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Method in the madness? Some new ways to learn from staff experiences in humanitarian crises: the historical case of UNICEF

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Abstract

This article reviews why tapping into tacit knowledge of relief workers to inform humanitarian responses is seen as a valuable exercise that paradoxically often fails to live up to expectations. This paradox is explored through the example of historical efforts undertaken by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to learn from the tacit knowledge of its staff. The article briefly reviews the challenges to learning within humanitarian organizations, and why humanitarian organizations may see tacit knowledge as an attractive alternative source of evidence. System-wide challenges in 'learning to learn' (Minear, 1998: unpaginated), identified in the 1990s, have largely remained the same. A counter-productive 'thirst for immediacy', and the nature of emergency relief staff's relationship to knowledge continue to make the commitment to learning a difficult one to sustain. The article, however, argues that should such learning exercises be reframed more firmly as a research endeavor, some of these obstacles might be overcome. It provides leads on a possible way forward in the context of a pilot initiative for humanitarian learning at the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

Keywords: humanitarian agencies; knowledge management; organizational learning; tacit knowledge; UNICEF; research

Introduction: the challenges of learning from staff experience

Initiatives by humanitarian agencies to learn from their staff's experience and collect their stories are hardly a new endeavour. In fact, they tend to be seen as a good idea, touted as an investment in the organization's best asset, namely its people. These initiatives are the result of a commitment towards organizational learning and sound knowledge management, and can even be approached as a source of evidence generation so past lessons may help inform future programming (Ramalingam 2006).

Oddly, though, such programmes can struggle. One reason is cynicism related to 'lessons learning' since lessons are perceived to be rarely acted upon – so much so that the lesson that lessons will remain unlearned has been a constant observation in literature on lesson-learning in and from humanitarian responses. For example, in a paper commissioned by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Larry Minear diagnosed humanitarian organizations as having a particularly 'lacklustre' learning curve with several 'cultural impediments to learning' (Minear 1998: unpaginated). Minear identified four constraints to learning, namely:

- the tendency to approach every crisis as unique which is true of a crisis' context, but not in how every response tends to bring the same actors together;
- the 'action-oriented nature of the humanitarian ethos' (1998: unpaginated) meaning little time is invested to step back and (self)-reflect;
- defensiveness to criticism;
- a prevailing lack of accountability because of the humanitarian system's diffuse, imbalanced and fragmented power structure.

Another reason why efforts may tend to falter when trying to learn from staff experience is how the humanitarian system itself lives in what John Borton describes as a state of 'perpetual present' (Borton 2016, Borton borrowing the term from David Lewis who applies it to international development). So ahistorical is the humanitarian context that most lesson learning remains very short-sighted and short-lived, with 'initiatives aimed at fostering improved practice [tending] to only reference recent practice' (Borton 2016: 195). Reasons driving such ahistoricism are very much the same as the 'cultural impediments' diagnosed by Minear, with observers of the humanitarian system since the mid-1990s seeing a system riddled with 'policy dysfunction' in organizational cultures (Walkup 1997), condemned to repeat its failures (Terry 2002) and, for some, not only incapable of learning but rather unnervingly displaying 'an extraordinary capacity to absorb criticism, not reform itself, and yet emerge strengthened'(de Waal 1997: xvi). Together the culture inside humanitarian organizations, including; the environment of unpredictable funding, high staff turnover, insecurity, stressful working conditions and the conviction that with each crisis is unique, makes for a hostile terrain for any knowledge management initiative. Bringing together the many differing angles in approaching why 'humanitarians' are seen to be 'learning disabled' (Weiss 2013: 172), the paradox this article seeks to pick at is whether learning is at all possible when one is 'locked' in this state of perpetual present in which humanitarian workers and agencies operate.

