Learning for Humanitarian Leadership: What it is, how it works and future priorities

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1.   Introduction and aims

In the humanitarian sector, leadership is cited as one of the most important factors underpinning performance and effectiveness. Every major strategic and operational ambition – from addressing resource gaps to coordinating aid delivery to improving accountability to advancing localisation – demands the realisation of better leadership.

And yet, at the same time, there does not seem to be a clear sense of what leadership actually is. Like the infamous judicial decision on obscenity, we only seem to know it when we see it.

This discussion paper sets out to answer three simple questions:

1.   What is humanitarian leadership?
2.   When it is effective, how does it work?
3.   What should the future priorities for humanitarian leadership be?

We aim to address these questions by drawing on available evidence from different sources across the sector, together with our own reflections as long-time observers and analysts of humanitarian performance and effectiveness. The aim is to apply a learning lens to this critical issue and highlight what we see as some of the future priorities for humanitarian leadership.

2.   What is humanitarian leadership? From command and control to facilitation and feedback

In the time since ALNAP was formed in 1997, it was the Humanitarian Response Review of 2005, commissioned by Jan Egeland, then-UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, that put the issue of leadership at the centre of policy debates and reform efforts. The Review both identified critical shortcomings in UN leadership and flagged this as a priority area for action. However, despite commitments from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to strengthen leadership capacity at all levels of the system, challenges and barriers to effecting positive change were widespread and difficult to overcome.

Five years later, aid workers working in responses around the world identified poor leadership and coordination as the single most important barrier to effective operations (ALNAP, 2010). Numerous evaluations pointed to inadequate leadership at the level of humanitarian coordinators and clusters. Following the two biggest crises of 2010, some even went as far as to say that 'the responses in Haiti and Pakistan were *defined by poor leadership*' (ALNAP, 2012: 64, emphasis added).

Moreover, leadership gaps and challenges were not limited to operational responses. They were also observed at the head and regional office levels of many humanitarian organisations: in the words of one senior aid worker, 'We have issues around leadership everywhere' (Walker and Webster, 2009).

Some humanitarian organisations responded to these criticisms with increased investments in training, mentoring and support to leaders. However, underlying these efforts was the uncomfortable but largely unvoiced feeling that no-one was sure what good humanitarian leadership actually looked like in practice. The predominant assumption seems to have been that humanitarians needed to be 'heroic leaders', akin to the charismatic examples derived from military history or successful businesses. These 'heroes' were to work as prominent

individuals who determine goals, direct resources and drive motivations and actions. This 'command and control' model not only seemed to fit certain individuals within the sector but also aligned well with the life-saving, time-intensive ethos of humanitarianism.

This model and its assumptions were challenged by one of the first in-depth studies on humanitarian leadership at the operational level (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011). This work pointedly concluded that in many humanitarian contexts such a highly individualised model of heroic leadership was not effective. This helped to set the research agenda on humanitarian leadership for the next few years, and partly as a result of this work, a deeper and more contextualised understanding of humanitarian leadership has emerged.

This newer understanding was based on experiences both from parallel sectors and from in-depth interviews with humanitarian practitioners and leaders. What emerged was an acknowledgement that, rather than an individual leader who determines goals, resources and actions, operational leadership was best achieved through interactions between the formal leader and a broader group of individuals, regulated by a series of structures, processes and procedures (Knox Clarke, 2014). These leaders were better described as 'hosts' as opposed to 'heroes'.

Host leadership was less about following the commands of exceptional individuals and more about *distributing leadership* among the group, sharing the load and creating a culture of openness and mutual support. This made a lot of sense to humanitarian practitioners working in multi-agency clusters where there was no single line of command. One of the strongest findings was that humanitarian workers were most likely to support decisions they were involved in making, and strong collaboration and consensus-building were seen to be key to this. This is what we refer to as the 'facilitation and feedback' approach, so as to clearly distinguish it from the 'command and control' model.

