of these two factors means that humanitarians are, if anything, losing their capability for adaptiveness at a time when this capability needs to be strengthened much further.

A review of evaluation findings identified at least three areas where humanitarian agencies are struggling to be nimble and adaptive in response to change and new information.

**At the beginning and end of crises**

An area of change where humanitarian actors have struggled to respond proactively is in periods where humanitarian needs are drastically increasing or decreasing. Chronic vulnerability in crisis-prone areas leads to millions of people falling between the cracks of humanitarian and development assistance – particularly during periods in which crisis drivers are increasing (early warning) or where a crisis has ended (early recovery).

Funding mechanisms are often blamed for this, as they prevent a streamlined delivery of support that covers basic needs while also mitigating harm or helping institutions and individuals to continue on a path of forward-looking progress. However, this focus on funding instruments can mask the reality that there is very little knowledge of what works in disaster prevention, early response/action, and early recovery. When asked what they would do differently if given humanitarian funding earlier in a slow-onset crisis, agencies have found it difficult to describe a new way of programming (elrha, 2018). A review of programme design approaches in livelihoods early-action found that the processes for analysis and weighing of programming options against goals was often very weak (Maxwell et al., 2013) - these processes are critical for an organisation’s ability to adapt its strategy or activities to shifts in the surrounding environment.

**During a response, as the situation or needs change**

One of the most common types of change to which humanitarians must be responsive is change in the humanitarian situation itself. This includes what is most needed by people affected by crisis, where those people are located, and broader contextual factors that impinge on the situation, such as conflict dynamics and socio-economic and political trends. Humanitarian actors in the past have generally been able to manage these changes well, however several areas of challenge have arisen in recent evaluations and research.

The sector-based organisation of humanitarian support can inhibit timely changes to services and materials that meet new needs as they arise. For example, in an evaluation of an otherwise flexible shelter project in Ethiopia, the lead agency was unable to pivot to respond to aid recipient complaints about mosquitoes and other pests, as these were deemed ‘water, sanitation and hygiene,’ or ‘non-food-items’ concerns, and therefore outside the shelter project’s scope (Mutunga et al., 2015). While agencies can handover to others with particular sectoral expertise, these coordination processes can be slow. Humanitarian agencies tend to specialise in particular sectors, and calls for proposals and funding contracts are often aligned around sector-specific indicators or outputs. This can make it difficult for agencies to respond to affected people’s priorities when they cross multiple sectors, or when they evolve across sectors over time.
Responding flexibly to changes in location is also becoming a greater challenge, particularly in conflict-driven crises. Recent major studies (Haver and Carter, 2016; Castellarnau and Stoianova, 2018) have found that humanitarian actors’ presence in active conflicts and in response to displaced people is shrinking, despite these being areas in which humanitarian needs are often most acute: ‘Only a small fraction of the total international humanitarian organisations regularly respond to the most violent, conflict-driven emergencies’ and ‘the greater the level of violence in an area, the fewer the aid projects that run there: even though the suffering may be many times greater’ (Haver and Carter, 2016).

One of the contributing factors to this trend is a loss of operational flexibility. Operational flexibility enables humanitarian agencies to deal with an increasingly complex landscape of actors that shape the access conditions for humanitarian aid. It also helps them make changes to how they engage with these actors when needed (Haver and Carter, 2016). Organisations with greater operational and programmatic flexibility have been found to be more capable of making changes to location and means of transport in order to serve people in need in the most acute settings.

Alongside operational flexibility, regular context monitoring is increasingly seen as important for designing and delivering relevant and effective humanitarian responses. Context analysis supports conflict sensitivity, helps humanitarian actors avoid duplication of services, leads to the identification of important issues that can shape a humanitarian response such as land tenure rules and power dynamics, and supports relevant and meaningful communication with affected people (Campbell 2018). Contexts are not static, but change - often unpredictably - over time, and therefore their influence on a crisis and its response can change as well. Ongoing context analysis, including market and conflict analysis, are increasingly seen as a factor in the speed and relevance of humanitarian response.

When we learn about programme performance

In many cases, the stimulus for humanitarian agencies to make a change in what they are doing comes from a new understanding of the humanitarian situation or how well their programming is working. There are two important sources of information that agencies can use to achieve this new understanding, both of which have been characterised by high degrees of challenge.

The first source of information that can shift an agency’s understanding of how well it is addressing priority needs is through programme monitoring. While monitoring plays an important role in humanitarian response, organisational approaches to monitoring are rarely systematic and tend to capture mostly output-related data (Knox-Clarke and Darcy, 2013; Warner, 2017). Recent work by ALNAP found there is a consistent pattern of weak data collection and monitoring mechanisms in humanitarian programming, which can impede the quality of evaluations and inhibit the ability to identify improvements to programmes (Warner, 2017). Monitoring data that is useful for financial accountability to donors may be less illustrative of a programme’s quality or progress, as output data is not a good proxy for tracking outcomes – for instance, distributing a certain number of water filters does not automatically translate into improved hygiene outcomes (Turnbull, 2015). Donors also find the lack of better quality monitoring to be problematic as it prevents them from ‘investing in the right projects and partners’ (Mowjee et al., 2015: 15).

A second source of information, which is sometimes included in programme monitoring but also treated as its own distinct set of data, is feedback from aid recipients. Feedback from aid recipients can lead to a change in a humanitarian agency’s understanding of the relevance and appropriateness of its programming, and hopefully motivate a change in what or how that agency delivers services. While there have been significant improvements in the sector in listening and making changes in response to feedback from affected populations - including through the implementation of the Core Humanitarian Standards, making substantive changes to programmes based on feedback remains the exception rather than the rule. Despite an overall rise in the use of feedback and complaints mechanisms in humanitarian response, agencies tend to fail to use this information consistently to change programming (IRC, 2017; Jean, 2014; ICRC, 2018). The lack of responsiveness to affected people’s feedback may be but one instance of a much broader problem: a general inability to routinely collect information on programme performance, interpret this information for decision-making and execute decisions in a timely manner.
Using adaptive approaches to improve humanitarian action in 2019 and beyond

In autumn 2018, ALNAP and Groupe URD separately convened two events to discuss the above challenges and identify better ways of working that would enable more agile and adaptive responses to crisis. Each event focused on different issues: the ALNAP workshop looked at six themes based on the organisational and inter-organisational functions relevant to adaptiveness: Funding, Human Resource management, Logistics and supply chain management, Monitoring, Programming and working in networks/collaborative approaches. From these discussions, three key themes emerged that are relevant for utilising adaptive practices for humanitarian organisations in the future.

Find practical ways to improve the ‘soft’ skills for adaptiveness

Adaptive programming tends to rely more on ‘soft’ aspects of performance such as trust, relationships and critical thinking skills. It can be difficult to find concrete and practical ways to support these within large organisations, but important to do so in order to strengthen adaptive capabilities. Examples discussed at the ALNAP workshop highlighted the importance of incentives and decentralised decision-making structures in supporting these soft attributes to take root. Hiring staff who are skilled in relationship building and creative problem solving needs to be paired with decentralised decision-making. Also, incentives need to be in place to reward adaptation and counterbalance the tendency to avoid necessary adaptations due to concerns with cost or risk.

Trial and scale systems innovations

Many agencies fail to adapt due to funding restrictions, or to confusion over what level of change donors are willing to tolerate in a programme that is underway. In some cases, such as the new country-based programme approach to financing being piloted by SIDA, new donor arrangements or pooled funding mechanisms are providing opportunities to change systemic behaviours in the agency-donor relationship that impede agility. These innovative approaches, which re-think what a humanitarian funding and response system looks like, should be shared more widely and, if effective, scaled to other countries and agencies.

Focus on outcomes for crisis affected people over outputs

If humanitarian agencies were given funding based on how crisis-affected people rated them on outcomes, there would likely be a much more adaptive and responsive humanitarian system. A greater emphasis on outcomes - both by agencies and by donors - shifts the focus to achieving results through the best outputs rather than fulfilling pre-established plans when these are no longer relevant or useful. While agencies have made improvements on collecting and using feedback from aid recipients, these practices do not inform changes to programming on a consistent basis and are often constrained by what an agency is able to procure in a short time period.

In the private sector, adaptive approaches to supply chain management have been pursued in order to remain responsive to customers’ more bespoke needs while maintaining efficiency and reducing uncertainty. Techniques that support these systems, such as user or customer segmentation, could be considered by the humanitarian sector as a way of efficiently achieving greater responsiveness to crisis-affected people.

Feedback from aid recipients can lead to a change in a humanitarian agency’s understanding of the relevance and appropriateness of its programming, and hopefully motivate a change in what or how that agency delivers services.

1 This article draws on the discussion in: Obrecht and Bourne (2018), Making Humanitarian Response More Flexible, ALNAP/ODI: London.

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Black Swans and Grey Rhinos: Aid and the Challenges of Agility
François Grünwald

For a number of years now, the humanitarian sector has been debating the effects of agility on the quality of programmes in complex, changing and protracted crisis contexts, on the accountability of aid, and on numerous operational difficulties encountered in the field. Agility also figures in discussions about aid in post-crisis and ‘stabilisation’ contexts, and more broadly in discussions about risk management.

Grey Rhinos and Black Swans: Aid and Risk
The literature on risks includes a range of coloured animals to describe some of its concepts, and two of these are relevant to the issue of agility: the grey rhino and the black swan. The grey rhino is more or less certain to charge if you annoy it; it is therefore a certain and predictable risk, in the face of which you can take preventive action. For its part, the existence of black swans is unexpected. Imagine the surprise of those late 17th century European explorers who had arrived in the Pacific islands: everyone thought that swans could only be white, and yet there they saw black swans in flight. It was this surprise that was the inspiration for the Black
Swan theory, or rare event theory, developed by the statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb in a relatively ground-breaking essay, The Black Swan. In this theory, ‘Black Swan’ refers to an unpredictable event, of low probability (referred to as a ‘rare event’ in probability theory), which, if it takes place, can have potentially very serious consequences.

