Andrea Binder

Concept Paper: Improving Humanitarian Performance through the Implementation of Lessons Learned

- Draft -

April 2008

Introduction

The evaluations of the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC), ALNAP's latest Review of Humanitarian Actions, and many other recent assessments show that the lessons that the humanitarian sector draws from recent experiences (e.g. the Tsunami response, the Dafur crisis, or the Pakistan earthquake[1]) are not novel for the implementing agencies and the donors:[2]

- Allocation of humanitarian funding is still not according to need, nor does it reflect proportion in its global allocation;
- Needs assessments are still underperforming and, as a consequence, it is not clear whether the recipients are receiving what they need;
- Humanitarian assistance often does not reach the most vulnerable, including the elderly, women and children;
- There is no systematic approach to assess and include local capacity into international emergency response activities.

As the TEC and other studies show, many of these well-known lessons and existing international standards are not sufficiently put into practice, and are not consistently reflected in policies and programming.[3]

Apparently, the humanitarian community is pretty good at identifying lessons learned – yet faces significant difficulties in putting them into practice. Thus, humanitarian actors are often "accused of being very poor learners."[4]

Obviously, the failure on the part of humanitarian actors to implement lessons learned is not only a question of an organization's ability to learn but also a function of political priorities. An analysis of learning in the realm of transatlantic humanitarian relief therefore always has to take into account the political priorities of the EU and the US with respect to the lessons that should (or should not) be learned by humanitarian agencies. The study group's various outputs will have to look on different political levels in order to determine how political priorities affect the implementation of lessons learned, because: "[w]hen politics intrudes on humanitarian action, the higher the level of the policy maker, the higher the political quotient in the humanitarian equation. [Usually], human need looks more compelling on its own

---

[1] Telford, J, J. Cosgrave and R Houghton (2006): *Joint Evaluation of the international response to the Indian Ocean tsunami: Synthesis Report*. London: Tsunami Evaluation Coalition; Bamforth, Th. (2007): *Political Complexities of Humanitarian Intervention in the Pakistan Earthquake* Journal of Humanitarian Assistance - http://jha.ac

[2] ALNAP (2006): *Key Messages from ALNAP's Review of Humanitarian Action*; Telford et. al; Klyman, Y, N. Kouppari, and M. Mukhier (2007): *World Disasters Report 2007. Focus on Discrimination*. Bloominfield, CT: Kumarian Press

[3] Scheper, B, A. Parakram, and S. Patel (2006): *Impact of the tsunami response on local and national capacities*. London: Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, p.11

[4] Van Brabant, K (1997): *Organisational and Institutional Learning in the Humanitarian Sector. Opening the Dialogue. A Discussion Paper for ALNAP*. London: Overseas Development Institute, p.2

terms form the frontlines than from donor capitals."[5] Additionally, the study will try to control for the influence of politics and competing policy interests on learning by focusing on lessons that are – on a doctrinal level at least – broadly accepted within the donor community as well as among humanitarian organizations.

Following Benner/Binder/Rotman 2007[6] we understand that the creation and the implementation of lessons learned are two interlinked procedures that are both part of an organization's learning process. Following that approach, organizational learning can be defined as *"a process of knowledge-based change through the questioning of means and/or ends of addressing problems. The process manifests itself in the acquisition of knowledge and reviewing of experience, leading towards the development and implementation of new rules and routines for the organization's actions."*

Learning is generally thought of as a circular process. In the case of humanitarian assistance, this process could be depicted as follows:
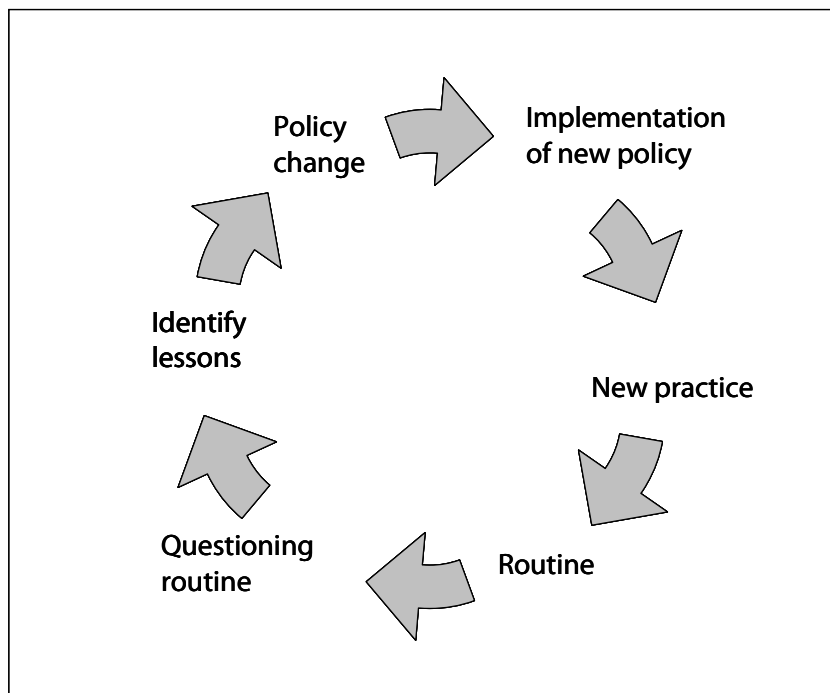
The learning process can – for many reasons – come to a stop at any point, inhibiting the implementation of lessons learned. It is crucial for both the EU and the US to better understand when and why learning stops, and what they can do to promote and support learning organizations and thereby improving humanitarian assistance.