Research began to endorse the value of quieter, humbler, less charismatic leaders committed to strengthening and being part of a broader team. This rang bells with many, and it was no surprise that the most visited page on the ALNAP website at the time was an animation entitled 'Goodbye super-hero'.

Alongside this new notion of distributed leadership, the use of standard operating procedures was deemed to be crucial. Effective leadership needed simple processes for dealing with routine as well as 'triggers' that could help in identifying when a situation was becoming exceptional. The latter had to be built in so that the leadership group would know when to adapt and divert from normal procedures and try something new. The trick was to use procedures when relevant – say, 80% of the time – but also to be flexible enough to change and innovate when circumstances changed – say, 20% of the time (Knox Clarke, 2014).

This chimed greatly with other work being carried out on designing different operational models to complement the existing model of responding to humanitarian crises (Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2014) and work on operational flexibility at the programme level (Obrecht, 2019).

Taking all of this together, the most effective operational leadership emerged when all three elements mentioned above – the individual, the group and the structures – combined to bring about positive outcomes, particularly to enable flexibility and adaptation.

This is not to say that the individual leader was not important – or that we had been looking for instances of humanitarian leadership in the wrong places. Far from it. Although the heroic model had rightly been challenged, it was also the case that, particularly in the initial stages of a rapid-onset crisis, individual leaders had stepped up to make strategic decisions first and build consensus afterwards. A documented example is from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where, as a result of his high level of personal credibility (based largely on

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experience), Ross Mountain, UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator, was able to lead the response from the front and turn around the international response to be more effective and accountable (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011: 18).

Thus, leadership takes many forms and operates at different levels in the system. For example, 'collective leadership' might come into play across organisations of the overall system, whereas 'adaptive leadership' is needed to operate effectively at the level of affected populations. Within particular international responses, it was increasingly understood that the best business models for action would be determined by leaders who were able to judge prevailing context and the operational structures – for example whether the intervention was taking place across a group of agencies where there was no single line of command or whether it was an individual agency. What this growing body of work suggested was that there was no 'best practice' for humanitarian leadership. Rather, the emerging sense was that what was most needed was an approach that understood the crisis context, including the social, economic, political and institutional landscape and the specific operational enablers and barriers, and used these to develop and apply a 'best fit' approach to leadership.

3.   How humanitarian leadership currently works: short-term human fixes to long-term systemic issues

Let's take a step back from leadership at this point and reflect on the broader issues of humanitarian performance. From at least the 1980s onward, there has been a widely held view that the humanitarian system is condemned to repeat its operational mistakes and unable to genuinely change and improve.

Lessons from the Kosovo crisis (2000) demonstrated that problems associated with the Great Lakes crisis in 1994 were still very much present, as if they were somehow hardwired into the system, leading to what some described as the 'once again factor'. The same issues arose again after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2010 Haiti earthquake and many of the major crises that followed. And the World Humanitarian Summit process highlighted the same issues yet again (Knox Clarke, 2017: 19). For a lot of people, the system was not just broken but permanently and irrevocably so – and any attempts to make genuine progress were daunting and problematic as a result.

Despite these deep-seated frustrations, evidence was emerging that the system *was* changing (Ferris, 2014; Barnett and Walker, 2015), at both a more strategic/structural level and an operational level. ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System series has provided longitudinal monitoring of international humanitarian performance for over a decade, and shows that improvements have occurred, largely in the form of corrections or improvements to existing practices. However, it is also true that such improvements have been slow and incremental, and have not happened in a smooth or consistent manner. Indeed, in some cases, changes that emerged were both unexpected and unplanned, and they were often hard to sustain.

One notable example of an improvement was Jan Egeland's 2005 humanitarian reform agenda, mentioned earlier, which aimed to bring a more unified approach to leadership, coordination, financing and accountability by establishing more predictable coordination structures (the Cluster system) and a new global contingency fund (the Central Emergency Response Fund). These structures and their subsequent improvements have helped improve the effectiveness of the international response.

