

Putting knowledge into practice

John Borton – Does Evidence Matter? – ODI – 4 June 2003

Thanks for the opportunity to present the results of the test of the Learning Support Office concept in Malawi.

Whereas the previous presentation was about knowledge sharing this one is more about learning, and concerns one sector of practice and action during a relief operation that has only just wound down in Malawi.

For those of you that do not know ALNAP, it is the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in humanitarian action. The Secretariat is based here in ODI. It was formed in 1997 and has most of the main actors within the humanitarian sector within it: all the main United Nations agencies, donors, non-governmental organisations, red cross and so on.

ALNAP seriously began to engage with knowledge management and learning when it was preparing for the Annual Review in 2002 which represented the first sector-wide assessment of knowledge management and learning in the humanitarian sector, but some discussion had been going on amongst ALNAP members before that about supporting learning in an ongoing operation. There was a sense within ALNAP that the Network was a great talk shop but needed to be made relevant to people in the field, to relief workers in ongoing operations. This concept was born during discussions in 1999 during the Kosovo operations and then was in effect market-tested and developed through retrospective interviews with those involved in operations in Orissa and then in East Timor and then Sierra Leone. In early 2002, it was decided to form an interest group to run a test of the concept in an operation to see how it worked, so this was very much a trial and pilot project of a concept. There were lots of questions about whether it would work and how it would get on with the agencies and so on. In July 2002 Malawi was selected out of a list of fifteen countries to run the test and at that point Malawi was seen to be the worst affected of the countries in southern Africa (six countries had begun to set up big relief emergency and food security relief operations).

The concept is of an independent capacity, dedicated to supporting learning by and between organisations, teams and individuals in an ongoing relief operation and having a positive impact on performance in that operation, not just subsequent operations.

What we took out of the knowledge management and learning literature - to simplify the rather off-putting jargon that we found in the literature - was three types or directions of learning: lateral learning within an operation (which is pretty synonymous I think with action learning); 'learning in' from previous operations; and 'learning out', which was capturing lessons for use in subsequent operations, whether in Malawi or in Zimbabwe or somewhere else in the world.

We rented an office which I think had been vacated by DANIDA (Danish International Development Agency) a few months before. The set-up team arrived at the end of August 2002 and we ran the project through until the end of March 2003. Originally we thought we were going to be hosted by one of the ALNAP member agencies, but the ALNAP member agencies with offices in the country were all so busy gearing up for the operation that they could not bear the thought of having to handle yet another project, even if we were not going to be placing many demands on them. So the first few weeks were spent identifying a host, because without one you do not have a legal cover to operate in a country, you do not have a business stamp even to contract mobile phones - all sorts of constraints. Fortunately the Malawi Red Cross saved us and there was a nice compatibility between the Malawi Red Cross's agenda in the relief operation and our own.

In terms of team composition, there were a total of six internationally recruited personnel and five locally recruited personnel. The first two international staff left after about three months, so for most of the time there was a team of nine people. Running in parallel to the project was a real-time evaluation being carried out by a Swiss consultant to draw out the lessons and to see how the operation looked at different stages and so on.

Just dealing with those three different types of learning, I will try to give you an idea of the activities.

'Learning in' from previous operations

We had a very nice resource centre of some nine hundred documents which were flown out from London to Malawi, including guidelines, handbooks, evaluations from previous operations in southern Africa and so on - a

generic humanitarian collection we called it - and then during the course of the operation, we built up the Malawi-specific collection. We used PonyExpress, run by Securicor, to take documents to field workers in various parts of the country. We also undertook literature reviews and analysis. One particular example was a paper on HIV/AIDS and food security which a Malawian colleague prepared and which was very well received locally.

Then we have this term 'oiling'. This was not in the original terms of reference for the project but we found that it was what we were doing a lot. It involved participating in meetings, of which there were far too many. There was a sophisticated coordination structure but what it did was simply spawn more and more subcommittees and working groups and none of the agencies had enough personnel to go to all of these meetings, so they had to choose which of the three meetings being held in one morning to go to. Often we would go to many more meetings than the agencies, so we were actually playing a role of moving information around the operation and also of being present in meetings and inputting that knowledge from the resource centre - not that I have all nine hundred documents in my head, but at least I know that there is a big literature on that and can say, 'if you give me until the end of the week, I can come back to you with a summary of the main points from that literature'. That role was very important and I will return to this later.