Ensuring that aid meets needs, remains relevant and creates as little harm as possible is a constant challenge in the face of the predictable risks and permanent uncertainties of crisis contexts. This is where agility comes in. This central aspect of the quality of aid and the accountability of actors towards beneficiaries and donors is relevant on several levels: understanding the situation and possible future developments; whether or not to act and allocate funds faced with uncertainty and risks; the possibility of making a mistake without regrets; adapting administrative and financial procedures to accompany change; and lastly, the constant need to build trust between the different stakeholders of the response to complex, multi-form and changing crises.

Today, risk management is shared between humanitarian and development actors as well as with donors who collaborate more and more often in protracted crisis contexts on multi-annual programmes geared towards reconstruction and/or resilience building. Thus, agility – or adaptive management – is growing in influence due to both the establishment of protracted crises, and the combination of humanitarian and development practices in fragile contexts, two types of context that require specific risk management efforts due to their extended timescales.

Ensuring that aid meets needs, remains relevant and creates as little harm as possible is a constant challenge in the face of the predictable risks and permanent uncertainties of crisis contexts. This is where agility comes in.

Flexibility: a discreet (r)evolution

Never in the history of humanitarian action have budgets been so high, contexts so volatile and funding and accountability procedures so time-consuming and complicated. The large number of different document formats, the cumbersome processes required to modify contracts, and the duplication of audit and evaluation procedures all limit the adaptability of operations. There is nevertheless some hope that it is possible to make progress and manage both what is known and what is uncertain: crisis modifiers, the development of “fast tracks” and the increased presence of certain donors in the field to help promote change and dialogue with operators, and to improve understanding of adaptive needs. Nevertheless, serious difficulties remain in relation to some administrative procedures, such as development donors who have begun to get involved in the complicated adventure of accompanying protracted crises. It is also necessary to mention the psychological blockages among operators who reject any responsibility, saying that they are unable to do anything as administrative procedures do not allow adjustments to be made. Instead, they try desperately to respect the logical framework, even if this means that the project becomes less relevant...

Agility, flexibility and adaptability

Agility brings new challenges for operators and donors: it implies that information is gathered, decisions are made and action is taken more quickly. To do this, actors need to be able to anticipate possible developments and prepare for these, use new technologies to make decisions based on data from the field, and accept that brave decisions need to be made in the face of uncertainty. Forty years ago, Robert Chambers developed the concept of ‘optimal ignorance’, that is to say, the level of knowledge needed to make a decision. Where have we got to now with regard to ‘evidence-based’ decision-making in a context of ‘infoxication’ (intoxication due to excess information), and the many different sources available on social networks? How can we make projects more flexible today using new financial and reporting procedures while contexts continue to evolve?

Tools have been developed by a certain number of actors. For certain donors, the aim is to create reserves that can be mobilized to unexpected contexts. Mechanisms called ‘crisis modifiers’ have been set up by the international development departments in the UK and the USA which make it possible to respond very quickly to emergency needs. Another approach consists of modifying development contracts very quickly to guarantee that the resources that are destined for this approach can be reallocated. Another series of tools aims to instigate agility in an anticipatory way, notably via scenario planning early on in the project design process. Other approaches aim to work on classic planning tools, such as revising the logical framework, or at least making it more flexible.
Managing risks, adapting or doing harm

We no longer have a choice: technological innovations and social networks mean that our errors are visible, our lack of decision-making is public and our systematic inability to be ‘agile’ is blatant. We therefore need to quickly bring together researchers, operators and donors who feel concerned about these issues in order to discuss the challenges of managing risks and uncertainty, and explore possible new ways forward. Are we capable of adopting the strategies, tools, methods and forms of dialogue necessary to deal with grey rhinos and black swans? It will be a major challenge!

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Agility: a topic Groupe URD has been promoting for twenty years

Having been involved in these debates since our creation in 1993, we began a number of operations at the end of the 90s with the aim of making it easier to learn in real time and adapt programmes. Following Hurricane Mitch which hit Central America in 1998, we carried out a series of evaluations that included discussion exercises with field actors. Processes of this kind became known as ‘Iterative Evaluations with Mini Seminars’ (IEMS). We then developed and implemented this methodology in several contexts: Afghanistan, Kosovo, the 2004 tsunami (8 field visits over a period from 3 months to 4 years after the tsunami), Mali (12 field visits between 2012 and 2018), Haiti (15 field visits from 3 weeks to five years after the earthquake), Nepal (7 field visits from 3 months to 3 years after the earthquake). Then, due to requests for close monitoring and ‘coaching’ between field visits, and also to enhance the effectiveness of evaluations and improve practices in real time, we began to set up Observatories. Three were opened: in Afghanistan, Chad and then Haiti, with the aim of bringing learning closer to field actors. Today, in 2019, we have begun two processes to help promote agility: one as part of the RESILAC project in the Lake Chad region, and the other in support of the Key Programme in Mali, which combines IEMS, scenario planning and operational research.
A standard can be defined as "a reference document, that provides rules, guidelines and characteristics for activities or their results, aimed at the achievement of an optimal operational level in a given context". Put simply, and in a deliberately broad way, a standard provides a reference framework to orientate a project in a given operational context. This reference framework can be ‘formal’, like the Sphere standards or the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), or ‘informal’, such as regular project management activities, which involve a certain level of standardisation, even though this is not always explicitly expressed.

The aid sector already has numerous reference frameworks at every level and in a variety of formats. Over time, project management became the established method for implementing projects, and this is now complemented by a number of new approaches:

- Tools like the logical framework or Theory of Change;
- Methods like the Quality and Accountability COMPASS;
- Technical reference frameworks such as the Sphere Standards;
- Good practice reference frameworks such as the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria or the Core Humanitarian Standard;
- International frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals.

With the number and variety of frameworks that exist - and which could increase given the growing number of regulatory demands in the sector - the idea of ‘agility’ or ‘adaptive management’ can be seen as a way of rejecting the constraints of existing reference frameworks which are not deemed sufficiently flexible or relevant. But to what extent do existing standards really limit the agility of humanitarian and development projects? What can we do to help them evolve so that they increase - rather than hold back - our ability to respond to changing needs, contexts or resources?

Though the majority of those working in the sector recognise that standards are needed in order to avoid reinventing the wheel and to specify what is expected for each operation, many also point out the limits of existing frameworks.

**Lack of flexibility** - The ‘sequential’ nature of the project cycle, which is further reinforced due to the extensive use of the logical framework as the main contractual planning and monitoring tool, does not leave actors a great deal of room to adapt an operation when needs, contexts or resources evolve. Though establishing a pre-determined path - a chain of expected results - can help to involve and reassure the different stakeholders in an operation, there should also be ‘agile’ governance to allow the right decisions to be made at the right time and adapt the operational framework if necessary within clear, predetermined limits. A ‘scenario planning and monitoring’ approach can be a useful way to complement existing frameworks. This involves defining in advance the different possible operations, the indicators that will determine whether to go from one possibility to another (security, needs, etc.) and the decision-making methods that will encourage the involvement of stakeholders and optimal transparency between them.

**Long-term vs. short-term learning** - The idea of ‘learning’ is becoming increasingly important in humanitarian and development operations. Indeed, learning from our operations is an essential part of continuous improvement both for organisations and for the sector as a whole. Testing innovations, knowledge management, different evaluation methods and simple lesson learning at the end of...
each operation are essential ways to increase learning for the long term, but not necessarily for the short term. The challenge of agility consists of finding the right balance between acquiring knowledge to improve management in the future and obtaining better results in the short term based on current knowledge. The increasingly frequent implementation of ‘real-time evaluations’ is a useful way of meeting the challenge of a long-term contribution while providing appropriate support immediately to the ongoing operation.

**Coherence, complementarity and coordination** - With the growing number of humanitarian and development organisations in many contexts, ‘agile’ initiatives are being prevented by different and sometimes contradictory demands between the different stakeholders of an operation. Agility depends on all the actors involved (operators, donors, authorities, representatives of a population or a group, evaluators, etc.) cooperating in a coherent and complementary manner. This does not mean that each stakeholder’s way of operating should be standardised but rather that these systems should be able to interact and contribute to greater complementarity. This ‘operational interoperability’ then acts as an interface between the different actors involved and facilitates an ‘agile approach’ that is realistic and adapted to each operational context.

**The profusion and confusion of reference frameworks** - In September 2014, the participants at a workshop at Groupe URD’s Autumn School counted no fewer than 150 reference frameworks to guide the actions of the sector. This profusion of frameworks can, of course, help to find answers to many questions, but it also comes at a cost for users, affecting their ability to use these references quickly and appropriately, and raising many questions (What do I really need? To what extent are these different frameworks complementary?).

In order to overcome this problem, Groupe URD, for example, developed a quality and accountability operational framework. This aims to help field teams to identify the reference frameworks that are important for them and translate these into realistic action that is adapted to a specific operational context and sector.

**Purpose vs. Process** - Anyone working in the sector who wants to improve humanitarian and development operations is likely to find themselves contributing to the development of reference frameworks at some point or other. The majority of these initiatives are rational from the point of view of the individuals and organisations who develop and promote them. However, taken together, all these rules and frameworks do not necessarily produce a relevant and agile whole:

• As is the case for all tools, some of these frameworks can be misused. If a ‘marker’ on a specific subject is not relevant, it can be misunderstood or can be inappropriate for the context. This can lead to extra work and the production of inaccurate information that does not contribute to good decision-making at the right time.

• By over-formalising the processes in place, all of these frameworks can reduce two essential factors of an agile approach: 1. Giving staff the ability to question themselves and adapt to how an operation is evolving; 2. Informal monitoring that helps to reinforce the relations between different stakeholders and focuses on important aspects that have not necessarily been identified before.