Given that addressing the above question at the level of the entire humanitarian system is over-ambitious, the focus is narrowed down to the experience of one agency, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Well-known for a long tradition in humanitarian action (Jolly 2014), UNICEF has a history of initiatives to capture, collect, manage and articulate the knowledge, lessons and oral histories from staff working in emergencies. Seeing the issue as an enquiry on the role of humanitarian responder's tacit knowledge, and the challenges of tapping into this knowledge for evidence generation, this article surveys UNICEF's past attempts to use such non-traditional sources of knowledge. In the context of a new pilot 'humanitarian fellowship' initiative at the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, the article argues that with a solid grounding in research methods and timeframes (and with some organizational courage), there is way to escape the trap of the 'perpetual present' and to overcome some of the challenges humanitarian organization faces in 'learning to learn' (Minear, 1998).

The history of learning initiatives at UNICEF

In UNICEF's history, whatever the label over the years, the initial starting point of staff debriefing programmes has tended to be the same: in the fast-paced environments of 'emergency', UNICEF's people are its best asset. Pressed for time, lacking data and short on concrete evidence, emergency staff rely on experience, intuition, and informal networks of peers and mentors to guide decisions and actions. The process is chaotic, organic, erratic and non-linear – and yet more often than not the learning that happens and the knowledge that gets exchanged helps unlock complex operational challenges, helps drive delivery for children, and even helps identify new questions (and answers) on how to meet children's needs. This is when the spark for the idea happens: why not capture, codify, and systematize this knowledge? Why not attempt to convert this richness of experience into something explicit and tangible? Why not work for this learning to be more structured, categorized, transferable… and organized to contribute to build evidence and guidance? And yet, as self-evident as the idea sounds (tapping into 'tacit knowledge' to better know what to do and why), experience from past attempts has been that the effort eventually runs aground.

The value of tacit knowledge is not the problem. Its use is long recognized, including for improving how humanitarian agencies think, plan, work and deliver (ALNAP 2004). Tacit knowledge can be broadly described as knowing more than we can tell through a mix of intuitive reasoning, embedded technical skills or know-how, and engrained cognitive models, or know-why (Nonaka & Konno 1998; ALNAP 2004; Polanyi, 1966, in Peet 2012). It is no surprise that in environments that tend to be

evidence-poor and where data has a short shelf-life, such as emergencies, converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge is an attractive idea – to be able to refer to something written up to know better what to do, and to turn 'hunches' and 'intuitions' into potential research questions that may help fill some of the evidence gaps. But the question becomes: why would an agency that is committed to being a learning organization, although it can at times *capture* tacit knowledge, can be found to struggle in *converting* it into contributions towards building *evidence*. Perhaps this is because the broad concept of staff debriefings, tacit knowledge approaches and oral histories in fact challenges usual models for evidence generation. Rather than going from research to policy, to practice, the tacit knowledge approach suggests is to go from practice back to policy and research. UNICEF's experience in trying to travel down that path demonstrates it can be a delicate journey indeed.

The UNICEF History Project 1982-1995

Though not specifically pitched as a tacit knowledge initiative, one of the first efforts the organization initiated to learn from its staff experience was the UNICEF History Project. Requested by UNICEF's Executive Board (UNICEF 1982), the aim was to establish a living history of the organization and to address the fact that many long-serving staff were about to retire, the latter being an early-identified challenge of knowledge management. The idea was also to infuse future practice, policy and guidance with the complement of experience. It was specifically pointed out that 'while the field manuals will set forth current policy and desirable practice, what [the project] seeks to do is to enrich the perspective of UNICEF staff by providing an understanding of what the organization went through […] and what has been learned in the process' (Charnow 1984: ii). The aim specifically was 'reminiscences, reflections and comments […] rather than information already provided in writing' (Charnow 1984: 2). Under this effort, some of the work looked into staff's experiences of emergencies, for example in the Nigeria-Biafra response, in Ethiopia, or as far back as post-World War II relief efforts (Jacobs 1983; Moe 1985; Spiegelman 1985). But the outcome was mixed. It had been important to establish 'the record' on UNICEF's history, but much of the output was event-oriented rather than analytical. Little had been written about the past that could inform how to work in the present. As a result, the materials produced 'were not drawn on by management' (Tacom 1995: 14).

