ORGANISATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING IN THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR OPENING THE DIALOGUE

A DISCUSSION PAPER FOR
THE ACTIVE LEARNING NETWORK ON ACCOUNTABILITY
AND PERFORMANCE IN HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

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Summary

Section One. This exploratory paper intends to open a dialogue between organisations involved in humanitarian action about organisational learning, and thereby to foster institutional learning. A conceptual distinction is made between the two. Organisational learning (OL) refers to collective learning within an organisation. Institutional learning (IL) to system-wide learning, ie. between and across agencies. There is no OL or IL without individual learning. A key question is how individual learning can turn into OL, and how OL can inform and strengthen individual learning. The outcome of learning is sometimes said to be change, especially changed practice. A distinction can be made between adaptive change, relatively minor alterations, and more fundamental change. Caution has to be raised however as change is not necessarily based on learning, and changed practice is not automatically improved practice. A provisional working definition of OL used in this paper therefore will be : the steering of the practices of an organisation on the basis of ongoing, collective and interactive, inquisitive review, by deliberately well informed staff, of one's own and the available institution-wide experiences and current practices, and their underlying assumptions, models and beliefs.

Section Two. Aid agencies, both in their development and humanitarian practice, have been accused of being very poor learners. Such criticism, together with demands for greater accountability and demonstrated effectiveness and/or impact, have spurred an interest inbecoming a learning organisation. The thinking around learning organisations originates from the business world. A number of reasons have been given why learning would be different, or more difficult, in the aid sector : aid agencies suffer no penalty for not learning ; aid work takes place in messy, volatile and complex environments and is therefore an intrinsically risky enterprise ; aid work is about influencing power relationships which is more complex than selling products and services ; and the role of aid projects, particularly those of NGOs, is to be experimental of innovative. None of these arguments however stands us as a convincing excuse for not learning, to the contrary, they seem to emphasize learning as a necessity and a priority. If however development work is already stated to be so complex and unpredictable, are the odds against learning around humanitarian action not even greater?

Section Three. Organisations generally should learn in order to be more effective, not only within one given context, but consistently in a variety of situations. Learning takes place at different levels of action and for different purposes : there is participatory learning in the field, project- and programme based learning, learning to inform policy and learning to inform advocacy. There is a tendency to link learning with accountability. Donors may be tempted to maake continued funding dependent on the recipient being a demonstrated learning organisation. Such linkages in practice may not turn out to be as straightforward as they first appear to be : There is currently still very little sector-wide agreement about a body of acquired knowledge and standards to serve as reference or base-line. One can also not unconditionally accept a learning-by-doing practice, for somewhere we need to draw the line. How much time should one allow such a process, how do we balance our appreciation for learning with the appreciation of effectiveness, and can serious errors be spared a penalty on the grounds that it has been a learning experience ? Whereas learning-by-doing is seen as the most effective learning method, the purpose of OL and IL should precisely be to reduce much unnecessary learning-by-doing.

Although the paper supports an empirical, inductive, approach, there are problems with the generalisation that is needed to formulate good practice and policy. For learning is not only

about recognising problems but also about recognising differences. In generalising, vitally important contextual differences may get lost. And the lessons learned from one context may not be automatically transferable and applicable in another context. Learning therefore cannot be seen as a simple, cumulative process. We learn wrong lessons and we wrongly apply lessons that may have been valid for one situation to another.

Section Four. The literature highlights a number of obstacles to OL. Obstacles generic to many large organisations, not just those in the aid sector, are said to be centralisation and hierarchy, internal power structures and poor information management. Obstacles seen as more characteristic of the aid sector are : having to live up to the false image that development and relief are quick and easy, the temptation to hype up one's performance in the face of growing competition between agencies, the financial instability of certainly humanitarian aid agencies, caused by a trend to go for cheap growth driven by short term funding and unrealistically low overheads, and the high degree of job insecurity of many staff. Finally there are also personal and interpersonal obstacles. Many human beings are also vulnerable in their self-image and interpersonal relationships. This leads to defensive attitudes and an unwillingness to questions our assumptions, beliefs and attitudes.

Section Five. Given these obstacles and resistances, what triggers change, and is that change grounded in, and an expression of, learning ? Internal change can come about from the results of monitoring, review and evaluation. It can also be catalysed by staff or by management. Many authors however feel that most change results from external pressures. This can be public criticism or a financial crisis. External consultants sometimes trigger change, especially when this has been an implicit motive in contracting them. Donor pressure and, still fairly unusual in the humanitarian sector, peer pressure, are another possible catalyst. Change can be instigated by formal audits or inquiries by official supervisory bodies like Congress or Parliament or a Court of Auditors. More permanent watchdogs such as an ombudsperson concept, or an independent and sector-wide agency mandated to monitor standards and practices, are under discussion. They would definitely be catalysts of change.

Section Six. A number of policies and practices are discussed, which are held to create a more enabling environment for OL : bringing management closer to the field, and bridging the gap between headquarters and the field and between different units and programmes ; procedures can be introduced that force staff to pay attention to lessons and recommendations ; and strategic thinking (rather than detailed strategic planning) even in crisis situations. Making learning an explicit organisational policy, and creating an organisational focal point for learning, are other practices seen as very positive.

Information management is obviously a crucial but increasingly problematic area. Issues and experiences are being reviewed with regard to documentation, the centralisation of documentation, comparison and synthesis, and reporting guidelines. Whereas most dissemination takes place through writing, there are also many ways of disseminating knowledge and experience through interaction. Institutional networks are being looked at, as a format to manage interagency encounters and, ideally, joint or 'institutional' learning. Since it is impossible for an organisation to learn about everything at the same time, decisions have to be made about themes that will be focused on.

For a number of agencies evaluation has been a primary source of, and tool for, learning. This does not always sit easily with using evaluations for accountability. There are different types of evaluation, and their relative relevance for, and impact on, OL deserve closer scrutiny. The usefulness of evaluations as a source of learning becomes questionable though, if there is indeed a great methodological anarchy. The impact of evaluation findings on policy and programming has also been questioned. The different organisational mechanisms to bridge

the gap between evaluation and programming deserve more comparative study.

Continuing staff development is a weak area in the humanitarian sector, particularly in light of the rapidly expanding requirements of knowledge and skills. These requirements are briefly looked into. More investment and attention seem warranted in the articulation and dissemination of policies and guidelines, in induction and handover and in training. Currently the dynamics of the aid sector and the humanitarian sector in particular seem to provide only very low returns on investment in training. More interagency initiatives would appear commendable. Learning also has to be written into staff performance monitoring, and, vitally, into workplans and budgets.

OL can be stimulated by a positive organisational culture. This may include a shared vision, values and a sense of mission, teamwork, and a positive rather than defensive attitude to inquiry, questioning and difference of opinion.

Section Seven. There are however the abovementioned structural obstacles to OL in the aid sector, that cannot be left unattended. Some degree of financial stability, and of job security for professionals seem necessary for meaningful OL to be possible. The support of a public that is better informed and has a more realistic perception of the complexity of humanitarian challenges, and the requirements for a professional response, but also its limitations, would make it easier to state the reality of practice and performance.

Section Eight. We still remain with the question how to identify OL, and who and how we monitor and evaluate it ? The often used simple model of action-analysis-reflection-dissemination-improved action, does not appear a very adequate description of how OL proceeds. The absence of agreed reference points, such as standards and a body of acquired knowledge, makes it currently difficult however to determine indicators of learning. Some institutional initiatives appear steps in the right direction. A number of indicators of the learning organisation have also been suggested that could be discussed.

Section Nine. Finally, whereas the reward for the learning business organisation is increased sales, the humanitarian sector does not sell desireables. What forms of tangible and less tangible rewards then can there be for the learning humanitarian organisation ?

Section Ten. No prescriptions or recommendations are suggested at this opening stage of the dialogue and discussion.

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1. INTRODUCTION

a. The concepts of organisational and institutional learning.

'Institutional learning' is growing in popularity in the aid world. It is eg. one of the explicit objectives of Dfid's and SIDA's evaluation departments, its desireability is recognised eg. within UNHCR and the FAO, it has been discussed at eg. MSF-Holland and the British Red Cross Society, it is an implicit aim of eg. the People-in-Aid and the Sphere Project, and an explicit aim of eg. Oxfam's strategic plan. The interest has created a market for a service such as a one day seminar for NGO directors and trustees about 'directing a learning NGO', offered by INTRAC, an Oxford-based training institute for NGOs.

While the general feeling is that it is a desirable something, most of us are at a loss when we are asked to explain what we mean by it, and especially how we do it. Spontaneous suggestions may refer to things such as databases, analysed information, evaluation, lessons learned etc. 'Institutional learning' therefore appears a shorthand for a variety of processes and products.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an introduction for ALNAP members and to raise questions and issues that the members may wish to address and further explore to enhance the ability of the humanitarian sector to learn from its collective experience. The paper draws selectively on the available literature and on the responses to four general questions on OL received from a number of ALNAP members. It should not be seen as an exhaustive review.

It seems relevant to introduce some conceptual sophistication and to distinguish between individual, organisational and institutional learning. In the managerial literature, typically a distinction is made between 'organisational' and 'institutional' development. The first term refers to changes taking place within an organisation, the second to changes taking place in the quality of the interactions between organisations that relate to each other in a given context. We will therefore use 'organisational learning' (OL) for learning within a given organisation, and 'institutional learning' (IL) for system-wide, ie. between and across agencies, learning in the international humanitarian system. Many authors however use IL to refer to OL.

A key question in the search for OL is the relationship between individual and collective learning. There appear to be different views about that relationship, which suggests that it is complex and at the heart of the matter. On the one hand it is said that organisations don't learn, only individuals do. Building on that, it can be argued that "organisational systems and structures help or hinder individual learning" (Edwards 1996:6).

At the same time "individual learning, at some level is irrelevant for organisational learning. Individuals learn all the time and yet there is no organisational learning" (Senge 1990:236). Individual learning therefore seems a necessary but not sufficient precondition for OL and IL : "If people have the capacity to learn and are encouraged to use it, then a solid foundation for institutional learning will be created" (Edwards 1996:20). On the other hand, individual learning definitely has to be an outcome of OL.

b. Definitions of organisational and institutional learning.

A bit surprisingly, some of our authors on OL or IL give definitions that are really about learning in general:

"an inquiry that results eventually in new understanding and new behavior - that is, learning" (Senge 1990:253) ;

"Learning is a process of personal growth and discovery, not just an accumulation of knowledge" (Edwards 1996:16).

The outcomes of learning are stated here respectively as 'personal growth and discovery' and 'new understanding and new behavior'. Implicitly, it appears that the expected outcomes of OL and IL will be changed practice. Weiss and Minear (1997:5), for the third phase of their Humanitarianism and War project, intend to look for 'innovative practices' . Changed practice may refer to changes in policies, in programme design or standards, in structures and procedures, in recruitment and training, in interpersonal interactions etc. There is an assumption however that changed practice will be improved practice. Weiss and Minear (1997:5). It is also further assumed that improved practice will lead to improved performance, and eventually -the aim or goal ?- to improved impact (for humanitarian action defined as improved assistance and protection ?). OL and IL are said to result in change. Does that mean that the continuation of an existing practice should automatically be interpreted as a failure to learn? That is implied in the assertion that "learning requires either adaptation or change, for without some action there has been no real learning" (Weiss and Minear 1997:5). OL and IL then become the motor or justification for perpetual change. Yet there is no guarantee that change is also improvement. There may be very solid reasons to maintain an existing practice. Clearly change per se then cannot be automatically taken as an indicator of OL or IL ? Rather the issue seems to be that an existing practice is continually tested whether it represents the best possible practice ?