• As more regulations are introduced, a whole series of additional demands are made of actors in the aid sector, which can act as a barrier to an agile approach.

The challenge of agility consists of finding the right balance between acquiring knowledge to improve management in the future and obtaining better results in the short term based on current knowledge.
sector for ‘models of excellence’ focused on the purpose and results of the organisation’s operations, which gives greater flexibility for an agile approach?

- Does an agile approach necessarily imply that there is an obligation to achieve certain results, over and above an obligation to implement the agreed means? If so, what responsibilities should be given to the different stakeholders of an operation? And based on what standards?

**Opportunities from the business sector** – Given the questions facing the humanitarian and development sector, what role can agile methods from the business sector play in operations? Having been interested in this issue for a longer time, the business sector has shown that agility and standards are not necessarily incompatible:

- The business sector’s agile projects are also implemented in sectors where there is a lot of regulatory pressure such as banking, insurance, energy, distribution, industry, and services. These show that it is possible to combine agile methods with technical and legal standards.
- A reference document of good ‘agile’ practices exists: the Agile Manifesto. This is an extremely succinct document that sets out the main principles for managing an IT project properly. It is the basis for what are known today as agile methods in the business sector and can easily be adapted to the humanitarian and development sector.
- Methods, tools and training courses already exist to develop the knowledge and skills needed to implement agile projects. Different types of ‘agile certification’ for individuals are recognised in the business sector. For example, the PMI Agile Certified Practitioner (PMI-ACP)® formally recognises a person’s level of knowledge of agile principles and their competence in agile techniques. This type of individual certification can help to address certain key issues of agile projects such as the specific characteristics of an agile contract, continuous needs assessment, the definition of operational scenarios, planning work in keeping with the capacities of the team, monitoring performance and managing change.

The tension that exists between agility and standards underlines the difficulty of finding the right balance between respecting rules and adapting an operation when needs, contexts or resources change. Using formal and informal ‘standards’ properly in agile projects is as much a question of respecting the demands of the sector as a question of the experience of the different stakeholders in being able to use existing reference frameworks in a positive and flexible way to guide and facilitate the agility of operations. As the experience of the business sector has shown, if, rather than being imposed, standards are established with the different stakeholders and adapted to the context, they can actively support agile operations.

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1 Adapted from the definition of a ‘standard’ by ISO – ISO Standard - “a document, established by consensus and approved by a recognized body, that provides, for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for activities or their results, aimed at the achievement of the optimum degree of order in a given context.”

2 [https://www.spherestandards.org/fr/](https://www.spherestandards.org/fr/)

3 [https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard](https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard)

4 Introductory text by Véronique de Geoffroy for the 2018 Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid


6 For more information about this tool, see: [https://www.urd.org/en/Activities/Organisational-support/The-Quality-and-Accountability](https://www.urd.org/en/Activities/Organisational-support/The-Quality-and-Accountability)

7 See the HEM article « An “Agile Manifesto” for humanitarian and development projects ».

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Information technology: a ‘fig leaf’ to hide the sector’s lack of agility?

Lisa Daoud & Edmond Wach

The relationship between agility and the use of information technologies can be obvious, it is not systematic. The 2018 Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid brought together experts on this issue from different horizons. This article is based on the discussions that took place on that occasion and a number of messages that emerged about using information technology in aid programmes.

Introduction

How can we improve our decision-making in crisis contexts? How can we adapt our responses more rapidly? How can we ensure that we learn continuously by monitoring change? Very often, the answer to these three questions is the same: information technology! It seems obvious: if rapid decision-making processes depend on having information in real time, and if the continuous improvement of projects depends on having access to reliable data, information systems and IT tools would appear to be a major asset, or even the way forward. As such, it is revealing that the concept of agility comes from the field of software development to describe a method which brings software designers closer to end users, thus reducing development cycles.

As humanitarians we have seen the birth and growth of IT solutions that allow contextual and project monitoring data to be collected, processed and combined. For example, consider the changes that have been brought by RedRose1 in terms of managing cash transfer programmes, or HDX2 in terms of needs analysis. The organisation of international aid can now be based on data, which is often quantitative, and which is supposed to allow decision-makers in the field and at headquarters to make more enlightened decisions, at the right time, based on convincing evidence. In the business sector, community platforms – with Airbnb and BlaBlaCar at the forefront – also seem to show that technological advances can allow more participation and control by those who use a service: the International Rescue Committee (IRC), for example, took inspiration from this to develop Serviceinfo, a platform that allows Syrian refugees in Lebanon to rate humanitarian services based on
the principle of crowdsourcing in order to be more reactive and closer to beneficiaries – in other words, more agile. But is the relationship between technological tools and the quality of aid really so obvious?

Though we have to recognise what information technology has contributed to agility, this must not prevent us from observing that it is not always as positive. IT solutions seem necessary, at least as components of an agility plan, but what practices should be adopted to ensure that the technology really contributes to agile, high-quality aid?

**Message 1: When a technology is used, this needs to be for specific uses and for a specific decision-maker.**

The ICRC’s report on the use of technology during interventions in conflict zones concludes that “The future (and the present) is digital”. Being “digitally-prepared” would allow organisations to supply more accountable and high quality services. There is nevertheless a nuance in the report: the deployment of technological solutions needs to be seen as a “means to an end, rather than an end in itself – which is still often the case”. So, what is the end? Why do we want data in a crisis context?

Answering these questions and clarifying the fact that data should serve operational and institutional decision-making is already half the battle. What decisions need to be made and where does this take place? In other words, what decision-maker is the data directed at and for what ‘purpose’?

The development of information technology allows faster access to data. The geographical hubs at headquarters in Paris, Brussels or Geneva can gain access (sometimes in real time) to their teams’ contextual and project monitoring data. As such, it is tempting to give the responsibility of making decisions to top management who are like the captain at the helm, and who feel that, in this big global village, they have as much, if not more, information than in the field. But does this not run contrary to the idea of contextual, rapid and effective decision-making? Has the centralisation of decision-making made possible by the dissemination of information somehow blocked the agility of responses in the field? As for the monitoring and evaluation of agility, which was described in a recent study as an ‘under-developed art’, it does not appear to have found a ‘champion’ for the moment. Worse still, it is sometimes the need for agility that is given as a reason for the lack of preparation and structure of monitoring systems. In the end, though the monitoring of indicators does contribute to continuous improvement, the systems that are created often only contribute to…donor reporting.

If it is intended to increase agility, the digitisation of a process needs to be preceded by an analysis of the decisions that the process aims to support and their logic. If roles and responsibilities are not formalised and the decision-making method is not clarified, it will be difficult to choose and configure an appropriate technology that allows efficiency and quality in general to be improved: indeed, there are different needs depending on the level targeted. As such, the example of organisational indicators is revealing: top management teams often instinctively want to install ‘business intelligence’ software that allows combined indicators to be visualised. But is it really a priority for country offices to send information about the number of facilities created’ every month when managing activities and measuring change represent challenges of another nature which require much more fine-tuned analysis and relevant IT solutions? The use of the technology will be different in the field, and different too between the different levels in a particular context. We therefore have to accept that what works for one decision-maker will not necessarily meet the needs of all decision-makers, at every level and in all organisations. In the absence of a universal tool, and given how difficult it is to transpose one set up (or one tool) to another context without adapting it, adopting the appropriate technology involves situation analysis and risk-taking.

What is more, using technology makes us question decision-making processes: what determines decision-makers’ choices? Is it experience, shared knowledge, or objective data? No doubt it is a little of all three, and it is interesting to note that recent studies (outside the humanitarian sector) show that individuals tend to rationalise and/or justify their decisions based on data after the fact rather than the other way around, as is often assumed. It is also frequently interpersonal relations that produce information and knowledge (and therefore decisions), rather than self-generated information based on data of varying reliability. Studies by Groupe URD and ALNAP on decision-making should help to move the debate forward.
Message 2: If individuals and organisations do not change their tech culture beforehand, digitalisation will not have any effect, or it may even make the current situation worse.

The aid sector is not immune to the paradoxes that society in general has been faced with regarding new information and communication technologies. If they are used with certain intentions, these technologies can make the world more participatory and accountable (freedom of expression, decentralisation of transactions), but with others they become instruments that make processes more cumbersome with potential totalitarian tendencies (labelling and surveillance, and even the identification and punishment of deviant behaviour). In short, ‘tech’ is what we make of it.

As we know them today, new information and communication technologies are oriented towards quantity and output. Data do not intrinsically contain any ‘knowledge’ and the data produced by institutional information systems rarely allow real-team reflection (they need at least to be cleaned and probably to be contextualized and triangulated). What is more, this mass of data that is difficult to digest – particularly without special skills such as those of a data scientist – is not sufficiently used to analyse the relevance of the response, and sometimes just contributes to a sort of ‘data war’: as implied by Alice Obrecht from ALNAP, the more data you have, the greater your share of the ‘humanitarian market’.

What is more, information software has an annoying habit of fixing data methods, processes, calculations and categorisations, in order to ensure that their formulas and algorithms are in good health. Many of us, I am sure, when we are analysing a system with a view to digitising it, dream of hearing a user say “I always do it like this regardless of the situation or the context”. In other words, the opposite of agility... And yet, the informal functioning, changed objectives and rapid decision-making that are the enemies of IT developers, are particularly common in humanitarian action. Consequently, if algorithms are given a major role in supporting decision-making, they need to be adaptable, transparent and accompanied by ‘human’ appeals and monitoring mechanisms that guarantee that the project has the necessary flexibility (for example the Proxy Means Test used in Lebanon to select the refugees to be included in cash transfer programmes). Also, the financial dimension should not be neglected: relevant information systems require continuous investment in order to anticipate changes.