I went with a budget to bring in experts but we did not actually do this, partly because of the speed at which things were moving and the fluidity of the situation in which each week was different from the previous week. I think there was also a slight coolness towards 'external fly-ins' and a greater - perhaps too great - respect for home-grown knowledge and the idea that the people in the room must have the knowledge and be able to generate the answers. To set up a group and try to have the answer by the end of the week was a very common way of operating for the relief organisations. We did not really do briefings and orientations for new staff either, because the numbers coming through were not great and it was quite hard to identify who was coming in before meeting them at the next coordination meeting.

In addition to the Resource Centre another significant asset of the LSO was the meeting room, which was frequently used to host meetings for relief workers, visiting researchers and evaluators. In January, for example, it was used by the Field Emergency Monitors funded by the United Nations Development Programme and reporting to the Department of Poverty and Disaster Management Affairs, who based themselves in the meeting room for a week.

Lateral Learning

I think that the area of lateral learning activities was the area in which we really scored, which was interesting. We got involved early on in a process which, unexpectedly, formed a whole cycle. We started with 'after-action-review' workshops for field officers of the agencies involved in general food distributions in which we asked them what was supposed to happen, what did happen and what they would do differently next time - very powerful questions. We used a 'carousel' approach, where the field officers rotated around three 'stations' (each with a facilitator and the recorder) to explore different issues. The stations were: community sensitisation and targeting; food distribution (the mechanics of trucking, storage and distribution; and on monitoring and reporting. The workshops drew a lot of information out from the field officers who, by that stage, had three months' experience of running the operation and knowledge which they had acquired in practice. That was a very rich source of information.

Then we formed a drafting team to convert all of that knowledge into a manual (which took far too long but that is another story). It was owned by the agencies and members of the agencies were on that drafting team. The manual, which was very practical and very Malawi-specific, was then used to train up all the other field officers (two hundred and forty five in total) from all the agencies who had not been able to participate in the original workshops.

Again, 'oiling' comes up: transferring knowledge and information between groups. Perhaps you need to be a networker in that sort of situation, linking people who have one issue coming up with another group of people who are just starting work on that issue is a form of lateral networking, as is putting people in contact with each other. We ran seminars and meetings and hosted visiting researchers. We ran a workshop which brought together the relief community and the HIV/AIDS community that were not having much to do with each other throughout the relief operation - which was remarkable.

We also did some filming with a small digital video camera. The idea was to show film of agency distribution sites to other agencies to show how other people were doing it and to see the differences, but it was a task too far and although we started filming, we never really carried it through - another lesson.

Here is a picture of another activity - facilitating the strategic planning meeting for the agencies undertaking general food distributions. Out of interest, there was only one Malawian in the room for this particular meeting. The two other Africans in the room were from Zambia and South Sudan. That is one of the issues of knowledge in a relief operation, that the people who are managing and coordinating the agencies' work are often expatriates

who have just come in from other relief operations in places such as Kosovo or Afghanistan. They tend to be very operationally focused people.

'Learning out' activities

'Learning out' activities included archiving and we donated the Malawi-specific collection to the United Nations resource centre when we left. It involved facilitation of evaluators and researchers, which for us was a bit of a problem. If you hosted someone's meeting then you might be tainted by association with that particular evaluation, so we were a bit vulnerable I think to the conduct of individuals and teams that we had no control over. Finally it involved the sharing of lessons. C-SAFE is the US NGO consortium undertaking recovery activities to follow-on from the emergency programme that was running in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe and they were wanting to set up a learning centre so we shared the results and design of the Learning Support Office and our lessons from working with the agencies.