---

[5] Smillie, I., L. Minear (2004): *The Charity of Nations. Humanitarian Action in a Calculating World*, Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, p. 137

[6] Benner, Th, A. Binder, Ph. Rotmann (2007): *Learning to Build Peace? United Nations Peacebuilding and Organizational Learning: Developing a Research Framework*. Research DSF No. 9, Osnabrück: German Foundation of Peace Research.

Aim of the Study Group

This study group thus seeks to analyze the stumbling blocks and enabling factors that the EU and the US are confronted with when trying to mainstream lessons learned into humanitarian programming. In other words, the analysis will try to provide insights as to why lessons learned are not sufficiently transferred into actual practice by empirically tracking the learning process. Based on this analysis the study group will develop policy recommendations for the transatlantic donor community on how to both better mainstream lessons learned into their own humanitarian aid policies and ensure that these lessons are applied by implementing agencies.

Approach

The study group will focus on *gender equality programming* and *working with local communities*, two issue arenas that highlight exemplarily how the humanitarian community struggles with the implementation of existing and broadly accepted lessons learned. On a doctrinal level, the vast majority of donors and implementing agencies agree on the necessity to support local capacity and to address the different needs and capabilities of women and men, girls and boys in disaster response and preparedness. Both, the US and the EU have policies on gender and local capaciy, yet both these issues are far from sufficiently addressed in humanitarian action:

Besides possible political reasons on the donor level, the difficulties in applying the international standard of building local capacities may stem from the humanitarians' general distance to national governments, rooted in the sectors principles of neutrality and impartiality. However, the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) found that "*most lives are saved in the initial response made by the affected communities and their neighbours.*" Nevertheless, in many instances the international community not only failed to build local capacity in its response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami but even weakened existing structures.[7]

The difficulties to implement gender equality programming in humanitarian action may be a result of the general perception that "*in life and death situations […] the question of gender equality [is] a luxury.*"[8] Yet, the IFRC's 2007 World Disaster Report, the IASC Gender Handbook, and other reports show that the question of gender is often a question of life and death: In the case of armed conflict, young men have a much higher likelihood to die than women. Conversely, in the case of the Tsunami in 2005 in parts of Sri Lanka and Indonesia about 80% of casualties were women.[9] However, the Tsunami claim-holder survey in Sri Lanka

---

[7] Scheper, B. et. al, p.10

[8] IASC (2006): *Women, Girls, Boys, and Men. Different Needs – Equal Opportunities*, p. 6

[9] IASC 2006

revealed that women were, compared to their male counterparts, less satisfied with the help provided, especially with respect to protection issues in camps.[10]

This study group will analyze stumbling blocks as well as enabling factors the US and the EU are confronted with when trying to adopt and integrate lessons learned with respect to gender and local capacity. This analysis will be based on a close examination of a number of individual humanitarian projects. As mentioned above, the study will analyze the learning process from a donor perspective. That is, it will focus on the relevant departments within the US and the EU administrations responsible for the design and implementation of humanitarian policies as well as on the implementing agencies these departments use to carry out the humanitarian assistance. It will be essential to distinguish the different responsibilities and mandates the administrative units have in order to identify those that are most important for the analysis of the learning process. This is the more important because "[o]utsiders bewildered by the US labyrinth [of humanitarian assistance] would undoubtedly find European Commission structures equally opaque and arcane."[11] The study group will therefore not only take into account the donor policies towards gender and local capacity but also different responsibilities, tools and mechanisms to implement these policies. Besides funding mechanisms, monitoring & evaluation (M&E) are important tools to oversee and control the processes of mainstreaming and applying lessons learned. Therefore, the analysis will have a close look at M&E policies and practices of both the EU and the US with respect to humanitarian assistance.