In terms of mentalities within the sector, there are two preconditions: on the one hand, we must stop being ‘tech optimists’ at all costs, believing in short-term investment and considering the harmonisation of tools to be a magic solution. As François Grünewald from Groupe URD says, we need to be ‘knowledge-driven’ rather than ‘data-driven’. Besides, we need to promote the values and approaches that we want to use, but we also need to identify the actions and decisions that we want to make more efficient so that the technologies that are developed represent useful tools. In other words, we need to respect our humanitarian culture!

The informal functioning, changed objectives and rapid decision-making that are the enemies of IT developers, are particularly common in humanitarian action.

Message 3: New information and communication technology will not save the world, or the humanitarian system...

... and will not make up for lack of skills (for example in management), poor contextual analysis, or the failure to listen.

Organisations, but especially the individuals within these organisations, should invest primarily in high-impact technology (rather than those with a presumed impact). Anyone who has attended a forum on aid and technology will have noticed how the humanitarian sector is not immune to ‘trends’. In the words of Sarah Seldorff, who currently runs the Humanitarian Data Center in The Hague, “It is not all about big data”. The challenge for operational organisations is rather to manage and give meaning to a variety of non-standardised data bases of limited size that are nothing like the big data that certain directors talk about. This is confirmed by what Simon Johnson experienced at GeONG 2018: participants at the conference felt that the impact of blockchain, cryptocurrencies and voice-assistance had been overestimated, while OpenStreetMap, HXL and IATI are little-known ‘heroes’ (who receive very little investment). Pilot

Humanitarian Aid on the move
Review n°20

15
tests of all kinds of technology, even the most futuristic, are useful to help the sector move forward, but sometimes detract from current challenges. We regularly see humanitarian organisations’ Innovation Units expanding and being given significant budgets to adapt the latest fashionable technologies, while their operational departments remain unable to use IT tools properly (for example, in terms of mobile data collection, case management, etc.).

Of course, the Famine Action Mechanism – the joint initiative by the ICRC, the United Nations, the World Bank, Microsoft, Amazon and Google – aims to prove the contrary. This project, which was launched in 2018, aims to “help to anticipate famine and periods of food insecurity before these events happen”, by combining artificial intelligence and ‘machine learning’. Though it will be interesting to see the concrete results of this innovative mechanism, we nevertheless know that the poor reactivity of actors to famine is caused by other factors: the lack of operational partners on the ground, access problems and the human factor, all of which cannot be tackled by technology.

Conclusion

The link between technology and the agility of aid is therefore not so obvious and raises questions about our practices. Do we really need real-time data at headquarters or regional levels in order to make decisions? This is not really so obvious if the decisions themselves are not made in the right place and the technology appears to only be legitimising this illusion of knowledge and control. Do information systems necessarily produce reliable data? This needs to be qualified in the light of the frequent methodological weaknesses of data collection in the field. Basing our analyses purely on data, without experience or knowledge of the context, is often useless, and the technological veneer can even sometimes legitimise inappropriate data. Finally, are aid actors really capable of adapting their responses due to feedback from IT tools such as crowdsourcing? Numerous structural weaknesses remain and technology will not be able to solve all of these. It may even continue to mask them if the current trend continues without any serious questioning of approaches and practices.

1 RedRose offers a unique e-card to manage distribution activities.
2 Humanitarian Data Exchange
3 Cf. the report by Christian Aid Ireland and ODI, Learning to make a difference Christian Aid Ireland’s adaptive programme management in governance, gender, peace building and human rights, 2018.
5 https://www.urd.org/fr/projet/les-processus-dalloctions-des-ressources-financieres-des-bailleurs-de-laide/
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9 http://www.cartong.org/geong/2018
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Having worked for more than 10 years both in the field and as a technical focal point with different NGOs, including SOLIDARITES INTERNATIONAL and Terre des Hommes, Edmond WACH currently works for CartONG where he is the Information Management Project Manager. CartONG provides services and tools in mapping, mobile data collection and information management for the humanitarian and development sectors.
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- Tech and Business Management blogs and websites:
  - A Reality Check on Agility and BPM | Bouncing Thoughts
  - The role of technology agility on business processes and organizational agilities - IEEE Conference Publication
    - Votre organisation est-elle agile ? | Revue Gestion
    - L’agilité : plus qu’une méthodologie, une philosophie
    - Can technology improve agility? - ebizQ Forum
- Pour une sobriété numérique : the new report by Shift on the environmental impact of ICT
In order to deal with growing humanitarian needs and the challenges of increasing their activities, Humanity & Inclusion (HI) is currently using Lean Management tools and methods to simplify its processes. By encouraging its staff and managers to adopt a culture of continuous improvement, HI’s objectives are to look after staff well-being at work and optimise the use of financial resources while increasing its presence and its impact among vulnerable people.

The decision to adopt Lean management

The issue at stake

Humanity & Inclusion (formerly Handicap International) is a non-governmental organisation that provides assistance to vulnerable people in more than sixty countries. Today, there is a huge increase in needs among the most fragile people in the field. It was therefore with the aim of increasing both the quality and quantity of the assistance that it delivers that the organisation drew up its strategy for 2016-2025.

One of the challenges that HI faces is to do more with resources that are increasingly difficult to find, while remaining faithful to its values and principles, and meeting the demands of private donors and funding agencies. The only room for manoeuvre would appear to be to simplify its way of operating. This is a major challenge in an organisation that is more than 35 years old, that has become a federal network of 8 national associations operating in more than 60 countries, and where procedures are reassuring, even though they compartmentalise and increase day-to-day work.

The solution and the activities carried out

At the beginning of 2016, as part of the implementation of its strategy, HI chose to adopt Lean Management as a way of optimising its processes and helping its managerial culture to evolve. A Lean Unit was created to promote this approach, manned by two members of staff who know the organisation well and who received training at “ECAM-expert” in Lyon. Their first mission – during which they were supported by pro bono consultants – consisted of formalising a methodology based on Lean Management but adapted to HI’s specific context and challenges.

The methodology involved simplification activities, in the form of projects called ‘simplification waves’. Each wave is dedicated to a specific issue that is prioritised by the Directoire (HI’s highest decision-making body). The objective is that these waves eventually cover all the organisation’s departments and optimise the most complex, cross-cutting processes. The staff and managers involved in each wave learn about the approach and are invited to reproduce it in order to establish a process of continuous improvement.

The waves last between 8 and 12 months. This allows time to become familiar with the approach and allows the improvements to be established durably. Each wave is piloted and coordinated by specific Steering Committees and Monitoring Committees. After a framing phase, these begin with an initial assessment based on interviews with representatives of all the actors involved (headquarters / field, managers / collaborators, support services / internal ‘clients’). The observations made during these interviews are shared and prioritised with all the contributors, and a precise action plan is drawn up of the issues to be dealt with. Each theme is then addressed in sub-groups in order to establish an improvement plan: formalisation of a target process, a new tool or a new operational rule. A test phase then begins during which the targeted process and the related tools are tested on a limited scale in order to check the relevance of the improvements and make any necessary adjustments. Key Performance Indicators (KPI) are identified to measure the benefits of the changes. Once the tests have been validated, the departments in charge of the optimised processes deploy them throughout the organisation. This is called the generalisation phase.
This methodology is complemented by specific and individual support for managers involved in each wave to help them establish continuous improvement as part of their managerial practices. This is the anchorage phase. This involves, for example, optimising the time spent on staff meetings, implementing visual management, communicating and tackling the root causes of problems encountered, and finally, steering the performance of their teams and the processes that they are in charge of.

In parallel to the simplification waves, problem solving sessions (known as Kaizen in Lean Management language) are organised to resolve the problems encountered by staff in their day-to-day activities while training participants in using Kaizen methodology.

**Results**

**Outputs**

Via the simplification waves, several of the organisation’s major processes were formalised and optimised, such as the arbitration of responses to donor opportunities and the drafting of project proposals, expatriate recruitment and career management, and accounting and financial closure of projects. Each optimisation involved the identification of key performance indicators. Monitored regularly, the indicators help to objectively quantify the performance of actors involved in the processes, and subsequently correct gaps appropriately (awareness-raising, training, adjusting standards, etc.).

“The Key Performance Indicators and the objectives for improvement that we give ourselves as a team, as well as visual management2 and problem-solving workshops, allow us to maintain our continuous improvement approach.”

(Director of Human Resources)

Over and above the improvements made, the simplification waves have helped to de-compartmentalise the teams who, too often, work in silos (those who work in the same sector, those in emergency relief and those in development teams, those at headquarters and those in the field). The process-based approach helped to share issues, talk about problems and compare viewpoints in order to find more relevant solutions and often establish a harmonised process, whereas before it was very common to have different ways of doing things depending on the interlocutors. This harmonised process was generally based on the good practices identified during exchanges.

Regarding the managerial practices deployed by the Simplification Unit, the managers appreciate receiving individual support to implement concrete tools that allow them to establish a new dynamic and think about the efficiency of their team. It is an opportunity for them to develop their managerial skills, which, up till now, they have often acquired empirically. They also are able to discuss with other managers in feedback sessions, which enriches the learning approach and the dissemination of good practices.

**The drivers of success**

These results would probably not have been achieved if the implementation of Lean Management had not been promoted by the General Director. The presence of the General Director and the relevant members of top management (Directoire) at the meetings to launch the waves, in the Steering Committees, and at the closure meetings with all the staff, shows strong commitment, and motivates the teams and managers to meet the challenge of achieving the optimisations.

A paradigm shift of this kind also requires investment in terms of HR, with trained, in-house ‘Lean Champions’ who kick-start the approach within teams and provide them with long-term support. Champions need to be able to take a step back from the organisation and the Lean Management approach in order to be able to adapt Lean recipes to the organisation. What is more, Lean Management encourages a bottom-up approach to optimisation and problem-solving. ‘Operators’ (those who are directly involved in implementation) are the best suited to identify problems and suggest improvements. As they are able to contribute concretely to the assessment, the action plan and the testing of the suggested solution, they feel involved and empowered, thus optimising the chances of success.