Some authors also make a distinction between 'adaptation' and 'change'. Adaptation is modestly corrective action, while change implies fundamental transformation. The distinction between both is replicated in the differentiation between 'single loop learning' and 'double loop learning' (Argyris 1978). Single loop learning refers to problem solving without substantial alterations to the existing framework. Double loop learning consists in questioning the underlying assumptions and beliefs, and changing them if required (see also Senge 1990 ch. 10).

It seems premature to try and come up with a sharp definition before we have more fully explored what OL and IL might be about. The following however can serve as a temporary working definition :

"Organisational learning means steering the practice of an organisation on the basis of ongoing, collective and interactive, inquisitive review, by deliberately well-informed staff, of one's own and the available institution-wide experiences and current practices, and their underlying assumptions, models and beliefs."

II. ORGANISATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING IN THE AID SECTOR

a. Do aid agencies learn ?

Whereas individual learning is studied by educators, the original literature on OL and learning organisations comes from business management and dates back at least 20 to 30 years. It is only in the past few years, with the growth in size of notably northern NGOs, and the concommitant search for management models and techniques, that OL/IL is becoming a fashionable topic in the aid world. More recently, the emphasis on greater effectiveness and accountability that come with stagnating or shrinking budgets, and scepticism about the lasting impact of aid, seem to have spurred the interest in OL/IL. Thus in 1995 the Swedish Government established an Expert Group on Development Issues one of whose purposes is to contribute to increased effectiveness of development cooperation practices. To that end a study on organisational learning has been commissioned (Bennedich 1997).

Some quotes may be cited to illustrate the perception of the learning gap at a general and at a more concrete level :

"Development is, or should be, a knowledge-based endeavour. The importance of learning what works, and why, is essential to success. Knowing what does not work is almost more important. Knowledge, however (too often confused with information), involves awareness, consciousness and the familiarity that develops with experience and learning. Just as messages are not always received, lessons taught -in school and in life- are not always learned. This is particularly true at an institutional level ; the inability to learn and remember is an acknowledged and widespread failing of the development community as a whole." (Smillie 1995a:158).

Other observers are more generous : "NGOs are significantly more thoughtful, analytical and mature in their self-criticism than they were 20 years ago" (Edwards 1996:11). It should be noted however that thoughtfulness, and an analytical and self-critical atittude do not automatically guarantee better and more effective practice.

Whereas the learning gap at general level is easier to argue intuitively than substantially, it can often be identified quite clearly at the level of the particular. Here four examples :

"But the UN's ability to learn from its Somali operating environment was painfully limited. Errors were repeated time and again ; indeed, judging by its public statements and policy initiatives, the mission appeared to understand less about Somalia in the final year of its existence than it did in the first six months of the intervention (Menkhausen 1996:30).

"People are quite literally tired of being 'assessed' endlessly... . Frequent assessments are carried out primarily because relief agencies do not have a system of records which retains the information collected previously for the newly recruited staff to have access to. Until recently, the WFP was giving 3 to 6 month contracts to food monitors who all start their jobs from scratch. All food monitors had to do their own research to understand local economic conditions." (Jok Madut Jok 1996:209).

In 1996 a senior representative of the IFRC in a particular representative who had never bothered to attend the open meetings at which the reorganisation of the coordinating body had been discussed with the member agencies, suddenly appeared on the scene and started raising questions that had been developed by a review committee over several months. When queried by the other attendants at the meeting whether he had read the report of the review committee that had been in circulation for many weeks, he admitted to not having done so.

"Anything longer than 3 pages goes straight in the bin".

The following is a recent (1997) peer reviewer's comment on a draft article on better practice in risk reduction for aid workers : "I felt that this paper reinforced what we all would accept as being best practice, whilst also recognising that it is an area of frequent failure. It's rather like an article saying that we should all stop smoking, everybody will agree, but then quite a few will fail to put it into effect."

b. OL/IL in the business and in the development sector.

The question has been raised whether methods and lessons to become a learning organisation in the for profit business world are applicable and transferable to the not-for-profit aid world ? Some see only a 'limited utility' (Weiss and Minear 1997:2).

A number of arguments have been advanced to explain, if not to justify, why institutional learning is different, or more difficult, in the non-profit sector.

1. **No penalty for not-learning** : Businesses have a benchmark or bottom-line that non-profit organisations are said not to have : profit margins, which ultimately depend on customer interest and satisfaction. If businesses don't learn, the argument goes, customers will stay away and business may have to close down. The 'customers' ie. target groups and intended beneficiaries of development and humanitarian aid have indeed very little voice and choice, which explains the recent interest in a rights-based approach and the articulation of a beneficiaries' charter. In aid, it are generally the aid agencies that comment on their own performance and in doing so may downplay the problems and failures.

2. **A different context** : Development work, it has been said, takes place in messy and highly complex environments, that resemble emergent and volatile markets rather than established ones. Presumably the complexity and the rate of change are such that development, and certainly sustainable development, is a highly uncertain and unpredictable, and therefore risky, enterprise. Flexibility and adaptation therefore are more important than a learning that can translate into advanced planning. Whereas this argument holds some truth, business also operate in emergent and volatile markets and policy environments, about which they have to learn. Some are relatively successful, while others, like the Japanese Matsushita company in China, indeed incur substantial losses (Economist 1997:115-116).

3. **A different business** : Development, it is said, takes place not in the material economy but in the political economy. Development is about power relationships, and the allocation of resources and opportunities. Working on power relationships is infinitely more complex than selling products or services. Again there is something to the argument, but learning must be possible. The work on gender, or on poverty, where power relations are at play, shows substantially advanced learning.

4. **A different role** : The role of the non-profit sector, and more particularly of NGOs, is to be experimental, innovative, critical. That entails risks and failures. Whereas this line of argument may explain failure, it does not justify non-learning. On the contrary, learning and dissemination should be a primary objective of any experimental undertaking. Moreover, the small scale projects of NGOs, like the pilot and demonstration projects of other aid actors, have been said to fail not only in terms of insufficient learning, but also in terms of their inability to scale up, to be replicable and extendable (eg. Smillie 1995a:159).

The question here can be asked whether the distinctions between the business and the voluntary sector are not becoming blurred, and if so, what impact that may have on the way we view learning-in-development ? Notably a number of NGOs have grown in size, and are often playing a role, not of innovative experimenters but of more regular service providers. At the same time, businesses or profit-making companies for many years have been involved in contracting development projects, and are more recently also shifting in the humanitarian aid business. More questions of achievement against stated objectives, and of relative effectiveness and cost-effectiveness (eg. Hallam 1996) are therefore being addressed at the voluntary sector. Unlike voluntary organisations, private companies in aid are not expected to raise voluntary contributions, to represent the interests of the target group or to strengthen the third sector in society (eg. Kruse et al. 1997:75). It remains to be seen whether donors and analysts will hold the business companies that move into development and humanitarian aid to the same standards of accountability, and whether their performance will be evaluated according to criteria similar to those of voluntary agencies ?

c. OL/IL about development and about humanitarian action.

The writings and reflections on OL/IL in the aid sector have focused on development work. The question is whether the contexts in which humanitarian assistance is provided, the nature of its business and the roles of its providers, are fundamentally different from that of development assistance ? It can be argued that humanitarian assistance takes place in situations that are even more messy, volatile and complex than development contexts. Humanitarian assistance is even more about power and the reallocation of resources and opportunities. Indeed, it has been argued that humanitarian intervention 'should alter the balance of power in favour of victims' (Weiss 1997:103). Hence the concept of 'complex political emergency' although there is debate about whether 'political' refers to the causes of the emergency and/or also to the nature of the response ? The intended customers of humanitarian action are even more voiceless and choiceless than those of development assistance. Indeed, while there are many 'southern voices' engaged in the development debate, hardly any have appeared so far in the humanitarian debate. Interestingly, there has been a tendency to provide relief, at least in the major sectors of food, water, health and shelter, in remarkably standardized technical-logistical ways.

Experiment and innovation are entering humanitarian assistance only recently, in terms of gender-sensitive programming, more customized programming on the basis of participatory approaches, capacity-building, 'smart relief', conflict-mediation, social reconstruction and reconciliation etc.

Are these differences between developmental contexts, and the ones in which humanitarian assistance is provided, so profound that the ability to learn organisationally and institutionally around humanitarian action is even further restricted ? Or is it on the other hand an argument that OL/IL is even more imperative and urgent when it comes to humanitarian action ?

III. WHY SHOULD ORGANISATIONS LEARN?

a. Learning for improved performance.

If we accept the earlier quote of Smillie about development as a knowledge-based endeavour, then the goal of OL/IL should be to do development -or to provide humanitarian assistance- more effectively, ie. informed by a knowledge of what works and what does not work. The emphasis is here more on effectiveness (not necessarily cost-effectivness) than on impact. Does OL/IL indeed refer more directly to development and humanitarian assistance as a practice, rather than to the outcomes ? The 'pay-offs' and benefits of OL identified by Weiss and Minear (1997:10) in their discussion note, indeed all refer to internal, not to external impact (eg. improved morale and reduced turnover, augmented fund-raising abilities, greater capacity to resist pernicious outside interference etc.). Obviously external impact is important, but 'impact' ie. improvements in people's conditions of life, is dependent on far more factors than developmental or humanitarian assistance. As much as possible, the developmental and humanitarian actions should try to expand the domain of what is under their control and the domains that they can influence, but there will always be important factors beyond our control. It appears then that the aim of OL/IL is structurally improved performance, within a given context but, most importantly, also across different contexts.

b. More specific purposes of learning.

Mike Edwards (1996:15-18) has distinguished four purposes of learning which correspond to different levels of action :
-       Participatory learning in the field, the purpose of which should be to give the target groups more information and insight that can benefit their own self-development and instigate positive social and economic change ;
-       Project- or programme based learning, within and across comparable projects and programmes to identify good, best or innovative practice ;
-       Policy-related learning, which is the most interesting but also most problematic level because policy formulation implies generalising. Transferring experiences from one context to another is fraught with risk. Building policy on averages, obscuring the meaningful divergences and differences, is equally dubious. In reality, it has been pointed out, policy may be more influenced by the configuration of values, coalition politics and prevailing ideas than by the systematic analysis (eg. Weiss and Minear 1997:3).
-       Advocacy- or policy-influencing learning : Advocacy may mean formulating a general position. Advocating a particular policy or policy change will often imply that complexity is simplified and that discordant information is suppressed. An alternative is to stay closer to the participatory and project/programme based learning, in order to provide a 'reality check' on the assumptions and impact of a given policy.

A fifth, emergent, purpose of OL/IL might be accountability. The understanding of 'accountability' is expanding from a narrow financial-administrative interpretation, to a more broader one that looks at performance as a whole and even, tentatively, at impact. The control and audit functions of a supervisory body need to be complemented with evaluation (eg. Verhoeven and Simonet 1997:205). In that broader sense, accountability is about demonstrating that an agency or the system showed the best possible performance in a given context, and incorporated past lessons in that performance..

c. Learning and accountability.