In light of the leadership discussion above, it is interesting to note that, when recently describing how these reforms came about, Jan Egeland spoke of the importance of 'leading from the saddle' – a statement resonating greatly with the idea of an effective heroic leader operating at a system-wide level (ALNAP, 2021: 46).

This does give us pause for thought, specifically with regard to why the lack of change is so easily attributed to a 'lack of leadership'. The automatic response of many in the sector seems to be to refer to the need for a combination of political motivations, institutional space, clarity of intent and collective action necessary to effect change. And, typically, there is not the leadership in place to effect such change. Every now and again, an exceptional individual or group will emerge to do so. However, as much as their success is lauded, it also serves to highlight the relative lack of such capabilities in the 'business as usual' of the sector.

Over time, and in different situations, this has become something of a repeated motif when talking about different aspects of humanitarian performance. Take a given issue – say, humanitarian coordination. The reality is that the system is not set up or structured in such a way as to facilitate such coordination: donors fund vertically, competition is rife and conflicts over operational mandates and space run deep. But somehow the expectation has become that leadership, if it were good enough, would be able to make coordination work. A few notable names will spring to the minds of everyone reading this of certain individuals who have been able to make coordination work, in tough situations like Afghanistan, DRC, Sudan. These are held up as the exemplars – but, unfortunately, almost everyone else then comes up short. This inability to somehow magically 'clone' these exceptional individuals is then referred to as 'lack of leadership' – while nothing is actually changed structurally to enable others to be able to follow in their footsteps.

In our view, this almost habitual response of the sector to locate failures in the domain of leadership is unfortunate for everyone concerned. It is unfortunate for the leaders who perform these feats of system fixing; it is unfortunate for those leaders who don't or can't repeat their successes and are doomed to operate in their shadows; and it is unfortunate for the system as a whole because it sets most leaders up to fail – because only the most extraordinary of individuals can succeed. And it means that the systemic failures can – through a linguistic twist – be located with those individuals who do not fix the system, rather than in the lack of genuine structural change. What we are seeing, in effect, is more and more effort to strengthen individual leadership capabilities and not enough to institutionalise leadership within the way the sector operates.

So what might be done about this state of affairs? This is what we turn to next.

4.   Major priorities for humanitarian leadership

The research and evidence we reviewed for this discussion paper suggest three main overarching challenges giving rise to the 'lack of leadership' motif. Each of them tells a story and contains a set of assumptions about what it takes for humanitarian aid to work well.

Challenge 1: Can the international system work collectively and cooperatively – both horizontally *within* different layers of the system (donors, UN agencies, non-governmental organisations, government departments, community organisations, etc.) and vertically *across* these layers?

Challenge 2: Can the system adapt its business model to suit particular contexts (Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2014), taking account of the capacities, needs and specific drivers of crises and vulnerability?

Challenge 3: Are operational responses flexible enough to adapt activities, interventions and responses to different socio-cultural and economic contexts, stakeholder interests (including those of affected communities), evolving operational circumstances and different institutional architectures (Obrecht, 2018)?

In this section, we go through each of these in turn.

4.1   Challenge 1: Collective leadership

Most people would agree that the kind of collective leadership needed to make the system genuinely work as a system has not yet been forthcoming or sufficient.

When we were designing the very first State of the Humanitarian System report in 2008, to pilot the concept of overall systemic performance, one of the most common responses we received in our consultations with aid leaders and experts was a rather colourful 'What ****ing system?'

This is both a capacity issue and a procedural one. There are many examples of agencies that lack the capacity and/or know-how to coordinate even when it is necessary and vital to do so. It is clearly the case that some agencies are more equipped than others in this regard. Moreover, evaluations have reported particular organisational resistance to changes that seek to affect the relationships and power dynamics between international agencies, regional and local agencies, host governments and affected populations. The *status quo* exerts a heavy counterbalance to potential improvements.