A second push from Executive Director James P. Grant led to a second phase over 1988-1991, in which, among others, the oral histories of senior management were to be recorded in debriefing exercises. But this initiative soon morphed into a less ambitious effort aimed simply at making sure information was catalogued and retrievable, the broader aims of the project having not been internalized' (Tacom 1995). A 1995 review of the history project listed as reasons for the initiative to

downscale ambitions a recurring lack of organizational commitment, 'rule by committee', minimal financial support, and absence of any backing from management (Tacom 1995). The review adds that if the project were to be revived, it needed to be properly resourced, it should not shy from being self-critical, it should have a better link with research,[i] and should enjoy true commitment to learn from experience, good or bad. In fact, the review's prognosis on the chance of a successful revival of a history/oral history project is guarded, seeing how 'challenging timeframes lessened interest in the past', and the commitment to maintaining a 'viable "institutional memory" languished' (Tacom 1995: 7-8).

Pilot effort to gather lessons and experience 1998-2000

Still, there was a second attempt only a few years later. In 1998, as part of a review on its humanitarian work for children, a senior level consultation of UNICEF staff was held to discuss what UNICEF's role should be in emergencies. One of the suggestions made during the meeting was to explore the idea of debriefing staff working in conflict 'to provide the organization with a systematic way to gather lessons from their experience' (Richardson 2000: 2). The UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti seized on this and led the effort, heralded as a UN first (Richardson, 1999). Pitched as a pilot initiative the aim was to go in-depth and put together analytical lessons and studies drawing on staff experience[ii]. What took place, close to two years later, was a meeting of Heads of UNICEF offices from Afghanistan, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda, over three days. While participants appreciated the opportunity to discuss, all agreed this was not *per se* a 'debriefing' as the method adopted did not allow for capturing any in-depth detail of participants' experience (Richardson 2000). The post-mortem of the Innocenti initiative was bleak and the outlook was even more pessimistic on the added value: all seemed to agree that ' "Lessons learned" [had] become a regrettable cliché that many will associate with a litany of bland recommendations which are never acted upon' (Richardson 2001: 8).

Senior Leaders Debrief 2005-2009

Designed as a pilot with hopes to be the first in a series, the Innocenti initiative ended up as a one-off. But the effort was to re-start again, and again just a couple of years later. A 'Senior Leaders Debrief' programme was initiated inside UNICEF's Office of Emergency Programmes and ran from 2005 to 2009. There was little attempt to look back at what had not worked a few years earlier.[iii] The model was to target select Heads of Offices, bring them to Headquarters for a debrief and organize a short writing retreat for them to put pen to paper on a topic that was a particularly thorny humanitarian dilemma or complex operational challenge at the time. The programme yielded a number of outputs–on negotiating access with non-state entities in Nepal, on programming in insecure environments in Afghanistan, and lessons on preparedness in Haiti and post-Tsunami (Hingst and Gilgan 2007; Sakai 2007; Skoog 2007;

Beigbeder 2008). Some are 'event-oriented', some are lists or checklists of recommendations, but none are externally published. Few are referenced in organizational literature or guidance. With hindsight, the timeframe to organize, conduct and write-up the debriefings was found to be far too short.[iv] With the aim of tying the lessons to burning guidance gaps, the other obstacle was that little general guidance could be inferred from the write-up of one staff's experience and lessons. There were arguments around validation of lessons preventing anything from becoming policy or being made externally available through publication. [v] By 2009, the programme ended.

In all three cases, the initiative failed to become internalized, possibly because of misconceptions in the design. In the next section, the potential role of research to learning is considered.

Learning to fail, struggling to learn: redefining failure and redefining learning

Research tends to be absent from the stated purpose of those past initiatives. Research is between the lines when the work is about creating UNICEF's historical record, and implicit when Innocenti, UNICEF's dedicated research office, volunteered itself to pilot the debriefing programme in 2000. But at best, the relationship to research is ambivalent. More broadly, speaking of the link between tacit knowledge and research, or the question of how to extract tacit knowledge and from there to move on to a research objective, is not a much written-about subject. Most of the literature around tacit knowledge is about the conversion of this knowledge from tacit to explicit for the purpose of improving processes, procedures, and production, starting from the corporate field (Nonaka and Konno 1998) and imported into the aid world some years later (Ramalingam 2006). This is perhaps simply because the very exercise of extracting and organizing tacit knowledge is in itself research… but the question inside a busy humanitarian/aid organization will then be, 'so what next'?