“The simplification waves provide an opportunity to take part in very structured group discussions with a specific methodology that allow us to gradually become familiar with the issues involved.”

(Technical Director)

In terms of workload, staff involvement in a simplification wave is significant. It is essential to anticipate this to ensure that those involved will be available. A provisional timetable for a simplification wave is a good way to increase its visibility and allow each person to organise themselves.

In terms of method, the test phase plays an essential role. When there is reticence about implementing an optimised process involving less control, for example, because it is perceived as a risk for the quality of the result, carrying out a test on a limited scale can help to gain the support of stakeholders. If the test is positive, this can remove
reticence making generalisation easier. If the test is negative, readjustments are made and then new tests are carried out until generalisation is possible.

“Trying solutions on a limited scale makes it possible to think ‘out of the box’ by testing very innovative things that we would not have dared implement directly on a large scale.” (Director of Human Resources)

At the end of each simplification wave, particular care is taken in estimating what has been gained (number of hours/days saved, duration reduced, ‘errors’ reduced). The communication of these gains helps to reinforce the methodology. It is also a source of motivation for the teams involved in the simplification waves, who can then focus on tasks with a higher added value.

In terms of managerial practices, the principal success factor is exemplary behaviour. Each level of management, beginning with the Directors, should be a model of good practices in implementing Lean Management so that these practices can be re-appropriated at each hierarchical level, and then deployed in a durable way.

Problems encountered

The first difficulty appeared during the framing phase of a wave. As it had not been sufficiently framed, the first simplification wave was spread out over too large a perimeter, involving too many different people and services. The subjects that were chosen in the action plan were too disconnected so that the transformation process became too diffused. The working framework of the following wave was more focused, but the scale of the subjects dealt with meant that more work needed to be done than initially programmed and, as a result, the length of the project and the involvement of the different stakeholders had to be extended. This had two consequences: the motivation of the teams was difficult to maintain, and it somewhat compromised one of the principles of Lean Management, which is to move forward one small step at a time while adopting a culture of continuous improvement.

Another point is that, at the beginning of a wave, it is difficult for managers to assess the extent of the changes that will need to be implemented at the end of the wave (generalisation of improvements and changes in managerial practices), when support stops from the Lean Unit. Despite the initial framing, the aspects that are going to be affected by the improvements are not known in advance (Will we need to train people? … revise certain forms? … adapt IT tools? … work on complementary processes?…). In certain cases, there are major impacts and generalisation can be difficult to organise and manage.

“Over and above top management, the manager involved in a simplification wave should not only be familiar with the approach, but should be highly motivated due to the high level of involvement that the approach demands. They also need to accept that they will not be completely in control, as the proposals and solutions come from the teams” (Director of Human Resources)

Because certain teams are based in countries where infrastructure is not very developed, it is sometimes difficult for staff to take part in workshops remotely and this needs to be anticipated so that they are able to contribute fully. For certain topics, field visits have helped to enrich initial assessments and involve more field staff, but these are expensive and therefore remain limited.

It is important to have a relatively stable organisation, both in terms of operational and management functions. Changing the people involved in the middle of a project means that momentum is lost and slows down the unfolding of the wave. More generally, staff faced with organisational changes are too pre-occupied by the deployment of the new organisation to be able to focus on improving processes.

Finally, as many processes are neither harmonised nor formalised, the initial formalisation work can be tedious for people who are not familiar with this practice. Designing a process may appear to some like a way of making things more complex rather than making them simpler. It is therefore important to carry out this step as quickly as possible and then begin the work on finding optimisations which is more motivating for those involved.

Conclusion and perspectives for the future

With almost three years of experience, the lessons we have learned will guide the approach of the Simplification Unit in the years ahead, with the aim of continuing to adapt Lean Management to the specific characteristics of NGOs. We also feel that Lean Management needs to be adopted by management as a whole. These managerial practices can only last if they are part of a common management system used by all managers, regardless of their level in the hierarchy.

Involving staff and supporting the managers in charge of our activities in the field are major issues that we will need to address in the months ahead. Part of the answer no doubt lies in the tools implemented by managers at headquarters, tools that they will be exposed to and from which they will be able to take inspiration. Other actions will also be needed to increase ownership of these tools and deploy them more systematically.
In terms of the simplification of processes, though the ‘wave’ approach is still relevant to tackle complex issues that require significant commitment, simpler processes should be addressed using a light mechanism over shorter time periods. This will be tested in 2019.

Finally, we have begun to map all the organisation’s processes and this will continue in 2019. This mapping will make it possible to clarify who is in charge of each major process and will give an overview to allow us to prioritise the processes that need to be formalised, and, if necessary, optimised.

1 Lean Management (also known as Operational Excellence) is based on the following pillars: adding value for the client, reducing waste, working collaboratively (internally or externally), and improving actors’ skills by resolving problems. In order to be successfully deployed, it needs to be applied simultaneously to the operational system, the managerial system and the organisational culture (proposed definition from ECAM-expert).

2 http://www.ecam-expert.fr/

3 Visual management uses visual cues to make information within a workplace available at all times to those who need to know it.

After a number of years as expats in the field, Aline Robert and Damien Badoil have occupied different positions at HI headquarters, first in operational roles, then as managers and directors, which has given them in-depth knowledge of the organisation. Aline also has 10 years’ experience as a consultant in management and project management. In early 2016 they did a course to learn about Lean Management principles and tools and created a Simplification Unit with the help of 2 consultants.
An “Agile Manifesto” for humanitarian and development projects

Today, agility is a key concept in consulting firms and other service companies. All major firms have begun transformation projects and many fields other than information systems have begun to embrace agility. This desire to be more ‘agile’ has also reached humanitarian and development organisations who are using the experience of businesses to increase their effectiveness and flexibility. But what are the roots of this trend?

The concept of ‘agility’ was established - in the world of software development - due to the need to restore common sense. Meeting a need in a coherent manner had become of secondary importance compared to meeting the terms of increasingly complicated and restrictive contracts. People had begun to talk about resources and man-days as others talk about kilos of potatoes. It was in this context that 17 people involved in using ‘alternative’ project management methods got together in 2001 to create what is known today as the Agile Manifesto, an extremely succinct document that re-establishes the foundations for the proper management of an IT project. This manifesto serves as the common denominator for what are referred to today as ‘agile methodologies’. These are methods for steering and carrying out projects that aim to include the users as much as possible and be as reactive as possible to their demands. This is achieved by means of short and adaptive cycles (‘iterations’) that allow expected deliverables to be conceptualized and carried out progressively or ‘incrementally’.

Of course, project management is not limited to the world of information systems. Indeed, it provides a methodological framework for the majority of international humanitarian and development projects. At the Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid, which took place at Groupe URD’s headquarters in October 2018, the participants collectively reflected on agility in humanitarian and development aid, and the Agile Manifesto emerged as a source of inspiration. In this article we have adapted the original text in order to produce an ‘Agile Manifesto for Humanitarian and Development Project Management’.

"Agile Manifesto for Humanitarian and Development Project Management"
(Adapted from the "Manifesto for Agile Software Development")

The 4 values - Through our work in the sector, we have come to value:
1. Individuals and interactions over standards, processes, procedures and tools.
2. Concrete and relevant products and services over exhaustive project documentation and reporting.
3. Collaboration with the different stakeholders over contract negotiation.
4. Responding to change over following a plan.

These values are the basis of an agile approach. We recognise the importance of all the items mentioned above, but we believe that an agile approach should give priority to the items at the beginning of each phrase (in bold).

The 12 principles - We follow these principles:

1. Our highest priority is to meet people's needs in a responsible manner through the concrete and regular delivery of products and services in the common interest.

In the aid sector, ‘clients’ can refer to: those who are targeted by its operations (often referred to as ‘beneficiaries’), the body that funds the operations (‘donors’) or the authorities who regulate them. In an agile operation, all the stakeholders work together to place the population at the centre of the project and respond to their needs in a responsible manner.
2. Stakeholders welcome changes, even late in a project. Agile processes adjust operations when needs, contexts or resources change in order to remain as relevant and effective as possible. Projects almost always need to change in order to be successful, and all the more so in the kind of contexts where humanitarian and development projects are implemented. These changes are normal and to be welcomed as long as there is a flexible mechanism in place to manage them.

3. Implement projects frequently and in a timely manner, with short cycles that allow stakeholders’ opinions to be taken into account regularly.

This principle underlines the importance of short implementation and improvement cycles – sometimes called ‘sprints’ – in order to implement projects regularly and concretely, and adapt frequently, if necessary, rather than wait too long in order to design the ‘perfect operation’ which only exists in logical frameworks. It also raises the question of the responsibility of aid programmes to regularly gather and take into account the opinions of aid recipients.

4. Stakeholders and project teams work together throughout the project.

Agility is not possible without a ‘participation revolution’ which implies the active involvement of aid recipients in projects.

5. Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.

Though the aid sector has taken some time to make progress on this issue, ‘wellbeing’ at work cannot be dissociated from an agile approach which is impossible without motivated and responsible staff.

6. The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to the stakeholders of a project is face-to-face dialogue.

In a typical ‘operational chain’ during an aid project, numerous stakeholders are involved without necessarily having the possibility of meeting each other and establishing relations beyond the impersonal relations of carrying out activities, using resources and achieving results. In order to build relations, it is important (if possible) to have at least some face-to-face exchanges in order to overcome the shortcomings of remote communication.

7. Products or services that meet aid recipients’ needs in a responsible manner are the primary measure of progress.

In order to be agile, it is necessary to have detailed and shared understanding of the changes that are being targeted by an operation while reducing the monitoring of methods and means implemented to achieve them.

8. Agile processes promote a sustainable work rate.

The different stakeholders should be able to maintain a constant pace indefinitely.