The learning organisation will relate learning and accountability. It is in the nature of human beings, and inevitable for something as complex and messy as humanitarian action in a crisis situation, that mistakes are made. But the objective of OL and IL is to ensure that important mistakes are not repeated, ie. it creates a category of 'avoidable mistakes' . Epistemologists and philosophers of science can debate whether this is basically similar to, or different from the way that advances in immunology have created a category of 'avoidable diseases'.

A tendency might now develop among donors, from governmental ones to donor-NGOs, to link continued funding to learning.. When recipient organisations commit what would become considered 'avoidable mistakes' or perform below an established standard, we can decide not to continue funding them, or link continued funding to an expressed/demonstrated readiness to learn.

Linking learning and accountability is not immediately as straightforward as it might seem:

-        Whereas there is presumably a relative consensus about the state of knowledge in immunology, and hence of what are in principle 'avoidable diseases', in the humanitarian sector a clearly articulated body of 'acquired knowledge', and established standards, is less noticeable or identifiable. For development work overviews of theories and models are available in textbooks, although there too the pace of change and the growth of criticism seems to spur such rapid thematic and even 'paradigm' shifts, not necessarily driven by scientific evidence, that development aid recipients increasingly talk about 'donor fashions'. In the technical sectors of humanitarian action, there is a relative consensus on what constitutes good practice, so that system wide standards can be set, but this is far less the case for many other aspects of humanitarian action, notably in its organisational, social, economic and political dimensions. The overall 'paradigms' of humanitarian action are also far less articulated. Paradigm 'revolutions' (Kuhn 1962) tend to be driven by the latest mega-emergency (from Afghanistan to Iraq to Somalia/Bosnia to the Great Lakes...), rather than by more systematic and comparative analysis of contemporary humanitarian action in a number of places, and are more visibly subject to political trends and interests than perhaps development assistance. Thus, while most professionals are definitely able to cite examples where policy makers and practitioners did not fully draw on the knowledge available in their organisations and in the system, the judgement that an 'avoidable mistake' has been made, is not always so easy to argue beyond reasonable doubt.

-        There is also a difficulty with the discourse of 'learning-by-doing'. Participatory learning and learning-by-doing are recommended as the best methods to ensure that lessons are 'owned', and therefore will be taken on board in future actions and decisions. Yet there is a strong argument to be made that not all learning should be through the direct experience of doing, as this is evidently not cost-effective and is precisely often the cause for the reinvention of the wheel ! The point of OL and IL is precisely that aid work cannot rely only on experiential approaches. Learning from not only one's own mistakes but also those of other, and exercising in simulations, are essential characteristics of OL/IL.

-        Advocates of learning emphasize the importance of learning as a process, of ongoing learning, of developing a capacity to learn continuously. This raises the question of how to balance the evaluation of process and of outcome ? If we emphasize learning as a process, then the fact that an organisation is learning is by itself highly positive. Limited outcomes are not so immediately important. If however we emphasize effectiveness, then the fact that an organisation is learning or not, has less importance.

The current climate sees both an interest in developing learning organisations and in increased effectiveness and demonstrated impact. Whereas in principle the two go logically together, as the aim of learning is improved performance (probably measured as greater effectiveness ?), much learning is derived from mistakes (ie. failed performance). Balancing our appreciation for the learning process with our appreciation for effectiveness may not always be straightforward.

- There is the question of relating learning, accountability and time. We can judge as positive that individuals, organisations and the institutional system as a whole want to, and are, learning. But how much time should they be given before we see the results in performance? Will only the fast learners be rewarded ? Is there a system-wide standard on the pace of learning like with schools ? Fundholders have power of judgment, but notably the more bureaucratic ones, like donor administrators, the UN system and perhaps increasingly big donor NGOs, acknowledge that their own pace of change is very slow. Can they expect from others faster learning curves than their own ? The time frames for policy review and evaluation sometimes appear very short. That may not perhaps always reconcile with a pro-learning attitude. Has there been sufficient time to learn before policy evaluation takes place, and who determines what is 'sufficient' time ?

- This leads to the question of learning, accountability and penalty. If fault is found, and responsibility established, is it then enough to admit guilt and claim indulgence because now one has learned ? What penalties should apply in the aid industry, where professional mistakes have been made, but clemency is sought on the basis that it has been a learning experience ?

d. Transferability : scaling up, generalising, and wrongly applying the lessons.

The basis of all learning, it is said, is 'difference' or the 'reality check', in which our models and theories, or plans and designs, are contrasted with other views and with real outcomes in particular settings. Participatory learning, and reflection-in-action, are therefore often seen as excellent learning mechanisms. Research in the agricultural sector (eg. Systemwide Programme on Participatory Research and Gender Analysis 1997:6-7) is however focusing in on the methodological problems of scaling-up this form of learning, an issue that so far has only received scant attention in NGO development work (but see eg. Edwards and Hulme 1992). Highly participatory ways of working are very effort-intensive and slow. They are therefore not easy to scale up at reasonable cost, and the available evidence (in the agricultural sector) does not indicate that much 'lateral dissemination' takes place from one locality to another. Wide and strong institutional linkages and partnerships seem an important prerequisite for scaling up (eg. Edwards 1996b:7 ; Mawer 1997:253), but in conflict situations, where existing institutions may have weakened, collapsed or be compromised, and where competition rather than collaboration at times seems the norm, it is often those that are very difficult to establish.

Policy making requires generalisation. Many of the vitally important contextual differences might get lost in the process of generalisation (see eg. Kruse et al. 1997:27;97-98). It has therefore been recommended that policy makers should purposefully look for the different and unusual experiences, select cases so as to reflect variety and not averages, and build on longer term programme experiences in wider geographical areas to develop a richer picture (Edwards 1996a:17-18). In that light one can ask, for example, how valid it is for NATO to review its policy on civil-military relationships on the basis solely of its Bosnia experience ?

The simplification that comes with hasty generalisation may lead to two mistakes : learning the

wrong lessons, and the unwarranted application of lessons from one context to another. The available literature does not address the question of how we crosscheck that the purported lessons learned are indeed correct or valid ones ? It is perfectly possible for superficial analysis and rapid evaluation, particularly when looking at reality within short time frames, may simply overlook fundamental issues and identify causes and cause-effect relationships that would not stand up to closer scrutiny. What is 'learned' might be a wrong or a relatively minor lesson ?

Equally problematic is the transfer and application of lessons, whether right or wrong, from one context, to another. The joke in the military is that generals always fight the last war. It is widely believed that the debacle with military intervention in Somalia in 1993 did play a role in the reluctance to intervene when the genocide started in Rwanda in 1994. Ways of working that have proven effective in one context may not apply in another. Thus an EU consultant in 1989 recommended that an EPI programme in rural Afghanistan should follow the global standard model of integration in the existing health service network, completely ignoring the very specific and highly unusual conditions that applied (Van Brabant 1992:343-344). In a similar vein, relevant similarities may be detected in assessing risk and managing agency security in an Afghan and Somali context, but the approaches that have a certain effectiveness in those two contexts, have little application in eg. Sri Lanka or Liberia (Van Brabant 1997).

Basing learning on recognised 'difference' seems a more fruitful approach than basing learning on the identification of a 'problem' (cf. Weiss and Minear 1997:4). Problem-solving too easily consists of removing the difference and diversity, which precisely may inhibit learning.

Cautioning against hasty generalisation does not mean embracing the opposite view that every situation is unique. At a normative level notions of universal standards and rights appear necessary (Newens and Roche 1996:16). At a programmatic level, the current thinking seems to focus in on searching for the factors, external and internal, that contribute to success and failure (Kruse et al. 1997:29). Policy and planning should therefore proceed with a careful consideration of the conditions that will affect its implementation, and may try to enhance those that are expected to have a favourable influence.

In summary the current interest in learning assumes a too simple cumulative process. It tends to neglect or downplay the risk of learning the wrong lessons and of inappropriate transfer of lessons between contexts. OL/IL therefore cannot simply rely on institutional memory and on a 'lessons learned' attitude. We always need to be alert to differences. The most appropriate approach in certain situations, might be to 'forget' all the models and recipes we have been taught. We thus need a balance, and a tension, between the acquired knowledge of lessons learned and an open mind, (relatively !) unburdened by previous models and experiences.

IV. OBSTACLES TO LEARNING

The literature highlights a number of obstacles to learning, which can be broken down into generic obstacles, structural obstacles particular to the aid sector, and personal/interpersonal obstacles to learning.

a. Generic obstacles to learning ?

There seems to be a consensus among authors that centralisation and hierarchy, with the concomitant emphasis on top down management and control, are an obstacle to OL. This seems more an intuitive than a well researched thesis. Decentralisation of decision-making may allow more innovativeness, but does that by itself suffice for better and faster OL ? The arguments against strong hierarchies concern the division of labour, office politics and interpersonal relations. Centralised and hierarchical organisations are more prone to create a division of labour between thinking and acting, with policy-making, planning and decision making relegated to specific departments and senior management. The vertical and top-down flows inhibit teamwork within units and across units. The structure stimulates organisational politics where the priority for staff is not learning but to protect or advance their own position, or that of their unit or their budget. Mastery of the system and its policies and procedures are deemed more important, than understanding the context and questioning the quality of a policy or programme (Menkhausen 1996:31). Conformity is rewarded, not innovation, alternative views and critical reflection. Field staff, who are closest to 'reality' and most keenly aware of the 'difference' find themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy, with their views and interpretations ignored or overruled. This leads to an argument in favour of decentralisation and flatter structures (cf. MSF-Holland) and/or the devolution of greater authority to field-based staff (eg. Simonet and Verhoeven 1997:25).

Learning or not learning therefore is closely related to power and authority. Power relations play a role in what discordant information is admitted or not, in whose views are accepted as authoritative, in what is retained as a 'lesson' and what not (Mukhopadhyay 1995). OL thus should inquire into who reflects and analyses, who draws the lessons, who controls the organisational memory and who controls the dissemination (Howes and Roche 1996:3).

Poor information management is another generic problem area. This goes from the absence of base line data to compare with, and vaguely formulated objectives, over poor systems for the processing, storage and retrieval of information, to poor dissemination within units and throughout the organisation. Bottom-up, formal routine reporting, particularly in very hierarchical structures, often tends to have limited learning value. The timeframes are too short, the emphasis is on activities and inputs/outputs, achievements rather than problems are highlighted and the exercise is seen as a procedural obligation rather than an opportunity for reflection and learning (Howes and Roche 1996:4-6). Through such processes, organisations may create self-sustaining systems of 'misinformation'. Paradoxically, the problem of limited or wrong information is compounded by that of information overload. So much information is coming in and available that the effort to digest it becomes too much. There is a problem then with producing and with identifying quality information.

b. Structural obstacles in the aid sector ?

Four major such obstacles appear to be image, competition, finance, employment.

IMAGE. It has been said that aid agencies have become the victims of their own false portrayal of development and emergency relief as quick and simple. Having given that

impression to the general public and donors alike, they are now forced to come up with 'success' stories and to downplay problems and failures. The criticism is that the aid world has failed profoundly in its public education work. Unlike the feminist and environmentalist movement, it has not been able to generate a more insightful understanding and to mobilise northern citizens into a citizen's movement for sustainable development (Hulme and Edwards 1997:20/279) or a global human and humanitarian rights and peace movement.