With respect to the learning cycle the analysis starts at the phase where lessons are identified, then proceeds to the analysis of policy change and the implementation of a new policy. It examines whether evaluations show that the implementation actually took place and inquires whether the results of the evaluations had any consequences for future decision making, e.g. concerning future funding or changes in the terms of reference of a respective project.

The table below depicts the underlying analytical framework. The shaded left-hand column shows the levels at which the analysis will be conducted. The humanitarian community level comprises all humanitarian actors such as donors, NGOs, international and intra-governmental organizations, the UN, academia, and the interested public. This level is only included in the analysis to show that, on a very generic and doctrinal level, there is broad agreement on the importance of including local capacity and mainstreaming gender equality programming as reflected by respective policies of all main humanitarian actors. The two other levels than distinguishes between different type of actors, mainly donors and implementing agencies. It is on those levels where differences with respect to what lessons should be learned and by whom might occur. On the donor level the study group will analyze donor policy towards gender and local capacity, funding policies, M&E of the new practice, and (possible) policy consequences deriving from the M&E process as well as relevant aid, domestic and foreign policy goals. On the implementing agency level the study

---

[10] Scheper, B. et. al, p.33
[11] Smillie, I., L. Minear, p.165

group will assess whether programming and implementation reflect these policies. The dotted lines indicate possible feedback loops from policy consequences to the donor policies or to funding policies. The gray arrow indicates the phases of the learning process.
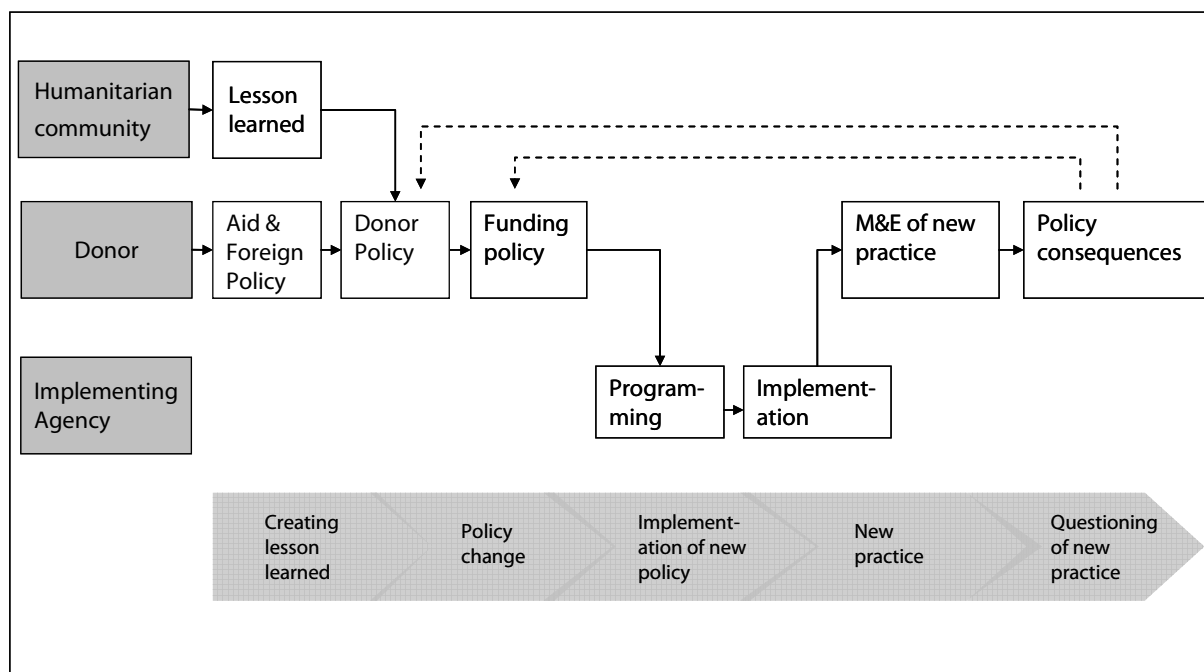
Methodology and Key Questions

Scope of the study

The goal of the case analyses conducted in this study group is to trace empirically the (non-) implementation of lessons learned with respect to either gender equality programming or the support of local capacity. This will be done by zooming-in on a specific country program implemented by a specific humanitarian agency. The respective program has to be funded by either the US or the EU (or both). As indicated in the graph above, the analysis has to follow the learning process from the administrative level in Washington/Brussels to the activities in the field and back.

The study consists of two main parts: first, an analytical summary report, and second, four case studies.