Agility is impossible if the commissioning body, the implementing teams, the aid recipients, etc. do not have the time available to monitor a programme and adapt their involvement if necessary. The effectiveness and ability of a team also depend on their level of availability, without which the project runs the risk of weakening the people involved, and consequently, resources being misused and results not being attained.
9. Good project design and continuous attention to technical excellence reinforces agility.
Being agile does not mean ‘cutting corners’ or taking action in a superficial way. We begin to prepare
agility during the initial assessment and the project design, laying the foundations that will allow us
to implement activities in a flexible and relevant manner. Agility also depends on the technical
quality of the products and services that are implemented or strengthened by an operation. This
limits the risk of blockages as much as possible, and helps to improve these services in the future.

10. Simplicity - the art of maximising the amount of work not done - is essential.
With the increasing complexity of operations, it is essential that simple (though not simplistic)
project implementation and monitoring mechanisms should be put in place that allow people's
needs to be met in an effective and responsible manner.

11. The most agile operations emerge from self-organising teams
with clear and relevant decision-making processes.
An entrepreneur once said: “I do not pay engineers in order to tell them what to do, but rather so
that they tell me how to do it””. Agile operations also depend on delegation and governance that are
clear and accepted by all.

12. At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to improve,
and adjusts the operation accordingly.
Continuous improvement is directly linked to this principle. It involves taking a step back to make
adjustments throughout an operation. More generally, it helps the organisation to learn.

Conclusion
Reworking the Agile Manifesto for humanitarian and development aid is neither revolutionary, nor
totally new: experienced organisations will see it as common knowledge. However, we feel that
these principles can serve as a common denominator for initiatives that help to adjust an operation
when needs, contexts or resources change, thereby increasing the relevance of humanitarian and
development aid.

1 For more information about the Manifesto for Agile Software Development, see: https://agilemanifesto.org/iso/fr/manifesto.html
2 Speech by Alice Obrecht (ALNAP) at the UAH.

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Agility, accountability and quality: linking humanitarian and development aid more effectively

Jean-Bernard Véron

This article looks at the programme to assist IDPs and support agricultural and livestock activities in Northern Mali, implemented by The Association of Professional Farmers’ Organisations (AOPP). It analyses the programme, which was run in a crisis/post crisis context, in terms of agility and accountability.

The programme to assist IDPs and support agricultural and livestock activities in Northern Mali, implemented by The Association of Professional Farmers’ Organisations (AOPP) aimed primarily to combine the provision of humanitarian aid to the displaced rural population – and their host communities – and the reintegration of these IDPs. This reintegration involved not only restarting the IDPs’ economic activities, but also a ‘development’ programme (in the strictest sense of the term), aimed at improving agricultural and livestock outputs.

To achieve these two objectives, the programme aimed to be agile, in terms of its design and its implementation, and accountable towards beneficiaries, in terms of the choice of projects to be funded. And, of course, it also aimed to achieve high quality results. From these three points of view, the programme was therefore in line with recent trends in the aid sector, particularly in crisis situations.

Context and challenges

The security crisis that Mali has been going through since 2012 has had two negative impacts on the people directly or indirectly involved. The first is that it has threatened the coverage of IDPs’ basic needs and placed additional pressure on their host communities. The second is that the IDPs have had to stop the farming and livestock activities that had allowed them to be economically autonomous. What is more, when they returned to their homes - once the security situation had been stabilized - their means of production had been damaged, as we will see below.

The programme aimed to provide assistance to those affected by the crisis using an LRRD approach (Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development), that is to say,
by combining humanitarian aid for the IDPs and the host communities, and economic recovery activities for the IDPs when they returned to their homes. There was therefore a double challenge: adapting to changes in the context as they moved from the humanitarian phase to the reintegration and development phase, and remaining relevant to the needs of the beneficiaries. In order to meet these challenges, it was necessary to be agile in terms of the different forms of assistance provided, and accountable vis-à-vis the beneficiaries.

**Objectives and implementation**

Given the situation, the programme had several objectives in keeping with the two types of action involved, with humanitarian assistance first, followed by reintegration and development aid. The first objective, during the humanitarian phase of the programme, was to cover the basic needs of both the IDPs and the host communities. This involved distributing food kits and insecticide-treated mosquito nets, training health workers in screening, and providing care to malnourished children. These needs were identified in discussions with the two target groups.

The second objective was to help relaunch activities to allow the IDPs to regain their economic autonomy once they were back in their home region, so that they would no longer need humanitarian aid. This took two forms:

- for the farming activities carried out by men: seeds and fertilizer, spades and wheelbarrows were distributed so that they could repair the small dykes in the irrigation areas, as were donkeys and carts which are essential to transport crops and manure;

- for the livestock activities carried out by women: two ewes and cottonseed cake for animal feed were given to each beneficiary.

The agility that should be underlined here concerns the adaptation of the programme to the human context. It included components targeting men, irrigated rice growing, and components targeting women in terms of livestock farming, and to a lesser extent, market farming. As such, it was in keeping with the diversification of activities that allows the families involved to cope better with hazards, particularly climatic hazards, but also market fluctuations for the products that they sell. It should also be noted that this diversification of activities is a very old practice which allows these communities to manage some of the hazards that their activities are faced with.

The third objective was to build the resilience of beneficiaries in relation to climatic risks and improve performance in agriculture and livestock farming. Thus, the seeds that were distributed were selected seeds, including wasa rice, potatoes and onions, with varieties that all combine good yields, are adapted to erratic rainfall, have a short cycle and are resistant to parasitic weeds such as stiga. The women, who each received two ewes, received training in fattening and care, which allows early lambing.

The fourth objective, on which the accountability of the programme is based, was its appropriation by beneficiaries using a bottom-up approach. This gave priority to working with local bodies, not only to establish an in-depth analysis of the situation, but also to define the content of the programme and how it was implemented.

As a consequence, the content of the programme and its implementation method were decided in discussions with grassroots farmers’ organisations who were also supported by the regional AOPPs and the national AOPP, without involving foreign organisations, whether humanitarian or development NGOs, consultancies or businesses.

The choice of beneficiaries and the content of the ‘Village par village’ programme were the result of discussions between members of each local farmers’ organisation concerned. To do this, the latter received different kinds of support from their regional and national authorities, which also helped to consolidate them.

The choice of beneficiaries was the responsibility of each farmers’ organisation and concerned the most vulnerable people, particularly widows, and also some of the most productive farmers so as to serve as an example to the other members of the farmers’ organisation. At the local level, whether for irrigated rice farming, livestock farming or market gardening, the farmers’ organisation supplied seeds, inputs, tools, diesel for the irrigation pumps, and animals. In exchange, after the harvest or the new-born lambs had been sold, the farmers’ organisation was paid a fee to cover the cost of its services. It was also able to buy the farmers’ excess produce and sell it on wholesale markets.

The regional AOPPs provided technical support and provided local farmers’ organisations with funding delegated by the national AOPP. The latter centralised requests from the local level, which it weighed against the financial resources that were available. It was also in charge of knowledge management and sharing of
successes and failures with member organisations, for example, by organising exchange visits between farmers’ organisations. This brought both agility and accountability to the beneficiaries of the programme, helping them to improve their performance in their different activities, in keeping with a quality approach.

In addition, the national AOPP conducted advocacy activities in order to push the public authorities to implement the new Agricultural Orientation Law and denounce land appropriation due to population displacement. Another of its objectives was to reinforce grassroots organisations and gradually increase financial autonomy as secondary outcomes of a programme which otherwise had very concrete production objectives.

Results and future prospects

The results of this programme have been positive in terms of what it has achieved for both beneficiaries and organisations. Some uncertainties remain, however.

Rice yields for the beneficiaries of the programme were very respectable, in the order of 50 to 60 quintals per hectare for the first harvest. On the other hand, farmers in the same region who had not benefited from the programme and who traditionally cultivated rainfed or bank crops suffered from the lack of rainfall during the last winter.

Thanks to the veterinary and fattening training received by the women, the ewes gave birth earlier. What is more, each woman involved in market gardening was able to increase their number of beds from two to six, which allowed significant increases in production. And they were able to secure a certain amount of revenue by selling their products on credit to civil servants, who are more reliable buyers because of their regular income.

It should also be pointed out that, thanks to this, they were able to borrow from a micro-finance organisation and have two storage warehouses built, and that they were then able to pay back the loan without any difficulty. The programme also helped to boost seed production since the seeds that were used were of good quality, were suited to the region’s climatic context and were supplied by farmers’ organisations that are specialised in seed production.

In terms of the results obtained both in crop cultivation and livestock farming, the programme achieved the objectives that had been fixed and the level of quality that was being aimed for. Nevertheless, this does not mean that it will not be faced with difficulties of different kinds in the future.

The first of these difficulties is obviously the unstable security situation in Mali. Armed forces, including France’s Opération Barkhane, the United Nations’ MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel, have helped to reduce conflict in certain regions of the north. But the lack of results to date of the Algiers Agreement, and the spreading of insecurity to central Mali and the three-border region (whether this is due to Jihadist groups, drug trafficking, particularly cocaine of Latin-American origin, or community conflicts, particularly between sedentary farmers and nomadic livestock farmers), clearly means that there are threats to the population of these regions, and therefore potentially those who have benefited from the programme. We should not under-estimate the risk of renewed population displacements which would bring us back to the initial situation that the programme was designed to address. And it is unlikely that agility alone will make it possible to overcome this security challenge.

To this should be added the question of crop commercialisation. The arrival on the market of greater quantities of produce has destabilized the relationship between supply and demand and therefore has had a negative impact on selling prices, which sometimes has led to the loss of some of the produce. The reason for this is that without any storage (or the ability to conserve perishable goods such as onions or milk), it is not really possible to extend the period during which they can be sold. That said, and this is another sign of the agility and involvement of beneficiaries, certain farmers’ organisations have begun to consider complementing this programme by building collective grain stores.