This is where the first problem arises, with a thirst for immediacy that links back to the state of 'perpetual present' and the 'action-oriented' humanitarian ethos. It is easy to see the inherent flaw in seeking to plug a gap in guidance by drawing on one person's experience of one particular issue within one particular context at one particular time. Yet the temptation of real-time learning often still takes hold, leading to a false hope that debriefing some key staff (or crossing their impressions with recommendations from evaluations) will help draw up quick lessons that can be rapidly turned into guidance. But the flaw is in fact two-fold. First, there is only so much real-time learning that can happen and that can be fed quickly enough into real-time adjustment within the same response, or even re-used in a different emergency –

because of the time and logistics involved in capturing lessons, and because crossing contexts is never as easy as it seems (whether contextual differences are real… or perceived to be). Second, by making the goal informing guidance in near-to-real-time, the exercise is likely to yield lessons… that are already known. Taking a network perspective on tacit knowledge, UNICEF – or any similar organization – can be described as an organization with high network density (that is, high staff interaction, especially in emergencies), high turnover and operating in a complex dynamic environment. In such environments, complexity and density can mean lots of learning is happening but also a lot of the same learning, especially if one takes on board the point made by Minear that crises are not as unique as they tend to be portrayed to be. This leads to a point of saturation and tacit knowledge that is 'oftentimes redundant' (Droege & Hoobler 2003: 57). This phenomenon is demonstrated by how recurrent the lessons learned cliché has become: lessons documented time and time again, bringing little new to the table. This is the breeding ground for the cynicism about lessons learned and questioning the added-value of debriefing staff to turn their tacit knowledge into explicit findings, given that the output is likely to be superfluous confirmation of a 'lesson' already widely known.

Second, there is a problem with emergencies themselves as an environment. Though they do not make the link explicitly between both behaviours, Paul Knox-Clark and James Darcy point out in *Insufficient Evidence* how, on one side, knowledge in emergencies is 'socially constructed and validated' by emergency staff – i.e. taken on board if already 'part of the humanitarian discourse' (or doctrine) – and how, on the other, humanitarian policy-makers tend to be 'selective', 'filtering evidence' and 'ultimately make the decision about which of the researchers' recommendation for policy change they [are] prepared to accept '(Knox-Clarke & Darcy 2014: 63, quoting Buchanan-Fabri, 2005). As a result, whether it is research, internal or external evaluation, the uptake is limited and selective, a fact that again is long-established (Walkup 1997; Minear 1998). Knox-Clark and Darcy see this obstacle to evidence being taken on because of organizational politics (or perhaps doctrine) and the push and pull of external pressures (donor pressure not being the least of it). Emergencies are messy, and the path to evidence is 'seldom clear', plus 'where the evidence challenges received wisdom or standard approaches, it may well peter out altogether' (Knox-Clarke & Darcy 2014: 64). With the competition to enter accepted humanitarian discourse and be 'validated', and with the politics around evidence uptake, one (or even several) staff's 'reminiscences, reflections and comments' face an uphill challenge to even be considered a source of evidence in the first place.

What may not have been tried is returning to the fundamental original assumption that extracting tacit knowledge is a *research* exercise and should be approached as such[vi] – acknowledging that research has its own processes, methods and timeframes to

generate evidence the organization can act on, in time. This is where to redefine the ambition. Failure to immediately feed guidance need not be automatically seen as irredeemable failure. Understanding the effort as a research exercise may, in fact, help change the relationship of staff debriefings, oral histories, and other such non-traditional sources of knowledge with the problems of time and immediacy, and with the questions of adherence or deviation from organizational doctrine. Time is key – rather than being gripped by *real* time, taking a longer perspective can change and afford a lot. Taking the time may help the redundant and smaller lessons fade, and not blur the exercise, allowing reflection on experience to focus on bigger questions. Other times, the smaller lessons may be valid to capture – but the exercise is best timed with a delay, not to run into institutional resistance about being self-critical.