COMPETITION. The growth of the humanitarian industry has increased competition for profile and for funds in an unregulated market. As a consequence, the increased pressure to show results may also increase the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of performance.

FINANCE. Although in recent years there has been an increase in overall funding for emergency and humanitarian work, it appears that the system at the same time suffers from profound financial insecurity. The question can be raised whether the valid concern for increased cost-effectiveness in what is, at times, a rather complacently 'affluent' sector, is not now overshooting its target ? The UN system, certainly for humanitarian action, is heavily dependent on appeals and voluntary rather than assessed contributions, while many INGOs, precisely because of a rapid growth through project-based official funding, have equally uncertain funding prospects year by year. The myth that development and humanitarian action are relatively cheap, has translated into requirements for unrealistically low 'overheads' (Smillie 1995b:151-153). Increasing concerns with cost-effectiveness have also affected donor aid departments whose increases in budgets have not always been matched by increases in management capacity. Low overheads then may reflect understaffing rather than efficiency (Verhoeven and Simonet 1997:23). In the equation the emphasis has been on reducing costs, more than on improving effectiveness. Performance becomes then measured in terms of cash flow (income and disbursement logic) and 'cheap' implementation. Accounts however do not say anything about hidden costs, the quality of an action or its impact. Research institutes too have not escaped the drive for 'cheap growth'. Core grants have been reduced or abolished and academics spend increasing amounts of time submitting tenders, and hurrying to complete work against tight deadlines, to the detriment of innovative research, teaching and intellectual debate and reflection. Rising expectations about performance, combined with tighter budgets and pressures to cut costs, make for very high degrees of workload in the aid sector, that allow little scope for reflection. Is the net result a tendency to go for the short term, quick fix, rather than for more in-depth learning?

Contracting out is becoming more common in the aid sector. One can ask what the implications are of relying on outside consultants and contractors for the nurturing of in-house competence and institutional memory (Weiss and Minear 1997:11) ?

Some aid recipients have taken critical note of the reduced concern for quality of northern donors (eg. Perera 1997). Both in development work and in humanitarian assistance in protracted crises, there seems scope for more for programme funding. Dfid's 4 year framework programme in Sri Lanka could be one such example (SEADD 1997).

If development, and humanitarian action, are complex and sophisticated activities, and if programmes are increasingly expected to take into account the politics around aid, capacity building, industry-wide standards, the interests of multiple stakeholders, gender and environmental concerns etc., should then the conclusion not be that increased quality, effectiveness and impact, may mean less rapid disbursement and higher 'overheads' ?

EMPLOYMENT. The argument states that the financial volatility in the aid sector have generated increased casualisation of work. Many desk and field staff, also with important responsibilities of eg. the DHA (Donini 1996:55) or ECHO (Court of Auditors 1997:15-16) but

also INGOs work on sometimes very short term contracts. The job insecurity can be further aggravated by strict equal opportunity policies that abolish the mechanism of internal promotion, politicization of appointments and promotions (eg. Verhoeven and Simonet 1997:21-24) and ongoing internal restructuring. Although restructurings are often defended in terms of organisational adaptation to a changing environment and improved effectiveness, they may be demoralising and send the opposite message to staff affected. At field level, certainly in humanitarian operations, the high rates of notably international staff turnover, work against continuity and OL. Under such conditions, there is little incentive for both organisations and staff to invest in learning, or to question dominant ideas and practices.

c. Personal and interpersonal obstacles to learning.

Individual learning is still a necessary condition for OL, albeit not a sufficient one. Some authors therefore do pay attention to personal and interpersonal factors in learning. In that context it is felt that the ability to learn and develop professionally cannot be separated from the ability to develop personally. Essentially the argument goes as follows : Human beings in and through their general upbringing and functioning in society tend to become highly conditioned. Much of our thinking and behaviour is rooted in habits and routines, in deeply implicit mental models of how the world works, in well concealed assumptions and prejudices (ie. pre-judgments). In a way we need these routines as we cannot question everything all the time. On the other hand, our habits, assumptions, mental models and prejudices impose uniformity and simplicity on the complexity and variety of events and experiences, thereby obscuring and negating 'differences'. Confronted with situations and events, our interpretations and responses in the present tend to be conditioned by the past. As human beings, we carry around our own personal 'institutional memory' and 'lessons learned', which we apply automatically and without much reflection. We have great difficulty seeing each situation with fresh eyes, and responding to in its own terms.

Organisations bring people into functional relationships, that typically involve roles and authority. The personal identification with roles and authority tends to generate more overtly defensive attitudes. Unusual events, apparent failures or criticism, alternative views, the prospect of having change imposed, or of being evaluated, then become threatening. Our reflex is to maintain our role, to protect our position and authority, to keep up appearances, to save face, to avoid embarrassment. Such potential threats have to be avoided, repulsed or suppressed. That creates tension, at a personal level, and at an interpersonal and organisational level.

In recent decades the educational approach in schools has been to question the memorizing of vast amounts of encyclopaedic knowledge, under supervision of the teacher as authority. Rather students have been provided with a mind set, and with skills and methodologies to inquire and find the sources that may provide answers. But proponents of a 'holistic' approach to education, would hold that both parental and school education generally fail to pay equal attention to the systematic inquiry into our own personal assumptions and, often emotional, logic. Thus we may be very intelligent about the world around us, and very confused and uncertain about ourselves, and about our interpersonal relationships.

The ability to learn then is not based on mastery of vast amounts of recorded information, but on an openness and freshness of mind. What Senge has called 'personal mastery', is the ability to see clearly what is important and what is not, and to look at current reality alert and unburdened by models and interpretations of other situations. Not surprisingly, at a personal level, he has called this 'a lifelong discipline' (1990:142). Learning then involves both better documentation, reflection and analysis for 'institutional memory', and the ability to 'suspend' our acquired knowledge and viewpoints, so as to look at each situation afresh. The two do not

necessarily contradict each other. The suspension of our acquired knowledge and viewpoints, is precisely what is needed to provide the space to recognise 'differences' and inquire into our assumptions, and to introduce caution in transferring responses, approaches and solutions from one context to another.

V. CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE, CATALYSTS FOR LEARNING ?

Given the obstacles and resistances in organisations, what triggers change, and is that change grounded in, and an expression of learning ? The literature points at some factors, external or internal to organisations, that tend to trigger change and unblock a status quo.

a. Internal factors

In principle research, monitoring, reviews, evaluations and impact assessments should generate single loop and at times double loop learning. In practice there can be many reasons why they do not generate the learning they potentially entail. It has been observed that the monitoring and evaluation systems in the humanitarian sector are an area of weakness (Wallace 1995:5). We will return to the role of evaluation later. In principle however, negative or catastrophic experience, more likely than a very positive one, can trigger change and learning.

Staff can be a catalyst for change. Staff initiatives and sustained internal pressure can bring about change. New staff can bring new knowledge and expertise. Alternatively, or simultaneously, change can become possible by the removal of staff who constituted an obstacle.

Change can also come about from a management initiative, or under pressure from the Board of Directors or Trustees.

It would be worthwhile to examine cases of change resulting from internal factors, to see whether this change was grounded in learning, and brought about new learning ?

b. External factors

Given the inertia and resistances in the human psyche, magnified and objectified in organisational practices, most authors seem to feel that external factors are often a necessary condition for change. These can be media pressures, and other forms of public criticism with demands for more accountability and transparency.

A financial crisis is often a very effective catalyst of change. Public criticism and a financial crisis may however lead to change, but there is no guarantee that the changes will draw on learning or contribute to learning. Changes may be quick fix solutions in an atmosphere of crisis management. Other external pressures may bring about more substantively informed and reflected changes. Donor demands for results, or donor inquiries into a perceived programme failure or organisational weakness, are another possible catalyst. Inquiry by congress or parliament (Verhoeven and Simonet 1997) or a Court of Auditors (1997) a third. An external industry-wide watchdog, the 'ombudsperson' concept, could play a triggering role. The observance of sector-wide standards and practices can also be more systematically embodied such as is the case with the independent Joint Commission of Accreditation on Healthcare (JCAHO) in the US. The JCAHO carries out quality audits of medical services, and extends accreditation for a specified time, after which another review is due (Purdin 1997).

Peer pressure, such as the very public Alex de Waal/African Rights criticisms of the humanitarian sector, or the less confrontational 'Do no Harm' school around Mary Anderson, can force agencies to focus their mind and to take a harder look at their roles and practices. Initiatives like Codes of Conduct, the People-in-Aid code of best practice or the Sphere Project on standards and a beneficiaries charter, the Joint Evaluation of the response to the first Rwandan crisis, or DAC guidelines on best practice, represent other institutional (ie.

systemwide) pressures for learning.

External consultants, be they facilitators, organisational development advisors and/or evaluators, sometimes make an important impact. Possibly this may happen most easily where they are deliberately brought in to play that role. External actors can be used to break the deadlock in fixed assumptions, concepts and functional relationships. Their reports can be used by junior managers to introduce new ideas and proposals in the face of inertia of senior managers, or by senior managers to render 'objective', and thereby to legitimize change initiatives.

Again, it would be worthwhile to examine cases of change where external factors played a role, and to examine whether they facilitated and/or contributed to learning.

VI. CREATING THE LEARNING ORGANISATION: INTERNAL CHANGES

a. Organisational structures, procedures and policies.

The following are a number of factors that are held to create a more enabling environment for organisational learning.

MANAGEMENT CLOSER TO THE FIELD. Bringing the decision making closer to reality ('the field') is felt to contribute to an organisational environment that better 'enables' learning. The weakest is probably the occasional field visit or mission, followed by the use of contracted local consultants (eg. the Dutch NGO NOVIB), to advise on projects and partners, and to monitor. Agency representation can take place through the (occasional) deployment of field-based staff (eg. ECHO, USAID, DHA..), or the creation of a more solid delegation in the form of a country office. Country offices are expensive to establish and maintain. From an organisational learning point of view, their disadvantage is the absence of a comparative perspective that would help to identify similarities but also meaningful differences, which is precisely what may trigger learning. Regional offices, which would be cheaper to maintain (but also equally effective ?), can in principle provide a comparative perspective. The aid sector has a rich variety of organisational experiences with centralisation and devolution, including regional managers/directors in headquarters, country and regional delegations which encompasses donors (eg. Dfid), the UN (eg. UNICEF) and the NGOs (eg. ActionAid, SCF-UK). There are fundamental issues though with 'bringing management closer to the field'. One is the question of decentralisation (geographical spread) or devolution of authority. Secondly, the lines of communication and the precise delineation of responsibility and authority between headquarters, regional and country delegations, can be problematic. Thirdly, how to combine decentralising and devolving authority, with maintaining one identity and coherence/uniformity of standards and policies ? How to distinguish between local initiatives that are 'innovative' and 'creative' and that become 'maverick', and how to control for the latter ? And how to ensure that local representatives are fully cognisant of the capabilities but also of the constraints of the organisation ? Specifically with regard to humanitarian action, there are experiences in having separate emergency departments and specialised emergency staff, and with humanitarian action being integrated in the overall programme desks, or a mixture of both. The question whether an emergency response capacity should remain centralised, or build up in regions, or a mix of both, is also relevant to the subject. What influence the different organisational models have on emergency preparedness and early warning alertness, and on standards, capacity and learning for humanitarian response, could be a research question.