Another difficulty, or unanswered question, concerns the displaced persons who are shop owners or tradesmen rather than crop farmers or livestock farmers. Their economic reintegration will require other types of assistance, such as micro-finance for investments that are necessary to restart these activities. If this were to be implemented in a new phase of the programme, it would have objectives of agility and accountability and would target new categories of beneficiaries based on their needs.
Conclusion

For the time being, the adoption of the concept of agility in the initial analysis, the choice of content and the implementation (while adapting to the changing Malian context and the economic practices of beneficiaries), and the focus on accountability towards beneficiaries, have allowed this programme to achieve satisfactory results.

In addition, it has established new relations between humanitarian aid – except, of course, in relation to emergency relief – and development aid. As such, this programme is removing a distinction that no longer makes sense, particularly in situations where there is evolving, long-term insecurity.

Jean-Bernard Véron spent most of his professional career at the French Development Agency, where he held a number of positions, including Head of the Macroeconomic Studies Division, Head of the Agricultural and Rural Development Division for Central, Eastern and Southern Africa, and Director of the Asia, Caribbean, Pacific Department. He also created and ran a department focused on crisis situations, with a particular accent on the Sahel, Somalia, Afghanistan and Colombia. He is currently Chairman of the Fondation de France’s French Committee for International Solidarity, Editor-in-chief of the review Afrique Contemporaine and a board member of the Committee for Cooperation with Laos. He is also a novelist and a photographer.
What is an agile team? Is it possible to envisage agile operations and responses if the teams who design and implement them are limited by non-agile environments, practices and ways of thinking? Over and above the operational issues that this question raises, there is the fundamental consideration of the human being in complex organisational systems. Are aid organisations inevitably bound to be standardised ‘service providers’ and passive partners? In the age of aid bureaucratisation, is there still a place for the spirit of rebellion that led to the birth of the humanitarian movement?

These were the questions that were debated by some of the participants at Groupe URD’s Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid in October 2018 during a discussion about how to build agile teams. In this article we propose to look at these issues in greater detail. Firstly, we analyse what it is that ‘stifles’ the ability of teams and individuals in the sector to be agile, at a time when the growing complexity of crises and of the system set up to respond to them requires more and more adaptability on their part. We then explore possible ways of re-boosting teams by allowing them to both optimise the impact of their collaboration with the population and partners and to give back meaning to their involvement in the sector.

The project approach in complex contexts: did somebody say ‘agile’?

The international aid system is affected by several paradoxes. The first is that the realisation that “it is not enough to do good, it needs to be done well” and the responsibility of delivering aid in an equitable and transparent way in all fields while respecting human rights, have led, over time, to the development of a whole range of frameworks, and operational and accountability standards. The paradox being that these mechanisms (sometimes?) make the system very rigid, which reduces actors’ ability to respond appropriately.

These quality-related demands have also had positive results: the professionalization of activities and operations, and the involvement of experts other than doctors, logisticians and geographers, such as directors, administrators, and managers with a specialisation in one field or another. These changes have helped to respond more appropriately to crises of increasing complexity which have weakened areas where there are ecological, climatic, social, economic and demographic tensions.

On the other hand, the aid system has become more rigid: the work of humanitarians, and of aid actors in general, is increasingly complex and is slowed down by increasingly cumbersome administrative and financial procedures. These procedures are part of new ways of working, such as nexuses and consortiums approaches with, sometimes, huge cultural differences between members. They can also be distorted when military doctrines are given priority over humanitarian operations or when some NGOs create orphanages for “humanitarian tourists”.

The second paradox is that the international aid system, which is based on an internationalist concern for humanity, can – at its worst – force those who work in it to adopt a de-humanising position. Taken to the extreme, this creates incongruous and stereotypical situations where human beings who have been affected by a crisis, a disaster or poverty are confined to the role of passive beneficiaries, and above all, of victims to be saved and who have no say in the matter. For their part, national authorities and local NGOs are seen as incompetent or corrupt, with little understanding of the issues at stake or, at best, they are selected to be simple implementing partners.

Though this is a somewhat exaggerated picture (though no so far removed from reality...), it nevertheless raises the question of the place given to the human being within the system. Already in 2005, in a book called Beneficiaries or partners? Groupe URD was questioning the role of affected people in humanitarian projects. At the other end of the spectrum, it is also necessary to talk about the place of aid sector workers, whether employees, volunteers or even interns; resources who are renewed with each turnover, and who are often damaged or “burnt out”.

The psychiatrist and psychotherapist, Barthold Bieren de Haan, former head of the ICRC’s psychosocial staff support programme, wrote about the sources of stress and angst among staff. Much more than considerations of security or exposure to risk, organisational and managerial pressure, as well as ineffective managers, were mentioned most often.
Projects get caught up in implementation approaches - objectives of effectiveness and efficiency, quality of the results - when the conditions themselves are often under-estimated. How many logical framework actually take into account the human factor that aid workers represent as drivers of the expected change and without whom the project cannot be carried out?

All of this leads us to a possible third paradox. In this context, where energy and creativity is crushed, the concept of agility is both a risk and an opportunity. It is a risk if the injunctions to think, act and be agile are added to the tensions that already affect practitioners who are asked to no longer just be relief workers or developers, but to think “out of the box” while being limited by rigid implementation, monitoring and reporting methods. It is an opportunity if the addition of agility into the system allows human beings to be at the centre of complex systems, not as beneficiaries or humanitarians, but as agents of human solidarity.

**Having the courage to place human beings at the centre of complex systems**

At the level of the individual, agility is an adaptive approach based on the best that the individual can give: their intelligence and their courage to leave well-trodden paths and frameworks in order to respond to changing contexts, that is to say, to reality. However, applying this idea is not easy because, as we have seen, agility cannot be achieved by decree: it is achieved by means of individual and collective reflection and experience, often based on observations of shortcomings and failures of projects and teams, but also dreams of a different form of action.

At the level of the individual, above all, agility is about letting go the need and desire for control. Over and above knowledge and certainty, agility calls for the meaning of actions and tools to be questioned, particularly if these are reputed to be all-purpose. Complex crises require specific responses that are adapted to the context and existing capacities. Is it possible to be agile when using standardised ways of thinking and tools?

Agility is a question of humility and responsibility: sometimes not knowing how to answer a given question, not knowing what approach to use, or what tool to apply. In the face of complexity, experts can sometimes feel helpless and without answers. In any case, the situation in which he or she finds themselves requires reflection, consultation and risk-taking in order to implement an unformatted project in response to changing issues, or even a changing environment. It is a question of giving oneself the right to make mistakes, and being humble enough to accept one's own vulnerability which, far from being a weakness, can lead to greater creativity, and even, according to Renée Brown, to joy.

It is also important here to repeat that agility cannot be imposed - and particularly not by means of bureaucratic procedures: it is achieved by dealing with the reality of a situation or a context, and when possible, working with 'sherpas' who already have relevant experience in the area. When they are managers, it is their responsibility to recruit collaborators on the basis of talent (for the future) and not solely on the basis of qualifications and experience (from the past). They are also responsible for establishing a confidence-based working environment and empowering collaboration via continual benevolent communication, and a protective environment for risk-taking. As such, agility is a learning process that promotes collective intelligence.

In a team, agility involves regular sharing of doubts and errors in the face of the complexity of contexts and decisions. It is an opportunity to learn and help everyone’s practices evolve, both individually and as a team. To do this, agile teams need to listen and have benevolent relations over and above the notion of respect. Even with the best projects, with substantial budgets and teams, how can we hope to mobilise the passion and physical and psychological availability of staff if the working environment is toxic? ...if each person is only interested in their own advantages and image? ...if, in addition, management is seen as being imposed and does not play its role? Agility therefore depends on the environment: can an individual, manager or team be agile if the organisation is not? How can there be agility when processes and modus operandi are fixed by contracts, standards and logical frameworks that have been written years in advance for the years ahead when, from one season to the next, people’s realities change, they move, and economic activities evolve?

Agility in organisations therefore involves reconsidering accountability in its entirety, that is to say, not only in relation to funding agencies, governments and citizen donors, but also from the point of view of populations, authorities, partners and collaborators. It consists of investing in the very first resource of a project, that is to say, the staff. Devoting in them consists of ensuring that they are
able to work in often difficult contexts and conditions. It involves putting in place psychosocial risk prevention mechanisms and rapid and appropriate response systems at the first signal of problems or as soon as is reported. It is a way of finally allowing organisations to learn and evolve... of giving them the possibility to leave and to come back. An organisation that is benevolent towards its collaborators does not worry about ‘losing’ them because, either they will feel sufficiently respected and valued to stay, or they will leave and perhaps come back better trained and more open due to new experiences.

It is time to go back to aid fundamentals

Though the idea of agility comes from the need to meet people’s needs more effectively in increasingly complex situations, it is encouraging to see that, when it is raised in relation to teams and individuals, there is a call for a return to the very foundations of humanitarian action and international solidarity in general: the relevance of what is done and the relations between those involved. Listening, benevolence, the right to make mistakes, creativity, compassion, etc. can only take place if there is dialogue and interaction. Could this be a way of ensuring that the ‘participation revolution’ mentioned in the Grand Bargain really takes place? ...that beneficiaries become genuine partners, and humanitarian actors become agents, witnesses and assistants of the changes that take place in the world, rather than the ‘saviours’ of passive victims?

Some of the participants at the Autumn School who discussed the issue of agile teams called for a return to the spirit of rebellion of the first ‘French doctors’: rebellion against the system(s) that shape crises, but also rebellion against – and within - the system that has been built to respond to crises, when it does not fulfil its role and limits humanitarians to the single role of aid administrators/managers.