I think outsiders had a strong expectation that the Learning Support Office should be setting out the lessons from the Malawi emergency operations - not just from the Learning Support Office test but the lessons for Malawi itself. We wanted to facilitate a collective lesson learning process for the agencies, but that was very difficult to do for two reasons. One reason was that the agencies were scaling up the operation right up until the last month, there was an increase in the number of general ration beneficiaries during January and February from 2.8 million to 3.5 million people. Consequently the agencies were simply too busy and did not have the mental space or the time to think about lessons, they were just too preoccupied with the present, getting the trucks out and getting the new village relief committees set up. Then you had this very rapid shift, over the space of about three weeks, when everyone became focused on the post-emergency programme. They were looking at their budgets and realising that they would have to lay off their staff in a few weeks time and thinking about how they could get enough funding to keep some of their staff on after the emergency programme finished. So the space was never really there while we were in the country to really engage with a collective learning process. The other reason why it was difficult to undertake any collective learning was that some agencies and relief workers found it difficult to handle comments that were at all critical of their performance. There was a surprising degree of defensive behaviour, particularly among some of the larger agencies that were projecting a positive corporate image of their achievements.

So what are the lessons?

There are two sorts of lessons. The first is for the Learning Support Office concept and model. The interest group of ALNAP that was overseeing this whole project is meeting in two days to review the reports from the real-time evaluator and the paper that I wrote, so these lessons are just provisional and are not complete.

A Learning Support Office can add value in an ongoing operation, I believe that very strongly. But we should have started earlier. It is important for an LSO to be present during the planning stage because that is where a lot of the knowledge from previous operations can be inputted fruitfully. By the time we arrived, a lot of the programme design was over, so whilst we might have problems with the programme design our saying so was not welcome. Of course another lesson is having hosting arrangements in place so that you do not have to scurry around looking for an agency willing to take on the hosting role. People said that you could buy anything in Malawi, but our experience was that although you can buy anything, it often takes two or three months to be delivered, so office-in-a-box solutions are important - even satellite phones because we had terrible trouble with communications (phones, email, internet access), and such problems were also experienced by large organisations such as the WFP and other UN agencies. Since January there have been power cuts every day in Lilongwe and Blantyre which has caused real problems for internet service providers. These kind of practical problems are really significant and do not seem to be fully appreciated back here. Other lessons for the LSO are that we should have taken more care in staff recruitment. We needed to have codes and procedures for how staff conduct themselves in relation to other agencies and also to go out with more explicit support from agency head offices.

Secondly, in terms of lessons for learning and knowledge management, there is an amazing lack of documented materials and even that is very difficult to get hold of, with no central location. You could spend days searching for a particular document which had only been produced six months before - people would say that it was on their hard disc somewhere but they did not have time to find it for you. Our resource centre did provide a central place where the agencies could come and get the key documents, but I think we need to take it a step further and be putting that onto CD-ROM. We had a web-bibliography on the LSO website, but internet access was really poor in Malawi unless you invested (as we did subsequently) in a wireless broadband access.

You can put the information in front of your relief workers, but these are people working twelve or fourteen hour days and unless they are really motivated they are not going to do their searches, so you need to complement making the knowledge resources available on a CD-ROM with a service that filters and condenses information so that you are providing busy people with what is immediately useful to them in addressing this week's task - especially in a relief situation where people are really pushed for time. That is where this oiling process comes in

again, it is a human filtering of the knowledge on the CD-ROMS, not a mechanical process, but a human face or interpreter who is able to filter and translate in a way that is directly useful to relief workers.

One of the lessons was that lateral learning, or action learning, was the most productive and well-received, but this relates to the next point, which was that there was defensive behaviour and some quite strong reactions to anything that contained critical comment from some of the agencies. In my experience this was worse in some of the larger agencies who had corporate images to protect. That has big implications for knowledge management and learning. It is extremely difficult to undertake collective learning and 'learning out' in that context. The conclusion I would draw is that we need to explore processes such as Appreciative Inquiry and encourage change in organisational cultures.

The overall conclusion though is that there is a definite role for an independent, objective, respected, learning support capacity that participates in ongoing discussions and meetings. The point I want to relay to my former colleagues here at ODI is that this applies not only to relief but to development as well. There were two donors who were very keen for us to extend the Learning Support Office even though the emergency programme was winding up because they wanted an independent capacity that was objective, respected and could host and initiate meetings on Malawi's structural issues. They were conscious that if they were to initiate or propose a meeting on a structural issue they would be seen as 'having an agenda'. Our independence and neutrality was really important to supporting learning.