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN HEADQUARTERS AND THE FIELD. One mechanism for doing this can be a policy of seconding and rotating staff (eg. Court of Auditors 1997:16). This can involve the temporary secondment of headquarter staff to field offices, and vice versa, or a broader career structure whereby staff or advisory cadres move between field- and headquarter postings (eg. in the ODA/Dfid, see Healey in Cox et al. 1997:219). The use of technical advisors (sectoral/thematic specialists and -learners), who reflect on programmes and provide feedback and advise, is a potential mechanism. They can be deployed in headquarters and/or in regional delegations. The FAO has established a new office to ensure coordination between field offices and headquarters, and between 'normative' and 'operational' functions. The latter refers to the mutual learning, or 'synergy', of field experience with more general technical/scientific knowledge (LaurentJacques 1997).

HORIZONTAL LINKAGES BETWEEN UNITS AND PROGRAMMES. Breaking down the walls between divisions, departments, units and programmes, is felt to encourage learning. At the

simplest level, important reports may be circulated to different units, who are obliged to provide comments on them. This does not necessarily lead to more active exchanges of opinions and experiences. That can be facilitated by thematic working groups (intellectual reflection) or task-specific multi-departmental teams. At field level, crossprogramme knowledge can be enhanced eg. through exposure visits, inter-office secondments, or regional thematic workshops.

PROCEDURAL OBLIGATIONS. These essentially try to ensure that explicit attention is being given to lessons and recommendations. Thus a procedure can be instituted whereby the relevant decision-makers add their reactions to the findings of eg. an evaluation (eg. Court of Auditors 1997), and what action they intend to undertake to follow up on them (LaurentJacques 1997). A related procedure, proposed a few years ago in the African Development Bank, is to request that new programme or project documents explicitly indicate how lessons have been taken into account, or to make the involvement of technical advisors and/or evaluation department staff obligatory in the preparation or appraisal of new proposals.

STRATEGIC PLANNING. 'Strategic management works best in what are termed 'learning organisations' (Wallace 1995:2). Humanitarian action has often been characterised as reactive, and ad hoc. But strategic thinking has become a buzz word in the development sector and gradually in the humanitarian sector as well (eg. ECHO 1997).

The failures of top down, detailistic and formalistic planning, by a specialised planning department, have been adequately documented by Mintzberg (1994). And there is as yet little recorded experience of working with strategic planning in conflict emergencies (Wallace 1995:3). It is sometimes stated that no form of planning is possible in rapidly developing and evolving crisis situations. Experience would indicate that this is not absolutely true. Although the timing and scale of events cannot perhaps be predicted, long-term observers, local and external, often have learned to anticipate a not unlimited number of possible scenarios. A degree of prepositioning is then possible. The practice is now to programme what are inherently long-term interventions (such as refugee care, livelihood support, an EPI service) in chronically unstable situations with longer than the usual 6 to 12 month time perspectives. Surely it is necessary and tentatively possible to build longer-term horizons and goals into much humanitarian response. Annual plans are already an improvement over ad hoc decision-making, but for most humanitarian situations would appear still insufficient. A medium-term strategic 'framework' for perhaps 3 years, in many cases may be adviseable. This is then detailed with shorter term, more specific, operational plans. In a 'rolling approach' the medium-term framework remains open to periodic review and revision. Such strategic framework helps to create a common vision and focus within the organisation. It becomes a tool for learning and for documenting the decision-trail, particularly when it is closely tied to a review of the external and internal environment, and the careful articulation of objectives and assumptions. DfID now expects NGOs, and encourages the UN, to present requests for funding, also for humanitarian assistance, with a logframe articulation of the programme. There may be discussion about when this may be feasible and appropriate, and when it is a, sometimes unacceptable, loss of time, but the practice seems to have certain merit also in humanitarian action. One should ask however whether in the logframes not more attention should be devoted to the column on assumptions, and the monitoring of those (Dixon 1997)?

While the wider adoption of formal planning or proposal formulation techniques is being recommended (eg. Verhoeven and Simonet 1997:26) they have also been challenged, in the development sphere, as disempowering for the South and negating its learning and inputs (Wallace 1997).

OL AS ORGANISATIONAL POLICY. There appears a general consensus that a formal and

official commitment to become a learning organisation is a facilitating, though not by itself sufficient, factor. It puts a name to a problem (Mukhopadhyay 1995). More effective learning is thereby not only given attention, but initiatives to promote OL and IL are legitimized. It now becomes acceptable to devote time and money to learning. Thus Oxfam (UK/I) in 1995 established a 'crossprogramme learning fund'.

AN ORGANISATIONAL FOCUS FOR LEARNING. Research could be carried out on the effectiveness of different organisational ways of providing a focal point for learning. One long-standing mechanism are the thematic and in principle temporary working groups such as the World Bank's 'Learning Group on Participatory Development'. But it appears there is a trend for more permanently institutionalised formats to provide a general organisational focus for learning. An interest in 'organisational memory' antedates that in OL. Naturally the library then became the repository of knowledge (LaurentJacques 1997). A somewhat evolved concept seems to lie behind a Centre for Documentation and Research, as was recently created by UNHCR (Riley 1997). Other organisations, like MSF-Belgium and the British Red Cross also recently created special units for research and learning. Often learning has been associated, implicitly and increasingly explicitly as an objective, with evaluation departments (eg. SIDA, Dfid, ECHO). The 'Lessons Learned Units' of the DPA, DHA and DPKO are another related concept and possible format. Oxfam (UK/I) in turn has recently merged some units into the Gender and Learning Team, and has appointed staff members as focal points for learning and training for its different Africa regions (Newens and Roche 1996:11).

Are there different concepts and approaches to OL to be discerned in these different formats. Is there for example a shift in emphasis from passive documentation to more active research, from a focus on evaluations to drawing learning from a broader range of sources, from a relatively retro-active interest in 'lessons learned' to a more pro-active ongoing 'learning' process ?

b. Information management.

AN EMPIRICAL APPROACH TO LEARNING. Information management seems one of the most complex and crucial areas for learning. Before looking at some issues and practices, it might be helpful to draw up a model of an inductive approach to learning that this author favours.

Operational action needs to be documented, and analysed. The comparison of different operational actions, over time and/or between situations, enriches the analysis. The insights gained are then disseminated. They can be used to quite directly influence policy and practice, or do so following more conceptual and theoretical development.

theoretical development

dissemination

comparative reflection

analysis

better policy

better practice

operational action
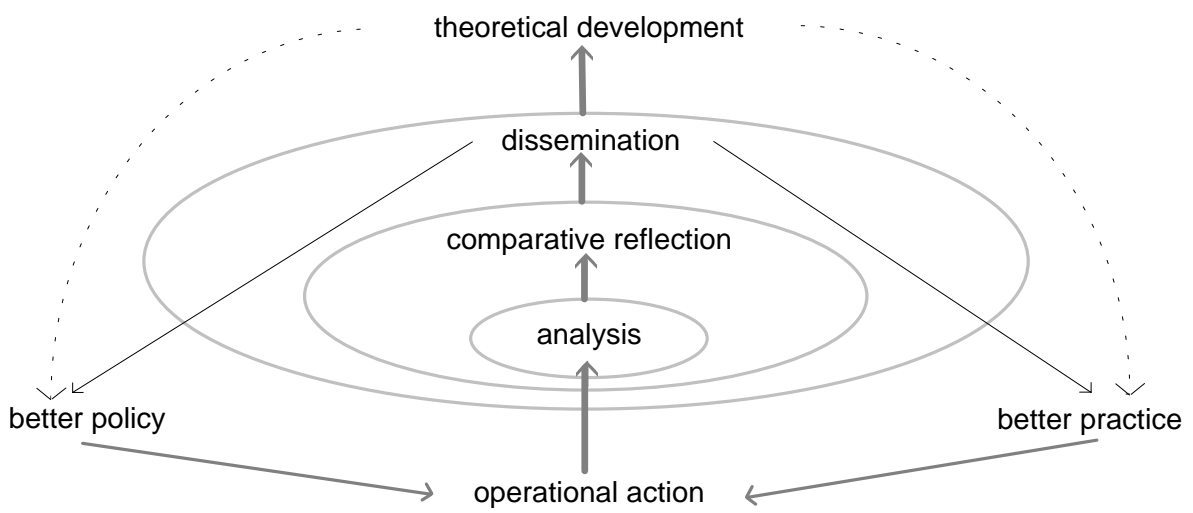
Since 1990 it appears there has been an 'avalanche' of literature on humanitarian action. One scholar has talked about a new field that presented many opportunities for all sorts of writers to capture what amounted to an 'open market for the publication of ideas, analyses and reflections' (Weiss 1997:97). Potentially valuable, this rapid increase in information, in the absence sometimes of widely emerging consensus and still limited synthesis and consolidation, has also left many policy makers and practitioners in the humanitarian field behind. There is much catching up to do, and the learning gap is wide.

DOCUMENTATION. Documentation of humanitarian action is often limited. In rapidly developing, high pressure situations, documentation of the evolving context and response to it, is seldomly seen as a priority. The Joint Evaluation of the response to the Rwanda crisis (1996) highlighted how sometimes the most basic information on agency resources is not available. Even more difficult is unearthing the decision-trail, the history of who in the agency made what decisions, when and why ? Even where efforts are made to do so, there may not be the capacity to process and absorb the information. An example is the case of a country representative of an agency working in a conflict-ridden country who at the height of a crisis wrote on average two to three situational analyses a week of 10 to 15 pages each. These considered events, and the responses of different organisations to them, but also paid attention to the changing political and public perceptions in-country to those, the dynamics of the national politics, and broader development aid issues for the parts of the country that were not directly affected by the conflict.

Although analytical and presented with a summary, they caused the overburdened desk manager considerable frustration. With a change in the head of office, the reporting was reduced to a 1 to 2 page note, dropping all the broader, contextual and political analysis, and the overview of other agencies' responses. While causing 'relief at the desk' (sic), the capacity for retroactive review and analysis, and for learning about operating in conflict, rather than the agency's emergency response, appears greatly diminished.

Donors seem to vacillate in their requirements for documentation. On the one hand they complain that narrative reporting is often inadequate, on the other hand they don't want to distract staff involved in humanitarian response from getting on with the job (Mowjee 1997).

Debriefings follow usually too quickly upon termination of an assignment to provide much additional information and perspective. Some organisations are using other mechanisms to capture some of the knowledge and learning of staff members. This can be a limited contract-extension for the purpose of writing up, or a 'sabbatical' for staff with longer term employment prospects.

There seems scope to improve the documentation of contextual developments and the system-wide response through interagency efforts, for example through sufficiently resourced coordination bodies. Typically, one of the first posts to be created within such is that of an information officer. Systemwide situational monitoring and updating investments have also been made eg. by the DHA in the ReliefWeb and the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) of the Great Lakes and West Africa.

Major crises may require a special information processing and dissemination capacity, such as the Rwanda Information Centre set up by USAID in 1994 (Garvelink 1996).