3 Renée Brown, Conference “The power of vulnerability”, available at the following address: www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability/language=en

Alain Olive trained as an Agro-Environmental Engineer, and also has degrees in Political Science and Intercultural Psychology. He was involved in aid programmes in the Congo Basin before working for UNDP and WFP where he was in charge of climatic risk management and recovery programmes during the food crisis of 2012 in the Sahel when Malians began to be displaced throughout the sub-region. As a researcher, evaluator and trainer at Groupe URD, he approaches fragility from a holistic point of view, placing the human factor at the centre of systems, and is looking into ways to make resilience and the humanitarian-development nexus operational. He is the headquarters focal point for the RESILAC project and the Key Programme in Mali.

Charlotte Dufour is a Nutrition and Food Systems specialist. She began working in the humanitarian sector in 2000 with Action Against Hunger (Afghanistan and Ethiopia). In 2002 she joined Groupe URD and contributed to the development of the Quality COMPAS and our work on ‘Participation’ with ALNAP. She worked with the FAO from 2005 to 2017, first in Afghanistan and then at its headquarters, advising governments on nutritional policies and programmes. She recently created her own consultancy, Narayan, through which she promotes a holistic approach to sustainable development.

Having begun her career as a pharmacist-biologist at the Institut Pasteur in Lyon, Monique Cardot joined Bioforce in 1983, working initially as a Trainer and then as a Tutor. In parallel, she actively took part in creating and running the NGO, “Comité pour Léré”, which has since become “Santé Mali Rhône-Alpes”, and “Action Nord Sud”. Since leaving Bioforce in 2005, she has worked as an independent consultant, supervising staff in the medical and social sectors, providing around twenty teams per month with regular support. She has been a member of Groupe URD’s Administrative Board since the creation of the association, and has been its President since July 2017.
Bibliography

Theory, definitions

**The Agile Manifesto, Agile Alliance, 2001**

The Agile Manifesto was drafted by the Agile Alliance in 2001 on the basis of 12 principles where individuals and interactions are valued over processes and tools, working software is valued over exhaustive documentation, customer collaboration is valued over contract negotiation and responding to change is valued over following a plan.


**Building a global learning alliance on adaptive management, L. Wild, B. Ramalingam, ODI, September 2018.**

With the increasingly complex challenges faced by humanitarian and development organisations, DFID and USAID recently got together to create the Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM) initiative. This global network aims to promote and support ‘adaptive rigour’ by identifying which tools, skills, practices, relationships and incentives best harness the potential of monitoring, evaluation and learning. The paper presents the GLAM initiative and its projects for the next four years.


**Managing to Adapt: Analysing adaptive management for planning, monitoring, evaluation, and learning, H. Desai & al., Oxfam Research Reports, The London School of Economics and Political Science, Oxfam International, March 2018.**

This report was developed by a group of students from the London School of Economics as part of their Master’s degree programme, in partnership with Oxfam Great Britain. It presents a collection of case studies from Oxfam and other agencies to illustrate concrete examples of how programmes can incorporate adaptive practices at different stages of the planning cycle. It also offers practical suggestions to development actors to support adaptive practices. It argues that PMEL for adaptive management entails flexible funding mechanisms; iterative design processes; developing locally owned approaches; and creating an enabling environment for learning.


**Making humanitarian response more flexible: challenges and questions, A. Obrecht, S. Bourne, ALNAP Background Paper, ALNAP, ODI, 2018.**

As humanitarian actors have been responding to highly dynamic, unstable environments for decades, they should be well-placed to adapt continuously to changes on the ground. So, why is this so difficult? To answer this question, this paper sets out the situations which lead humanitarian organisations to try to change what, where and how they operate, and explores the challenges they face in making these changes happen. The authors introduce work carried out primarily outside the humanitarian sector on flexibility and adaptive capabilities, to provide some initial thinking on how humanitarian agencies can improve their ability to respond to dynamics and uncertainty. They conclude with a brief summary of the state of evidence on adaptive approaches.


Adaptive management is characterised by a flexible approach involving testing, monitoring, getting feedback and making course-corrections if necessary. It is an alternative to more linear and mechanistic approaches. This introductory paper is intended for managers and leaders in civil society organisations and funders, who are not already immersed in the issue. It provides insight into what adaptive management is, when and why it may be appropriate, and what may be required for organisations to adopt adaptive approaches.


Transforming change: How change really happens and what we can do about it, Knox-Clarke, P., ALNAP Study, ODI, ALNAP, 2017.

This study is based on the idea that despite the time, money and energy spent on initiatives to change the humanitarian sector, very little attention has been paid to the processes that drive change in the humanitarian system. The author analyses how change can be achieved effectively and presents the ideas and views about change that were expressed during the discussions and presentations at the 2017 ALNAP annual meeting.


This report presents an agile approach developed by the authors, called Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA), and addresses a key part of the approach once a problem has been identified, based on real-time experimental iterations. This is intended as a practical paper that builds on experience and embeds exercises for readers who are actually involved in this kind of work.


Under what conditions does an understanding of political economy strengthen aid-supported development efforts? This paper sheds light on this question by reflecting on the experience and engagements of a small team of policy researchers in the Politics and Governance Programme (PoGo) of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). Since around 2009, the work of this group has been largely focused on supporting the movement towards politically smarter development assistance. Three particular areas of work are considered in the paper: problem-focused political economy studies; training in applied political economy analysis (PEA) for development agency staff; and direct engagement with donor operations. The paper suggests placing more emphasis on the weaknesses of PEA as an entry point for transforming development work and the feasibility of approaching the same challenges from a different angle – starting with ways of working.


In order for humanitarian and development actors to adapt in complex environments there is a need for constant learning, measuring, innovating, and iterating. This document articulates why adaptive management is important, unpacks what it is, and elaborates the four elements that underpin it: culture, people and skills, tools and systems, and enabling environment.


Calls for adaptive programming mean we need to focus on how information and knowledge can help to make changes to programmes. This paper begins by clarifying why and what kind of learning matters for adaptive programming. The paper then turns its focus to how strategies and approaches applied throughout a programme’s conception, design, management and M&E can enable it to continually learn and adapt. The authors draw lessons related to practices.


Case studies

Learning to make a difference: Christian Aid Ireland’s adaptive programme management in governance, gender, peace building and human rights, David Booth et al., Christian Aid Ireland, ODI, Irish Aid, September 2013.

This paper is the product of a multi-year collaboration between ODI and the core team of Christian Aid Ireland to assess the relevance of adaptive or trial-and-error approaches to the field of governance, peace building and human rights. Christian Aid Ireland’s current five-year programme is being implemented in seven countries affected by conflict, violence or political instability – Angola, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe. It is based on partnerships with local organisations, especially non-governmental and civil society organisations working with marginalised women and men, and other gender identities. It aims to make a difference to people’s lives by helping them realise their human rights, improve their security and address gender inequalities. The paper explains how the change to adaptive programme management is made, describes the lessons learned from the first year of experience and attempts to draw lessons by examining the possible implications for implementation in the years ahead. The authors observe that, in order to make the most of the transition to adaptive management, new working methods and their underlying principles will need to be more embedded in the organisations’ practices and cultures.


DRC, which has been in a perpetual state of sporadic conflict for the last twenty years, is an excellent example of why flexibility and the ability to adapt are so important for the future of humanitarian action, and also of why these two qualities are so difficult to obtain. Indeed, humanitarians are working in an environment that is continually changing, as many small-to-mid-level, complicated crises arise in different parts of this vast country on a weekly basis. This country study looks at examples of flexible humanitarian programming in an extended crisis context while analysing barriers to flexibility and the main issues which lead to a need for change.


A humanitarian fund Providing Humanitarian Assistance for Sahel Emergencies (PHASE) has been embedded into the multi-year Building Resilience to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED) programme. This paper showcases evidence from the use of the PHASE crisis modifier and situates crisis modifiers as a potential ‘solution’ for a more flexible aid system – if they are accompanied by a fundamental shift in the way development actors design their programmes and respond to predictable risks.


The Start Network’s Drought Financing Facility project sought to revolutionise the way the humanitarian system responds to major droughts. This interview with Emily Montier, who leads the DFF project, looks at the challenges they have faced in trying to change the humanitarian system, and what they have learned in the process.


Adapting Aid Lessons from six case studies, Mercy Corps, IRC, 2016.

In 2015 the IRC and Mercy Corps joined forces to launch ADAPT (Analysis Driven Agile Programming Techniques) to research, innovate and field test adaptive management techniques for the sector. Three questions dominate the adaptive management discourse: What does it look like in practice? What impact can it have? And how can it best be nurtured? ADAPT tackled these questions through case studies (Uganda, Syria, Niger, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Myanmar). The ADAPT report summarises the results of the case studies, brings learning together, and shares reflections on how adaptive management can advance the effectiveness and impact of aid. The ADAPT partnership’s aim now is to institutionalise adaptive management within IRC and the Mercy Corps and influence the sector more through the findings of this work.

To read the different case studies: https://www.mercycorps.org.uk/research/adaptive-management-case-studies


Short-term projects and linear management approaches are often unsuitable for achieving resilient development in the face of volatile complexity. Adaptive management combined with longer-term project funding has the potential to deliver more appropriate development outcomes. This will require development practitioners to engage with complexity in a participatory and transparent way, through regular participatory context analysis, modifiable theories of change, and evidenced periods of review. Organisations must overcome their fear of failure and support project managers to ‘fail forwards’. Non-government organisations should develop and pilot accountability frameworks that support learning and adaptation. They must prove to donors the value of monitoring for learning and adaptation to better achieve resilient development goals.


Mercy Corps is increasingly seeking to understand how best to manage programmes which iterate, adapt and respond to the consistently evolving settings in which they work. This brief Practice Paper provides some examples of what adaptive management looks like in practice on the Prospects youth employment programme in Liberia. Even though this programme is not a perfect example of adaptive management, its successes and challenges provide lessons for other programmes.


Bibliography


Groupe URD

Groupe URD (Urgence - Réhabilitation - Développement) is a non-profit research, evaluation and training institute. Its main objective is to help improve humanitarian practices in favour of crisis-affected people.
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www.urd.org

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