It also is a matter of seeing and committing to sharing knowledge as a *public good*. Investing in a public good can be a serious ask in an organization working with finite resources and with a mandate to both deliver and reflect on its own delivery. Nevertheless, the size of the investment needed is negligible in relative terms and the return is possibly *more* concrete if given a focus on a thorough and in-depth debrief of one (or a few) staff, for the inherent value of documenting their experience. Debriefing exercises not governed by an impatience for immediate results but guided by the patience to work towards a solid, analytical output *have value*: by eliciting new research questions on what was different, new and non-redundant in that experience, or by yielding case studies that test experience against analytical frameworks, reflect on the broader context, and survey other available evidence. Learning by the case tends to be a preference as well among field workers, over scanning through generic guidance (ALNAP 2004). All that is needed is simply investing for the write-up to meet rigorous academic standards and benefit from peer-review, for it to be published as a piece of evidence – however modest and contextual it may be – into a broader academic discourse, while also producing spin-off synthesized versions for quick consumption in the field.

This approach is a crucial, small step among many in improving the level of available evidence in humanitarian action, contributing tacit knowledge, individual experiences and oral histories of aid workers themselves as part of the multiple streams of evidence. Of course, it needs patience to happen, and patience for the value to reveal itself. Not all staff debriefs and oral histories transcribed into papers and publications will immediately be consumed by field workers who, by some uncanny coincidence, are facing the same dilemma and finding in those materials the precise solution they were after. In fact, to be clear, that will probably never happen. But there is inherent value in contributing a 'piece of evidence' in the discussion, whatever it may be, to move the needle – if even by an inch or two - on the topic at hand.

A case study detour: research unexpectedly informing practice

Towards demonstrating the value of documenting staff experiences and contributing them into the academic discourse, a small example from the present author's experience may help illustrate the point. Back in August 2011 in Somalia, as the UN for the first time formally declared a famine (Devereux, Sida et al. 2017), UNICEF's Chief of Nutrition for Somalia worked to quickly organize blanket feeding, a large-scale effort to prevent malnutrition and mortality, for tens of thousands of people in the country. This had to happen from scratch: there was no pre-existing operation to scale up and blanket feeding is not a usual UNICEF programme. And it had to happen overnight: other agencies that usually run those efforts were not present (Maxwell & Majid 2016), with the notable exception of ICRC. Many therefore looked to UNICEF.

After internal deliberations on a first large-scale shipment of food, the decision was made to buy rice. Rice met nutrition requirements, was culturally appropriate, could be bought, stored and dispatched with relative ease, and was immediately available. Day-long conference calls and some procurement acrobatics later, a full shipload was on its way from India. Our expert then turned to some unread emails. One of them, left untouched since the morning, was from a colleague at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), sharing an old journal article. Attached was a rough scan of a piece written *fifteen years* ago by an illustrious aid veteran, Andrew S. Natsios, on his experience during the 1992 Somalia famine (Natsios 1996). One lesson stuck out: avoid rice at all costs because it breeds speculation and ends up leveraged by warlords. While the initial decision could not be reversed, acting quickly on the basis of a fifteen years old paper helped limit negative impacts.

This anecdote illustrates that staff in emergencies use the experience of those in their network to inform decisions and that there is an inherent value in documenting an experience for the purpose of entering it into the academic discourse because its shelf life is invaluably extended. In this case, a research piece about a twenty-year-old crisis, written five years after that crisis, and shared fifteen years later helped make a major course correction.