CENTRALISING DOCUMENTATION. It is still relatively exceptional in humanitarian action to create a system-wide documentation centre at field level. One such example would be the Afghanistan Resource and Information Centre (ARIC) under the auspices of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief in Peshawar, Pakistan. Yet the advantages in terms of

access to a wide range of resources, for field practitioners and visitors alike, appear great. Most interagency coordinating bodies unfortunately do not, as yet, have documentation and collective learning as a major aim of their mandates.

Most agencies invest only in their own centres of documentation. The trend is to go electronic to increase access. Oxfam (UK/I) for example has a standardized project documentation form, all of which can easily be fed into a central database. It allows eg. the rapid production of statistics and graphs representing the global project investment, which is more useful for senior management than for field staff. The search by key word can also facilitate the identification of projects with possibly comparative relevance. The Refugee Studies Programme in Oxford, and Save the Children (UK) have invested in electronic catalogues of the published and grey literature they hold. SCF however found that its Global Information System remained substantially underutilised, certainly by overburdened project staff (Edwards 1996:17). The situation is probably better at the RSP, which is a teaching and research institute, without operational responsibilities.

Related initiatives are the production of thematic or specialised catalogues, ideally annotated. Thus the DAC Expert Group on Aid Evaluation has a database of evaluation abstracts. ECHO currently has an inventory of evaluations, and would like to develop a database with evaluation findings (Court of Auditors 1997:61). ALNAP itself is developing a database of evaluations of humanitarian action.

COMPARISON AND SYNTHESIS. A further step is the production of an overview of case studies, with a beginning synthesis in an introductory and/or concluding chapter, or as a separate volume. Examples of one volume studies are Macrae and Zwi (1994) or Cox et al. (1997). Examples of series studies are the publications of the Humanitarianism and War project at Brown University (USA), the publications on managing arms in peace processes from the UN Institute for Disarmament Research and the poverty policy studies currently being undertaken at the ODI. The FAO produces periodic syntheses of project evaluations while its Programme Evaluation Report presents lessons and issues from more substantive programmes (LaurentJacques 1997).

Synthesis studies (eg. Vouthira 1995, Borton and Macrae 1997 ; Kruse et al. 1997) follow a similar procedure but drop most of the case material to concentrate on summarizing the comparative findings, on identifying conceptual and/or information gaps and suggesting methodological improvements. Literature reviews such as Razavi and Miller (1995) or the 'Review of Peacekeeping Literature 1990-1996 (Collins and Weiss, forthcoming) can document the historical shifts in conceptual development and issues focused upon, and summarize debates.

Annual reports such as the UNDP Development Report, the World Disasters Report, the State of the World's Refugees, the UNDP, the planned Global IDP Survey, or the Populations-in-Danger reports of the MSF-movement, combine case material with synthesis and policy recommendations.

Good Practice Reviews, such as those produced by the Relief and Rehabilitation Network, coordinated at the ODI, are attempts to draw lessons from comparative experience at the level of programme policy and programme design.

In this regard, note might be taken that the job descriptions of agencies, typically demand analytical skills, whereas synthetic reasoning is overlooked ?

REPORTING GUIDELINES. These are used to ensure that certain issues will not be

overlooked, to make reports from different experiences comparable, and to restrict information overload eg. by imposing a maximum length and requiring an executive summary. Closed reporting formats however may be counterproductive because they may not provide scope for important but in the format not anticipated information. The alternative is a list of topics and themes that the report has to address, but, as in a semi-structured questionnaire, leaving scope for what the respondent sees as important.

There is a tendency to introduce new sections in reports. Conclusions and recommendations are now sometimes complemented with/substituted for by sections on lessons learned and follow up action to be undertaken. While encouraging OL in principle, some research into the effectiveness of such 'prompts', might be appropriate..

In recent years, thousands if not millions of recommendations have been formulated in the aid sector, and one can question the effectiveness of adding to the number. The Oslo Declaration on PARINAC (1994) for example contained no less than 134 recommendations. Recommendations can be too vague to make much practical sense. Obliging report writers to come up with conclusions, recommendations, and lessons learned may simply lead to poorly reflected answers of dubious merit. Thus a cursory overview of the a selection of answers to the questions of what impact on gender and on the environment a particular project was expected to have, obligatory paragraphs in one agency's project application format, revealed a rather superficial and tokenistic treatment.

A widespread problem with reports is that they do not generate relevant feedback. As said before, they then become a procedural requirement, usually bottom-up, with no learning application.

Where it is felt that recommendations are valuable, good practice may consist of mandating an individual or group with overseeing their follow up and implementation, such as was done with the Joint Rwanda Evaluation (JEFF 1997). Ideally, that follow up could be periodically presented to a supervisory authority, be it the Board of Directors, or be put into the public domain.

DISSEMINATION IN WRITING. Given that learning is stimulated not only by comparison but also by 'dissonance', a serious discrepancy between the pretended and the actual, or the norm and reality, tends to lead to dissemination being restricted on the grounds of 'confidentiality'. A change in culture seems recommended, whereby organisations articulate and disseminate their policies, publish about their programme experiences, and put eg. the results of evaluations in the public domain. The latter was one of the important agreements reached in the reform of the UK Disasters Emergency Committee. While exposing them to external scrutiny and criticism, they should also be recommended for seeking to be transparent and accountable, preconditions for learning.

It is conceivable that in the near future organisations will come to be criticised for being excessively 'confidential' irrespective of whether they have major shortcomings to hide or not. But the question can also be posed, in the light of increased competition between aid agencies, but also increased concern for standards and quality, whether the still existing 'industry-wide confidentiality', whereby aid agencies do not publicly criticise each other, will not come to be seen and denounced as complicity ?

Limited dissemination is an expression of the view that there are only a very few stakeholders? Broader dissemination recognises a broader range of interested stakeholders but decisions about tailor-made presentations for different audiences become more difficult. Email is becoming a faster and cheaper method of dissemination, while most Web sites offer

totally open access to information. For many people electronic information transfer is also adding to the problem of information overload. There may be a case for research not only on innovative ways of dissemination, but also for organisational guidance on where quality information on the World Wide Web is likely to be found. Some staff may have the time to monitor the information and to explore the changing map of the Web, but an organisational effort in this regard appears potentially more cost-effective.

The scale and complexity of large aid organisations is leading some of them to produce internal and sometimes external newsletters. These can help to inform about events and initiatives within the organisation, policy developments, programme experiences and important reports or documents and how to obtain them.

Short, usually thematic briefing papers in the face of information overload appear a very useful format for disseminating information and learning within and between organisations.
There is also a small but growing number of specialist publications in the humanitarian field that in principle are a forum for system-wide debate and the sharing of experience. Examples are the Refugee Participation Newsletter, DHA News, Crosslines, the Relief and Rehabilitation Network publications, Monday Developments (INTERACTION), a planned ECHO journal, or professional journals such as the Journal of Refugee Studies or Disasters. These provide material for IL rather than OL, and are an expression of the growing 'professionalisation' of the sector. How much they really or directly contribute to improved policy and practice is however not immediately obvious. It also appears that vast amounts of very relevant material only exist as hard to access grey literature.

DISSEMINATION THROUGH INTERACTION. These are ways of fostering learning that do not rely on the written word or much less so. Verbal briefing sessions, when well prepared and executed, can be a very effective way of disseminating important insights. Briefings, while a common tool for politicians, are probably an underutilised technique in aid organisations. Briefings can be organised for key individuals, or eg. during lunch for a broader group of interested colleagues. Meetings are a potential forum for learning. 'Learning meetings' are those not only where decisions are taken and follow up responsibilities identified, but where the available information has been reviewed, and different views have been constructively exchanged. Large organisations and action-driven aid agencies appear very poor at having effective meetings. Often meetings are poorly planned and poorly managed, with dominating personalities, meandering monologues and real or suspected hidden agendas. Meeting fatigue far outweighs the alleged donor fatigue. Investing in training staff on running effective meetings might give high returns, certainly when there is an open, inquiring, and learning-oriented culture in the organisation.

Exposure visits from (national) programme staff to headquarters. or from senior managers or donor representatives to projects are probably not very precise as a learning tool, but they can very effectively make someone understand the reality and complexity of a situation, in ways that can hardly be conveyed in writing. Much depends on the spirit with which such visits are undertaken (for inspection, relaxation or for learning ?), how well they are prepared, and what is being shown and discussed. The 'wandering minstrel' approach is a combination of specialist/trainer/facilitator who works with different programmes and country offices, eliciting and gathering insights in comparable experiences, disseminating it and building capacity, in the course of sometimes extended working visits (Howes and Roche 1996:12).

Other common formats of sharing of information and experience are conferences and workshops. The potential for learning seems greater the more interactive the event, so that participants can use their own experience, and fully engage in discussion and reflection. As organisations tend to be inward looking, in principle the potential for learning may also be

greater when outsiders to the agency participate, or where there is a multi-agency involvement.

The drawback is that conferences and workshops require a heavy investment of money and staff time, and ideally need follow up from the organisers and the participants (Howes and Roche 1996:10-11). Where learning is not part of the individual or organisational culture, attendance can also be seen as a holiday away from real work, a reward for good service and an addition to one's curriculum, rather than a learning opportunity. Networking and the sharing of experiences are often avowed expectations of workshop participants. Although face-to-face contact may prepare the ground for further exchanges, it appears difficult to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of the personal networking through workshops. The sharing of experiences is often also brief and rather shallow. Finally, just as with training courses, participants upon return may not feed back or not find an organisational environment receptive to what they have learned.

Creative formats are possible. The country office of one agency working in a conflict situation brought together its programme staff for 3 days every 6 to 8 weeks, in what it called 'programme staff meetings', away from the office. Apart from being an important team building exercise, these provided an opportunity for briefing each other on developments in the different districts, to collectively and critically reflect on programme experiences, to discuss organisation-wide or in-country policy developments, to report back on trainings and workshops attended, occasionally to provide some training, and to make progress on aspects of a country analysis or the development of a country strategy. Sometimes outsiders would be invited, academics or representatives of partner organisations, to provide specific input and/or to actively participate in the programme development. The meetings were maintained even during the height of a crisis, and constituted an avowed collective learning process.

Video is becoming a cheap and democratic tool that can be used eg. to document aspects of a context and a programme, to brief newcomers to an organisation, to act as a feedback mirror in training courses or participatory exercises. Video is appealing but images are as selective and can be as manipulated and untrue as written statements, so much will depend on the purposes and approach in using video. Aid agencies here could draw on the experience with video in management training courses, and on the reflections on ethnographic film in what is called 'visual anthropology'.

INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKS. Networks are created to serve as an institutional basis for interagency encounter and, ideally, joint learning. Their potential value is in providing a more sustained mechanism for the sharing and analysis of experiences between organisations, than the one-off conference or workshop (eg. Kruse et al. 1997:98-99). To be successful they need to constructively manage differences in perspectives, interests, and intellectual experiences, otherwise they risk being overwhelmed by too much diversity, rather than too little (Brown 1997). Ideally national or international networks have a thematic focus, such as eg. PRA, micro-credit, or disasters (eg. 'Duryog Nivaran' in South Asia). They may directly foster learning through training initiatives (eg. INTERACTION's courses on health and on security) or through meetings/workshops/conferences (eg. ALNAP), or less directly through mostly written outputs (eg. the RRN). More work appears required on ways of evaluating the cost-effectiveness of networks in terms of stimulating learning and contributing to improved policy and practice.

c. Selective and focused learning.