For example, some saw the Ukraine crisis as a potential tipping point for collective coordination reforms, by accelerating new ways of working and innovations (Alexander, 2022). Given the high level of funding and the presence of 1,700 newly formed aid groups, the operating environment seemed well suited to directly funding and working through the new informal aid sector. But recent reports suggest that international organisations have been unable and unwilling to provide rapid infusions of resources to strengthen local efforts. There are no doubt many reasons why this has not happened, but currently there is a feeling that compliance requirements have been too heavy and attitudes too conservative: agencies should have had a greater tolerance of risk and should have taken a 'no regrets approach' (Stoddard et al., 2022).

Collective leadership in this regard requires not just remarkable individuals but also changes to the behaviours and incentives that underpin the relationships between different groups and organisations. Collaboration is necessary across different agencies, different sectors and different kinds of professionals and between international, national and local levels. This is easy to imagine in theory but vanishingly rare in practice.

Collective action in this regard might be in the form of coordination (e.g. among operational agencies), partnerships among different interest groups (e.g. humanitarians and communities) or dialogue across a range of stakeholders. Collective leadership has a crucial role to play in helping identify shared alignment of objectives and scope for joint action across different silos and levels of each response.

But for this to be a reality, resource mobilisation needs to be adapted to make cooperation and collaboration a core requirement rather than 'nice to have'. This means that donors and

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funders need to actively make coordination a first priority rather than an afterthought. Just as challenging, it requires individual agencies to be willing to give up some of their autonomy for the greater sectoral and humanitarian good.

4.2   Challenge 2: Business model leadership

As noted in our 2014 ALNAP paper (Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2014), one of the biggest challenges facing the sector relates to the underlying business model by means of which aid is conceptualised, funded and delivered. To a large extent, incentive systems tend to reward compliance with standard procedures and financial targets, rather than choosing the best course of action to optimise humanitarian outcomes (Bennett et al., 2016). As a result, we are seeing growing numbers of national governments rejecting the traditional comprehensive model of aid delivery to seek a more nuanced partnership-oriented approach. Interestingly, however, traditional aid agencies have not always adapted well to these new opportunities, echoing the old adage, 'If all you have is a hammer, every problem becomes a nail.'

This is becoming a significant problem in settings that have some capacity and resources for responses and where national governments and civil society may be unwilling to hand over wholesale control to international actors. This is because the shift for international actors from being central in a response to playing supportive roles working alongside others is a major challenge: the core challenge around business model leadership is their unwillingness to relinquish control (Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2014). Some of the most prominent examples are Indonesia, Mozambique and the Philippines, where, despite strong national response capacities, international agencies have proved unwilling to work as equal partners.

A 2015 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) review on making humanitarian financing fit for the future argued for adopting a phased approach: ensuring critical needs are met through parallel actions to those of the national system in the early stages of a crisis, evolving into programmes that work increasingly in line with country priorities and on strengthening and working through country systems, starting with social protection schemes (Scott, 2015). Interestingly, in recent years, some actors have done exactly this in various emergency contexts, but these have been not traditional humanitarians but rather international financial institutions, most notably the World Bank.

In reality, genuine changes in humanitarian business models have come about more because they are forced on agencies rather than because of conscious choices. This was the case in the COVID-19 pandemic, when massive global disruption compelled agencies to do things differently and positive shifts were seen in several key areas, including greater localisation, flexible funding, improved inter-agency coordination and pooling of resources (ALNAP, 2021). This indicates that deeper changes *can* be made. However, these changes in business model leadership did not lead to meaningful changes in policy and practice. Instead, they appear to have been short-term adaptations followed soon afterwards by business as usual (ibid.: 7).

Genuine business model leadership needs to be based on a reconfiguration of the humanitarian appeals process, which needs to move beyond the blanket 'all in' approach and have more of a menu of options from which crisis-affected countries can select the best fit for their needs and capacities.

4.3   Challenge 3: Adaptive leadership

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Good adaptive leadership means teams and organisations constantly assessing their actions, recognising that they will have to continuously iterate and adapt their interventions as they learn more about the outcomes of decisions.