Making it work: methods in the madness

The Somalia example above happened by apparent chance and, in fact, the lesson emerged too late. Keeping in mind past attempts in UNICEF's history, how can an operational organization effectively and systematically 'mine' tacit knowledge and oral histories as a source of evidence to inform better humanitarian action? This article argues it can be done provided there is a specific environment, a specific

approach, and rigorous research methods. The below articulates some leads on 'how', in the context of the new pilot 'humanitarian fellowship' initiative being tested by the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

The environment

What the environment needs to offer is simple: a space to nurture the right mix of 'weak and strong ties' – between emergency staff, researchers, and external academic networks – that allow for tacit knowledge to emerge at its most valuable and least redundant (Granoveter in Droege & Hoobler 2003). In UNICEF's case, an office such as Innocenti can provide a space of epistemic diversity –where those holding the tacit knowledge and those facilitating its explicit conversion share just enough common practices (i.e. all are staff of the organization) but also have different or diverse epistemic standpoints: some may approach questions in a practical way, others will have a researcher's eye. Both will challenge – and surprise – each other and through that process generate the knowledge and the lessons, hone in on the a-ha moments, or even simply the key points of experience worth putting on the page (Choo and de Alvarenga Neto 2010; Peet 2012). In the humanitarian ecosystem of operational agencies, policy think tanks and the world of disaster studies, such spaces are rare and need to be nurtured as they are a specific locus where one can actually build a bridge between practitioners and researchers and reconcile the different languages they speak (Fast 2017). Such spaces are also where a two-way exchange can be established whereby scholars and practitioners can 'proactively collaborate […] in framing research and making data and experiences available' (Hoffman and Weiss 2008: 284). With the right commitment and follow-through what such rare places can provide is the space *and time* for proper conceptual framing. Lessons worth learning, codifying, systematizing and disseminating take *time* and minimal interference to be converted from tacit to explicit, including to benefit from a conceptual methodology and to be made analytical. A solid length of time and a *physical* space (rather than a virtual-only one) are critical. So is the need for the process to mix practitioners and researchers together, as learning from 'stories' and tacit knowledge *'is a social process*' (Peet 2012: 48), acknowledging as well that 'evidence generation [is] a process, and not an event, [with an] aim to build the body of evidence over time' (Knox-Clarke & Darcy 2014: 68). Provided there is commitment to a conceptual and research anchoring (and the timelines for it to flourish), and provided some of the usual impatience for immediate re-usable outputs is temporarily suspended, a dedicated research space inside an operational organization (such as Innocenti or other dedicated programmes in other organizations) can have a real chance to succeed in making 'tacit knowledge' and 'oral histories' of humanitarian workers another source of evidence to inform humanitarian action, and research on humanitarian action. Hoffman and Weiss also finally point how this may 'fill an ironic lacuna' as the world of humanitarian-related research has focused a great deal more on systems, meaning 'we know more about aid

work than we do about aid workers' (Hoffman and Weiss 2008: 284). In short, tacit knowledge and oral histories are… a research gap, and it can be filled in an environment of scholar-practitioner partnerships where 'practitioners [are not] mere objects of research, but also active in the design, execution, and processing of a research programme' (Hoffman and Weiss 2008: 284). A space where both scholars and practitioners will also be best positioned to package findings and the knowledge converted from tacit to explicit so that there is uptake in both the scholarly and practitioner's worlds. This leads to the question of how to go about it.

The approach

Simply put, what is needed are methodologies and the method to parse through the madness that is emergencies. Keeping always in mind the imperative for research timelines, a dedicated space for research in an operational organization can provide unique support to prospective staff fellows before their time in-house, once on board, and after. This can be by preparing, scoping and synthesizing the state of the evidence in advance; by linking staff's experience or their questions back to concepts, analytical frameworks and historical precedents; by suggesting the most adapted methodologies (anthropology, history, social and political sciences… or even econometrics) to go about the question staff want to explore; by helping ensure rigor in the methods; or even by challenging the question and the questioner to firm up the ideas and reach – even sinuously over whatever time is necessary – the valuable points of experience that should be put on the page, or the noteworthy research question to further explore. A hybrid space dedicated to research inside an operational agency can also cultivate academic connections to pair prospective field staff with external researchers, and link practitioners to academic support networks to enrich the conversation – and eventually enrich research outputs.