Although individuals and organisations learn informally all the time, it is not possible for organisations to formally learn everything about everything all the time. Organisational learning

requires selection and prioritisation. Policy and practice oriented research groups will choose research priorities. Learning organisations may identify priority learning themes, to be pursued over several years. Oxfam (UK/I) for example chose three : development alternatives, conflict, capacity building. SIDA's Department for Evaluation and Internal Audit has identified 9 themes/areas which it will successively or recurrently explore with the help of evaluation activities (Bennedich 1997). Obviously one should be watchful here that organisations do not deliberately exclude the sensitive and potentially confrontational themes.

d. Evaluations and OL/IL.

We have seen how bilaterals and multilaterals put a strong emphasis on evaluation as a major tool for learning. A recent review of the Belgian aid administration identifies the weak evaluation function and capacity as a major impediment to learning and recommends that it be strengthened (Verhoeven and Simonet 1997:27).

In order to avoid a conflict of interest were 'discordant' information comes up, the independence of the evaluation function is recommended (Court of Auditors 1997:25 ; Verhoeven and Simonet 1997:204-205) or already guaranteed (Bennedich 1997). This recommendation emphasises the accountability purpose of evaluation. For similar reasons, the UNDP guidelines recommend an independent, tripartite evaluation mode (LaurentJacques 1997). Particularly relevant, for accountability but also for OL, appears the practice to include the donor organisations performance in the terms of reference of the exercise (see eg. Court of Auditors 1997:25/60). Where organisations are defensive and reluctant to see their problems exposed, a tension arises between the learning and accountability aspects of evaluations (Borton 1996).

Different types of evaluations exist, and their relative relevance for and impact on OL and IL would have to be assessed in more depth. There are project evaluations and more strategic evaluations, be it of selected programmes or around crosscutting themes (eg. FAO, SIDA). There are ongoing evaluations, as a regular component of project management, and the ex post evaluations. There are the 'commando style' evaluations (Howes and Roche 1996:8), and the so-called 'embedded evaluations' , sometimes also called 'appreciative inquiry' (Elliott, Watkins and Jacobsgaard, nd.). Embedded evaluations are collaborative and participative. They involve the project personnel and other stakeholders. The focus is not on failure but on achievement, not on the past but on the future, on the understanding that building on people's strengths minimises resistance and gives the best chance that the lessons of evaluations will be quickly and smoothly adopted. Action-research or the French tradition of 'recherche-action-developpement' is close to this use of embedded evaluation. The concern that recommendations are adopted is also sometimes cited as an argument for more on-going evaluation rather than ex post evaluation (Mowjee 1997). It is not clear however how good this type of evaluation will be at producing double loop, ie. fundamental, learning. Can it challenge what has been called a striking thing about development practice over the last 30 years, ie. "how wrong people have been when they were convinced they were right, and how systems of mis-information become self-sustaining" (Roche 1995:2). Should evaluations perhaps strive to elicit 'discordant' information, to raise the need for learning ?

In the 'social audit' developed and tested by the UK NGO Traidcraft in association with the New Economics Foundation, feedback is sought from a wider range of stakeholders on the degree to which an organisation has met previously agreed standards (Fowler 1996:62).

Finally there is the agency specific and the system-wide evaluation, the most prominent example of which in the humanitarian field has been the Rwanda evaluation. Although there are questions about whether such system-wide evaluations should be repeated, the levels of

crossfinancing and subcontracting, and the need for coordinated action within the humanitarian system, would seem to warrant some degree of multi-agency evaluation.

The emphasis on evaluation for learning and accountability does not square easily however with the impression that the role of formal evaluation in institutional change seems modest at best (Weiss and Minear 1997:3). Whereas strategic evaluations appear most important, the practice often shows that project evaluations, due to the direct interest and commitment of concerned staff, are most easily absorbed. More formal and time consuming evaluations may be dismissed as 'historical' exercises, and the directives finally derived from them ignored as too obvious, too general, irrelevant or difficult to apply (LaurentJacques 1997).

More information appears needed on how the findings of evaluations are incorporated into operational management. In ECHO, the strategy and policy unit to a degree may play a facilitating role. One of several suggestions, made within the African Development Bank, to facilitate that process is not only for evaluation department staff to be formally involved in project appraisals, and to regularly meet with the Central Projects Office, but also to have a periodic rotation of staff between operational departments and the evaluation department.

The problem of learning from evaluations appears however compounded by the fact that evaluations, particularly in the humanitarian field, seem to suffer from methodological anarchy (Hallam 1997). Even where an evaluation can be methodologically convincing, poor monitoring and recording systems may deny it the relevant information. Some observers feel that too much is currently loaded onto the evaluation function, and that in due course other mechanisms need to play a more prominent role (Borton 1997). In that light, studies that describe the actual evaluation process in an organisation, and that map the actual use and follow up of findings and recommendations, seem particularly appropriate (Bennedich 1997).

e. Human resource development.

Individual learning is a necessary although not sufficient condition for collective learning. Human resource development in the humanitarian field appears particularly poor, hence the timeliness and relevance of eg. the People-in-Aid initiative. Enthusiasm, a sense of adventure and the willingness to jump onto a plane within two days are less determinant in humanitarian employment than they were a decade ago, but the phenomenon is still present in major high profile crises. While it is recognised that the sector has to, and is becoming more professional, one can ask whether agencies already adequately invest in staff development ? The question does not only exist for operational agencies. The need for better staff development, and field experience at the desks, has also been pointed out for eg. ECHO (Court of Auditors 1997: 15-16) and the Belgian aid administration (Verhoeven and Simonet 1997: 22).

REQUIREMENTS. Today's humanitarian practitioner, especially at a programme officer or programme management level, requires sophisticated new skills, such as political analysis, conflict analysis and -management, negotiation, knowledge about human rights and how one can act on them, humanitarian 'communications' and broadcasting, working with the military, risk assessment and security management, vulnerability and capabilities analysis, and working in urban rather than rural environments (Slim 1995). The agenda for humanitarian action, and therefore the knowledge and skill requirements, continues expanding.

Whereas previously humanitarian action was focused on saving lives and reducing suffering, the interest in what are inappropriately called 'developmental approaches to conflict' adds the protection of livelihoods and capacity building to the aims. The 'do no harm' argument, calls for 'smart relief'. Post-conflict 'sustainable recovery', on the borderline between humanitarian action and development assistance, has growing ambitions. Previously the scope of

rehabilitation and recovery was limited to the restoration of infrastructure and basic services. Now it appears to expand to include support for effective local institutions, for a new - legitimate and democratic- political and legal order (good governance) and even for national reconciliation and integration and the rebuilding of a rather elusive 'social capital'. These are big challenges and high ambitions, for which the previous and current generations of humanitarian practitioners are generally not well equipped.

Humanitarian practitioners at the programme management level, furthermore should demonstrate a range of abilities in general management and organisational development and training, and have insights derived from eg. political and social science, micro-economics, social anthropology and non-Western history. Some understanding of the basic technical aspects of the sectoral work(s) that are being undertaken, be it eg. nutrition, veterinary services, public health, micro-finance etc. is also desireable as the technical requirements need to be reconciled with organisational constraints. Let us not forget the important personal skills, such as teambuilding, stamina under stress and communication.

Ideally however, today's humanitarian practitioner should also have a broad understanding of the 'industry' s/he works in, where it comes from and how it has developed over the past decades, and what the important current debates are. Few if any do so, and if they do, the knowledge will mostly have been acquired through self-study, not because there are many textbooks at hand, or because organisations provide these insights through training or briefing.

Although here and there matters are improving, by and large one must ask whether the organised training of humanitarian practitioners involved in political crises has significantly advanced beyond general management and the essentially technical-logistical approaches to relief delivery, that characterised the response to natural disasters ? It is also obvious that today's requirements are truly multi disciplinary. That points the way to team work and team learning

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS. With the growth in the 1990s, more than 30 years after the start of formal development studies, NGOs and humanitarianism as object of study, now have also become an academic discipline. Various universities offer a rapidly proliferating number of short courses and MA degrees in the subject. The UN has set up a staff training college in Italy, various military are organising trainings on peacekeeping and civil-military cooperation. Undoubtedly, a new generation of practitioners will start out much better equipped than the previous ones.

The question is whether the different curricula are sufficiently comprehensive and without important gaps, and whether there is enough use of case material and emphasis on skill development ? For the above listed abilities need not only exist at the level of knowledge but as skills. Much learning in the world of humanitarianism remains dependent on reading. Knowing the principles and the theory does not however mean one can apply them. There is a need for up to date textbooks (beyond the ones that exist on mostly technical subjects) and for more training materials with more role play, and exercises and scenarios that represent real life dilemmas. A meeting of major donors and agency representatives, with the suppliers of academic courses and other trainings on humanitarian issues, to discuss requirements, priorities, curricula and skill development, could be a worthwhile initiative ?

It seems also highly relevant to start strengthening the capacity for analysis, research and training on humanitarian issues in a number of Southern based centra.

TRAINING. A RETURN ON INVESTMENT ? Investment in training and staff development has

a cost. Organisations experiencing financial volatility may chose to delay this type of expenditure. There seems significant scope for more collaborative interagency initiatives here. The very high turnover of staff in the humanitarian sector is seen however as another structural disincentive. Where agencies take their responsibility and invest, the return of investment may be appallingly low ? At headquarter level, donor administrations and operational agencies work with sometimes significant numbers of auxiliary staff or staff on short term contracts. For field operators, contracts also tend to be short. Moreover, the levels of stress, the instability created in one's personal life by constantly moving around, and the continued exposure to suffering and destruction, make that many experienced staff move away from field work at the moment that they have become highly experienced. More creative and supportive uses of staff seem possible, eg. through a policy of rotation, that would contribute to institutional memory and a higher return on investment in training. The concern that staff in whose training has been invested, will quickly move on to another agency, can also partially be met through interagency initiatives, through which the costs, and the benefits, get shared.

In the face of rapidly changing contextual conditions of work and approaches to work, and a developing and often heated debate about humanitarian action, ongoing training to update also experienced staff seems necessary.

An interesting idea, used in development work but not apparently in the humanitarian sector, is to organise workshops not on report but on case writing (eg. Brown 1997:6). This might improve documentation and generate more analysed case material for analysis and learning.

Most training events appear to take place in the countries that generate humanitarian action, rather the regions that generate humanitarian need. It seems there might be a strong argument that trainings in regions vulnerable to humanitarian crisis are likely to be more cost-effective, relevant and have a greater impact.

POLICIES AND GUIDELINES. Is there scope for better articulation of agency policies and guidelines, and, where they exist, for better understanding of them ? Given the complexity of their operating environments, the scale of the organisations and the serious responsibilities they assume, aid agencies need clearly articulated policies and operational guidelines, which staff then need to master. Donor administrations, UN agencies, the Red Cross and multilateral development banks, appear to have a stronger tradition of such than many NGOs. The rapidly changing conditions of work (in the field and in the political economy of humanitarian action) and the new types of programme themes and issues arising, may regularly require the articulation of new policies and the revision of old ones. This in principle should be informed by, and embody, organisational learning. Are lessons learned sufficiently incorporated into policy and operational procedures ? And where this is the case, are all agency staff informed and do they understand the implications of the revisions and new developments ? Impressionistically, it would appear that this is often not so. Even a very capable relief and development organisation that has a reputable involvement in policy debate, for a long time failed to inform its field staff that a Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct had been developed which it had signed up to. Although it also expected its field offices to focus on poverty in their country analysis, and in their programme designs, it never explained the different possible definitional and methodological approaches to poverty that are used and debated. Policy even when articulated at headquarters does not easily filter through to field offices, and the meaning and implications may not be understood without further follow up and closer instruction for staff.