The summary report will focus on the donor level. It will analyze the learning process of donors; their aid, domestic and foreign policy goals relevant to the implementation of gender and local capacity; the division of labor between different departments within the administrations, tools and mechanisms designed to influence implementing agencies; as well as their policies for M&E and the use of evaluation results. It will be written by the study group leader. The case studies will focus on the implementing agencies, collecting and analyzing empirical material related to a specific project of an individual implementing agency.

Given the relatively large scope of the study and the complexity of the learning process this study group will only provide an empirically informed overview of possible factors that promote or hinder learning with respect to gender equality programming or local capacity. The study does not provide the basis neither for generalizations nor for causal inference.

Research question

The overall guiding questions for the study group are:

- What are key enabling factors as well as stumbling blocks that both the EU and the US are confronted with when trying to apply lessons learned?
- What are effective tools and mechanisms to enhance the implementation of lessons learned both in donors as well as implementing agencies?

More specifically, the *summary report* will, amongst others, address the following questions:

At the transatlantic level:

- How can the EU and the US promote learning in humanitarian action?
- Is there potential for mutual learning with respect to mainstreaming lessons learned into implementing agencies?
- Do common transatlantic strategies to promote learning in humanitarian action exist? Which ones? How are they implemented?
- Is there space for common policies to promote learning in the realm of multilateral humanitarian assistance?

At the level of the "learning bureaucracy":

- What policies and what "infrastructure of learning" (Benner et al. 2006) exist in both the US and EU administrations with respect to humanitarian assistance? What role do M&E departments play? How many resources are allocated to them? Do they have effective leadership? Do they have access to relevant decision makers?
- What other mechanisms and tools do the administrations use in order to systematically mainstream lessons learned into implementing agencies

At the level of policy:

- What are current donor policies with respect to gender and local capacities?
- What are other (foreign) policy goals that may promote or hinder learning in these areas?

The *case studies* will contribute to the study group by addressing the questions below.

At the level of the EU and US administrations:

- Did gender equality programming/local capacity play a role in designing calls/contracts? Why/why not?
- Was gender equality programming/local capacity considered by the donors when choosing to fund this project? Why/why not?

- Were earlier evaluations of the implementation agency's performance related to gender equality programming/local capacity considered by the donors when choosing to fund this project?
- Do funding policies set incentives to integrate gender equality programming/local capacity into this project? Why/why not?

Interaction between the EU and US administrations and implementing agencies:

- Is there regular communication between the EU/US administration and the implementing agencies regarding the implementation of gender equality programming/local capacity?
- What are the formal and informal processes to monitor the implementation of gender equality programming/local capacity? How do they work?
- Do donors' evaluations of the implementing agency require the assessment of the implementation of gender equality programming/local capacity? What are the criteria with which successful implementation is measured?

At the level of the implementing agencies:

- Did gender equality programming/local capacity play a decisive role in the proposal for the project? Did the implementing agency have the impression that demonstrating commitment to gender/local capacity in the proposal would increase the chances to receive funding?
- Did programming address gender equality/local capacity substantively or only formally?
- Did the implementing agency succeed or fail in putting programming into practice? What factors helped or hindered the implementation of gender equality programming/local capacity?

Donor Perspective

The study explores how donor policy with regard to implementing lessons learned can be improved. That is, while insights from the field are paramount in informing transatlantic policy reform with respect to learning, the study group and the corresponding case studies will adopt a donor perspective. That is, it will focus on how donors themselves implement lessons and how they try to ensure that these lessons are also applied by implementing agencies.

Case Study Design and Selection

Two case studies will be devoted to "local capacities" and two to "gender equality programming". The selection of the cases depends to a high degree on the area of expertise of the case study authors. Selection criteria are:

- Access to relevant people from the respective implementing agencies
- Existing projects related to one of the two topics funded by the EU/the US
- Geographical distribution
- The disaster has to be either a natural disaster and/or a compound crises

Case studies are:

Case Study #	Topic	Implementing Agency	Country	Author
1	Gender	WFP	Nepal (tbc)	Mariangela Bizzarri, independent consultant
2	Gender	Solidarité (tbc)	Afghanistan	Claire Mariani, Groupe URD
3	Local capacity	Solidarité (tbc)	Chad (tbc)	Karla Levy, Groupe URD
4	Local capacity	tbd	Nicaragua	Silvia Hidalgo Turullols, DARA

Methods

The study will rely on the following methods: comparative case study research (US/EU), process tracing, qualitative interviews, and document review (especially documents and other sources indicating reflective processes within the donor administrations and the respective implementing agencies as well as documents and other sources reflecting new rules and routines within the donor administrations and the respective implementing agencies with respect to our two main topics).