The method

Studies on humanitarian evidence point out how all too often humanitarian research is grounded in mostly qualitative methods, which can be 'poorly understood and implemented'(Knox-Clarke & Darcy 2014: 67). The same studies argue that quantitative approaches are particularly difficult to implement in humanitarian contexts and need experienced researchers and frequent communication with teams on the ground to hope to succeed (Knox-Clarke & Darcy 2014). The result is 'field *observations* by aid agencies [that] may be fit for purpose, but methodologically unsound, [and] data from scholarly studies [that] may be methodologically rigorous, but either too complex to use or not presented in a timely fashion[vii] (DFID 2014: 18). Acknowledging that tapping into aid workers' tacit knowledge to inform disaster research is more likely to be a qualitative endeavour, the output is most probably going to take the shape of a 'case study'. In a humanitarian ecosystem, blasé by lessons-learned déjà vu and saturated with case studies, a critical research eye on

lessons learning is the way to be *analytical* rather than event-oriented and the way to develop case studies that look into 'what really happened, identify the factors that led to certain outcomes, […] compare within cases or between cases, [and] make analytical generalizations' (Knox-Clarke and Darcy 2014: 44). But case studies are only one of different approaches available. What a dedicated space for research can offer inside an operational organization, is piloting exercises such as evidence syntheses, systematic reviews, evidence gap maps, etc. and producing handy, approachable – but still rigorous – summaries on the state of the evidence as is also the stated objective of a number of academic-based centres. And in the end, what such a space can offer is an outlet for publication so staff voices, experiences, concerns and ideas can be valued and contributed into the wider evidence base at the crossroads between the academic and practitioner's worlds.

Conclusions: the question of commitment

Even though some point out – rightly – that it is an uphill challenge, today there is a growing recognition and appreciation of the need to be more evidence-based in humanitarian response, and to develop the right tools, products and mechanisms for evidence to better inform decision-making. Like many others, UNICEF recognizes this need, and is committed to being a learning organization and a knowledge broker for children. It strives not only to be evidence-based, but to *contribute* itself to the evidence discourse. A humanitarian fellowship pilot to tap into and contribute staff knowledge in emergencies is potentially one way to deliver on this commitment, although other options are possible. Giving this pilot a firm research grounding may be how to make this idea succeed where it previously has not. But the question that remains is not where such a programme should be housed or how it should be shaped, it is whether there is a broad, solid and lasting commitment to move this idea forward. That goes beyond the remit of Innocenti or any one office alone. In essence this revolves around whether it is possible to substitute the thirst for immediacy, and break from the trap of the perpetual present. There is method to do so, but the 'cultural impediments' Minear diagnosed twenty years ago can still feel very real today. A recent systematic review by UNICEF of the lessons it identified from six or so years of evaluating its humanitarian responses does point out indeed how 'overall, the production and absorption of learning to improve humanitarian action in UNICEF is currently unsystematic', while there is as well 'a wider absence of formal corporate knowledge management systems'(UNICEF Evaluation Office 2017: 41). What Minear spoke of then as organizational impediments are very much alive today because they are also organizational habits. Breaking habit needs organizational courage. Learning to learn needs organizational investment, and that applies whether the exercise considered is specifically learning from staff experiences, or more

broadly learning from organizational experience and lessons identified in regular, processual and mandated evaluation exercises. Thus, the question for any large humanitarian organization considering tapping into oral histories and tacit knowledge to inform its work then is simple: are they in short supply of either of those?

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About the author

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[i] The review regrets also that 'Innocenti has not been involved' Tacom, S. B. (1995) An overview of the history project: 1982-1994. In. UNICEF – 'Innocenti' is UNICEF's dedicated office for research, which in 1995 was known as the International Child Development Centre.
[ii] Based on personal communication during consultations with former OoR-Innocenti staff, October 2017.
[iii] Ibid supra.
[iv] Based on personal communication during consultations with UNICEF colleagues by the author (April-August 2017)
[v] Ibid supra.
[vi] However for the Innocenti event in May 2000, itself designed as a pilot, the initial objective was somewhere between the 3 days of discussion it turned out to be, and a longer period case study visit for two to three week. It was not, at least initially, envisaged as a short exchange session.
[vii] Although the case study example does provide some perspective on the notion of findings needed in a 'timely fashion'.