INDUCTION AND HANDOVER. These appear two weak areas in humanitarian action, where opportunities for organisation learning and - memory are missed. Only very recently it was not

uncommon to be deployed in a senior managerial post, with a new agency in a new country and in a new type of programme, with no more induction than the guidelines for staff and drivers about vehicle use. Induction needs to address the organisational structure, capabilities, constraints and operating procedures, and its values, vision, ethos and policies. It is ideally complemented with other information such as an overview of relevant geographical and programmatic experiences, and the institutional history of the programme or programmes one is assigned to manage.

Certainly at field level it is not uncommon for a handover not to take place or to be very short. Given that documentation is often not a priority in times of crisis, it seems that a better handover as a matter of policy could help to ensure the transmission of the understanding of important issues that have not been recorded.

LEARNING IN STAFF DEVELOPMENT. In the learning organisation, applicants may be asked questions about their learning interest and -ability during job interviews. It has been pointed out that this practice may work against multicultural diversity and equal opportunities (Gopal Rao 1997). Indeed, applicants from societies whose educational and family cultures emphasize respect for authority, be it the teacher or the father, can be unsettled by questions of this kind. They may not have been previously exposed to an environment that favours inquiry and openmindedness. Equally, applicants from societies that emphasize 'face' may find it difficult to deal with questions about their strengths and weaknesses. That doesn't mean they would be or remain poor learners. Learning organisations introduce agreed learning objectives for staff into performance objective setting exercises, and will review progress on learning in subsequent performance evaluations.

But unless learning is included in workplans, and time, and sometimes money, is set aside for it, the good intentions will not materialise. The high workloads, and the pressures to act or decide, are high in humanitarian work, although many of these pressures often seem to be generated by the organisation itself, rather than by external events.

f. A positive organisational culture.

Aid agencies, like other organisations, state that 'people are our most important resource'. Yet is is questionable whether the hierarchies, the suspicions, office politics, indifference, job insecurity, the poor investment in training and staff development and the excessive workloads, always turn that nice maxim into an experienced reality ? Perera (1997:167) from the Sri Lankan social movement Sarvodaya, chose to replace the notion of human 'resource' development with that of 'human response development' because they do not believe that people are resources to be used, but ends in themselves. Organisations obviously do not exist purely for the self-realisation of their staff, but the learning organisation is said to seek a creative balance between the self-development of the staff and the professional requirements of the organisation.

Aspects that are held to foster a positive learning culture on a personal and interpersonal level are shared vision, shared values and a sense of mission. These are said to generate enthusiasm, commitment and a sense of shared responsibility, that support a long-term perspective and simulate learning. The Khmer Rouge and the Nazis also had a visionary leader, shared values and a sense of mission, which led to some sinister learning, so we must assume there is something more to it, but it is clear that these factors are mobilising and strengthen the collective sense.

Positive organisational learning is said to be enhanced by continuous reflection and inquiry in teams that interact in an open-minded manner. In such team interactions, hierarchy, authority

and defensive routines are monitored, reduced and put aside. There is a sense of mutual respect that allows for a frank and critical exchange of opinions, but also for the critical examination of the assumptions, world views and mental models on which these opinions are based. The purpose of the interaction is not to win an argument, but to collectively find the best arguments. Team meetings here provide a space for reflection and inquiry. There is discussion and different views are advocated for, but the overall atmosphere is one of respectful dialogue rather than animated controversy.

Personal and professional modesty, the belief that different and alternative viewpoints enrich rather than threaten one's perspective, and that reflective and inquiring interaction and dialogue are an opportunity for learning, rather than a power contest, set the tone.

VII. CREATING THE LEARNING ORGANISATION : EXTERNAL CHANGES

It is common to refer to the increasing competition and pace of change in the world, to justify rapid 'adaptive' changes in organisations. Without wanting to deny the validity of this perception, it is also clear that the complexities of transnational humanitarian action, and the knowledge and skill requirements for the professionals working in the sector, support an argument for a degree of stability and continuity.

FINANCIAL STABILITY. Whereas open-ended 'core' grant funding may give rise to an attitude of complacency, the very short-term project funding that accounts for much of the resources in many operational agencies, creates its own inefficiencies and wastages. Medium-term programme funding, also in the humanitarian field, is an area that invites more exploration.

FLOATING PROFESSIONALS. The aid business, in its staff policies, has perhaps not yet come to terms with the tension between a tradition of 'voluntarism' and a reality of much needed 'high professionalism'. All professional aid organisations need highly experienced and skilled professionals and 'experts', but most are unwilling to provide an environment that offers some medium-term job security for more than a very few, let alone making career development in the humanitarian sector an attractive and sustainable option.

PUBLIC SUPPORT. If there is a perceived failure of development education, is it not even greater with regard to humanitarian issues ? Public information in this regard has been shaped significantly by the fundraising appeals of NGOs and the media, and has tended to be emotional, simplifying and generalising (eg. Smillie 1995b:117). The issue is not only to inform the taxpayers about what is being done with their money, but to get across the complexities of complex emergencies, the requirements for professional humanitarian response, and its limitations. Although the sometimes proclaimed donor fatigue does not appear confirmed by a generally continuing public support for humanitarian work, the gap between professional agencies' understanding of complex emergencies, and that of the general public, is wide and worrying. It provides a fertile ground for sweepingly general statements that 'relief does more harm than good' and that 'relief in fact prolongs wars'.

A degree of financial stability, of relative job security and of informed public support seem contextual conditions that would be conducive to developing a learning organisation.

VIII. MONITORING AND EVALUATING THE LEARNING ORGANISATION.

If it is accepted that OL and IL are desireable, and having explored some of its contributing factors, we remain with the question how we identify it, or monitor and evaluate progress towards becoming a learning organisation ?

THE LEARNING SPIRAL. There is a fairly common model around about the learning cycle or the learning spiral (see eg. Roche 1995) A process is perceived that starts from information gathering about action, moves through analysis and synthesis, to dissemination, memorizing, and new (better informed), action. Variants are the problem identification-diagnosis-implementation sequence (eg. Weiss and Minear 1997) or the virtuous circle of action-observation- reflection- decision-action.. (as discussed eg. by MSF-Holland). Mukhopadhyay (1995) has correctly pointed out that for each step the question should be asked who carries it out, and what patterns of authority or power dynamics are at play in the exercise (see eg. Howes and Roche 1996:3) ? Does this diagram of the virtuous learning cycle, which looks straightforward and appeals intuitively, and so happily conforms to the project cycle, do justice to the real processes of OL ? On the one hand, it seems to better represent project- or programme based learning, the purpose of which is improved planning. Much of that remains adaptive, single loop learning. Does the image lend itself equally well to the representation of policy-oriented learning ? And does it capture double loop learning, radical change ? More fundamentally, although the aim of OL is to make learning more explicit and structured, individual and certainly collective learning does not happen in such linear, formal and perfectly rational manner. Each step in the process, when taken as an organisational activity, is more problematic and complex, and there are various formal and informal moments of negotiation, contestation and even conflict, in the production of 'lessons' and of learning. The diagram therefore is not only normative rather than descriptive, but maybe too simplistic. A better representation, or mental model, seems needed ?

INDICATORS OF LEARNING. Surprisingly, notwithstanding the growing literature on OL and IL, there seems little available on indicators of learning. Simplistically stated, the learning organisation would not repeat the same mistake, certainly not one it made itself, and ideally also not a public one made by another agency in the same business. The variety and complexity of contexts makes this adagio easier to state in theory than in practice. In the humanitarian field, unlike at school, an industry-wide 'body of acquired knowledge' and industry-wide standards to serve as a base-line are not (yet) in place, and there are no regular and fairly standardized tests that would measure learning over time. This function is sometimes more or less explicitly ascribed to evaluations, but the absence of the abovementioned baseline, their methodological weaknesses and their irregularity mean that evaluations cannot do the job. Recent initiatives such as 'good practice reviews' (Relief and Rehabilitation Network), the Sphere Project on standards in at least four technical fields, the People-in-Aid project on standards and good practice in human resource management in the aid sector, and the elaboration of Codes of Conduct, are steps in the right direction. Developing broadly acceptable standards on other desireables such as stakeholder participation, capacity building or do-no-harm/smart relief, will be a more daunting task. This seems an area for more thought and research.

INDICATORS OF THE LEARNING ORGANISATION. Some suggestions can be found in the literature that could be considered as possible indicators of the learning organisation. A better capacity to anticipate changes in the environment is one. High morale (Edwards 1996:14), low defensiveness (Senge 1990:256) and an attitude of questioning the assumptions underlying one's policies and programmes, are others. Chris Roche (1995) from Oxfam produced a list of 10 characteristics which could possibly be indicators : enhanced recognition of the importance

of learning in the organisation ; improved structures and systems to extract learning ; improved opportunities and mechanisms to disseminate learning ; open information systems ; evidence of cross-team, cross-department and cross-programme learning ; managers acting as enablers rather than controllers ; a participative and learning approach to policy development and strategy making ; a climate or culture conducive to learning ; a better learning from outside the organisation ; a clear vision for organisational excellence and individual fulfilment. Some additional suggested indicators are : budgetary allocations for learning-related activities ; internal and external publications (Weiss and Minear 1997:9). Our earlier overview of factors that are said to positively contribute to organisational learning, can generate more potential indicators.

WHO MONITORS AND EVALUATES. Further reflection is also needed on who monitors and, periodically, evaluates, progress to becoming a learning organisation ? Are there internal monitors, is there a role for Boards of Directors or Trustees, for external evaluators, for donors, for an industry-wide monitor and/or watchdog, or what sort of combination of these? And where there are different views, in itself an opportunity for learning, how is a (periodic) judgment arrived at ?

IX. REWARDING THE LEARNING ORGANISATION

For profit-making organisations, the end reward of their learning efforts is increased sales. The humanitarian sector has the drawback that it does not sell desirables, or things that people, in principle, want. Indeed, humanitarian action ideally would prefer a world in which there is no need for it. It is also unlikely that target groups or intended beneficiaries will acquire more freedom, and power, of 'consumer choice' with regard to humanitarian assistance and action. Hence the professional and learning humanitarian aid organisation needs to see rewards in other tangible and less tangible forms : peer recognition, public and media support, positive evaluations, a respected voice in the policy debate, easier donor funding, beneficiary appreciation.. ? Only stronger sectoral standards and definitions of professionalism will create the climate and the forum in which such rewards can become expressed.

X. CONCLUDING REMARK

This paper has attempted to set out a range of issues concerning OL and IL in the humanitarian system. It has alluded to a number of possible ways forward as well as obstacles to progress. However, it is important that these are discussed before an attempt is made to draw up an action list of further work. In the spirit of openness that this paper makes mention of, prescriptions have been avoided at what is still an early stage of the discussion.

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