This requires clear processes for:

- determining the best options for action
- collecting, interpreting and acting on evidence, including defining a set of key measures for determining success or failure
- ensuring ongoing collection of operationally relevant data
- setting out a clear process for how changes in data and trends will trigger changes in action (Ramalingam et al., 2020).

It is increasingly recognised that social learning and adaptation should be at the centre of response (Doherty, 2022). For example, it was seen as a crucial element in the management of a recent outbreak of Ebola in West Africa (Nyenswah et al., 2016).

More and more evaluations are capturing *ad hoc* examples of where humanitarian agencies *are* finding ways to adapt more effectively. These have been triggered by particular events, including changes in the external environment (e.g. access conditions) and changes in understanding as to how the response is going (e.g. feedback from crisis-affected populations) (Obrecht, 2018).

Many of these adaptations are likely to have been supported by the kind of operational leadership premised on the interaction between the formal leader and the team and regulated by structures, processes and procedures.

One interesting aspect of this is that the spaces vacated by international leaders on the ground are naturally being filled by local leaders. At a recent global conference, participants lauded local actors for their ingenuity and capable leadership, citing examples in Bangladesh of mobilising humanitarian funds from citizen crowdfunding; in Sudan of local leaders effectively setting up multi-stakeholder/collective approaches; and in India of 'informal local leaders' enabling local supply chains and investment in long-term resilience (ALNAP, 2021).

But there is still a sense that these forms and examples of adaptive leadership are somehow the exception rather than the rule. The previously mentioned ALNAP work identified 'risk-taking skills' (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011) as one of five main areas for humanitarian leadership qualities. Many people are now demanding that humanitarian organisations, including donors, consciously give operational leaders and teams space to work and reward risk-taking. It is unclear how frequently this happens, and it is sobering to note that the aforementioned study found that, where leadership *had been* effective, it was because leaders had been prepared to take risks knowing full well they would *not* receive the support of their organisation. Programmes need to be able to have a clear mandate to change: instead of being seen as failures if they divert from the original plan, they should be seen as effective if they build robustly in adaptation of their way of working, because this is a signal of their commitment to relevance and appropriateness in the face of emerging needs and changing circumstances.

5. The future of humanitarian leadership: a reform and learning agenda

The humanitarian system is more technically and professionally competent than ever before. And in some situations, agencies have found ways to adapt to changing circumstances and deliver aid in a collective, relevant and adaptive manner. But this is arguably more because of the capacities and passion of individual leaders and less because of the existence of institutionalised approaches to *leadership.*

As Section 1 of this paper notes, there has been a tendency to rely on such individuals, rather than to actively embed their approaches and ways of working into the business as usual of the sector. And this is in part because there is considerable resistance in the system to such institutionalised approaches to leadership. Significant changes are watered down and massaged, and the adaptations and improvements that result are *ad hoc* and sometimes temporary, and do not add up to deeper necessary changes in the humanitarian *modus operandi*. We have noted three challenges where the failures are especially evident – around collective, business model and adaptive leadership.

While these failures are not the fault of individual leaders, it does appear to be the case that they are held up as the scapegoats for the lack of change, while the broader systemic changes necessary are not fully made. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the system has been described as 'stuck in a kind of functioning inertia' (Mitchell, 2021: 5), still rolling on and saving many lives but unable to make the transition to being fully collective, relevant and adaptable.

In order to fully address these issues, the sector needs to commit to learning and reform efforts that seek to create a stronger enabling environment for institutionalised leadership approaches, with specific reference to collective, business model and adaptive leadership.

This means actively working to ensure that the playing field for leaders is more even, and that the system itself supports leaders in these areas more actively, rather than leaders having to go against the grain of the system. It also means tracking successes and failures in these areas in an open, transparent and collective fashion. Only by doing so can we hope to see a genuine move in the sector from relying on individual leaders towards a culture and mentality of responsible leadership.

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